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ARTICLE

Embracing Lalaga and Talanoa: Weaving Relationality, Respect, and Reciprocity in Pacific Research and Education

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Abstract

Western knowledge systems are increasingly scrutinised for their colonial roots and their dominance over Indigenous perspectives. In response, Indigenous, First Nations, and Pacific scholars are actively challenging these colonial epistemologies in higher education through research and community engagement, carving out spaces that honour and privilege Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This article focuses on the collaborative research journey of Pacific scholars at a leading New Zealand university. Their efforts culminated in a Pacific Research Showcase, an initiative aimed at exploring and enacting values of relationships, reciprocity, and respect within Pacific research. Grounded in Pacific research methodologies (PRM)-including the talanoa framework, lalaga (weaving) metaphor and a collaborative reflective approach, this study outlines the development of the showcase, emphasising how these values are central to Pacific research and scholarship and its impact with Pacific communities. By highlighting Pacific-led research and fostering collaboration, the showcase legitimises Pacific knowledge systems and advocates for their integration into the broader landscape of educational research and policy.

Keywords Indigenous epistemologies · Lalaga · Pacific research · Pacific values

Copyrighted Material Permission has been granted by the author and journal to include "Table 2: Change Needed in Aotearoa Universities" (Naepi, 2019, p. 231)

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Introduction

Transforming Aotearoa New Zealand universities into spaces that foster inclusive and equitable education for all learners, and reflect the diverse identities of New Zealand's population, is essential (Eley & Berryman, 2019). However, the process of educational transformation is complex, particularly for Pacific learners who face unique systemic barriers, including dominant colonial and Western paradigms that may clash with, devalue and marginalise cultural knowledge. Pacific academics are distinctly positioned to enrich higher learning discourse through their ability to offer diverse perspectives and solutions to such issues, and make tertiary education more relevant by addressing barriers that have traditionally marginalised Pacific peoples from fully engaging in higher learning (Naepi et al., 2017). However, achieving this requires the integration of Pacific values and perspectives into educational frameworks.

In this article, we use the term *Pacific* and *Pasifika* to broadly describe the various Pacific communities within Aotearoa New Zealand. While this generalisation is sometimes necessary, it can be challenging due to the diversity in terms of culture, language, history, and individual experiences among Pacific peoples (Oldehaver, 2021; Pene et al., 2021). Similarly, terms like *Pacific worldviews* and *Pacific knowledge* do not refer to a singular "traditional worldview" or "traditional knowledge." Instead, they encompass all the contexts in which Pacific communities live and thrive. As Pacific experts have suggested (Oldehaver, 2021; Rimoni et al., 2022) it is important to recognise the nuances and differences in perspectives both within and across island nation groups. Furthermore, while this paper focuses on the experiences of Pacific academics, it is important to acknowledge the special relationship between Pacific peoples and Māori, the tangata whenua (Indigenous people of Aotearoa) (Mead, 2016; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017). This relationship is deeply rooted in shared ancestral and spiritual connections, historical migrations, and ongoing interactions that continue to shape the cultural landscape of New Zealand (Teaiwa & Mallon, 2006). Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) provides a central foundation for education, particularly in realising equitable outcomes for Māori, the indigenous people of the land (Ministry of Education, 2017; Tawhai & Gray-Sharp, 2011). Pacific peoples and groups are welcomed as partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Over the past century, New Zealand has seen a growing number of children with both Pacific and Māori heritage, reflecting the interconnectedness of these communities (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020).

Pacific Aspirations in Education

The desire to offer their children life-changing educational opportunities and to financially support extended family, either in their home countries or in New Zealand, led generations of Pacific parents to migrate and build a future in New Zealand (Macpherson, 2000; Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2022). The Pacific population has evolved from a migrant community to a well-established and integral

part of New Zealand society. In 2019, almost 400,000 individuals living in New Zealand identified as Pacific, with two-thirds being born in New Zealand (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020). While the Pacific population continues to grow and become increasingly diverse (Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024), the aspiration to have "good education" remains a significant priority for many Pacific families (Alkema, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2018; Salesa, 2017).

There is growing interest in understanding the experiences of Pacific learners, including their participation in educational settings and their outcomes. This interest arises from evidence that New Zealand's education systems have historically marginalised and underserved both Pacific and Māori communities (Barrington, 1966; Education Review Office, 1995, 2012; Jones, 1991; Ministry of Education, 2011, 2016b, 2019; Wikaire et al., 2017).

Transforming Education for Pacific: Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Transforming education for the success of all learners in Aotearoa New Zealand, including Pacific, requires a range of levers including robust policy and legislative frameworks that align with localised strategic plans. Policies such as the Ministry of Education's suite of Pasifika Education Plans since 2001 (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2001, 2012, 2020a, b, 2023); Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) (Ministry of Education, 2020a, b), the Statement for National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) (Ministry of Education, 2020a, b), and the Tapasā Framework (Ministry of Education, 2018) share common goals: a learner-centered approach, equity and inclusion, cultural relevance, quality teaching and leadership, community and family engagement, and commitment to long-term strategic goal. While the effectiveness of such policies has been contested (Averill et al., 2022; Horrocks et al., 2012; Samu, 2020), Pacific and Māori scholars continue to advocate for transformative outcomes for Pacific and Māori communities (Airini et al., 2010; Coxon et al., 2002; Luafutu-Simpson et al., 2015; Si'ilata et al., 2018; Tiakiwai et al., 2022; Tuifagalele et al., 2024).

While the New Zealand Education and Training Act (2020) outlines the roles of universities, noting that a university "maintains, advances, disseminates, and assists the application of knowledge" (Section 268, 2diiA), it does not clarify what or whose knowledge should be prioritised, an issue this article addresses. New Zealand universities are generally characterised as colonial and Western-centric in nature, fostering environments that uphold a monocultural knowledge system (Baice et al., 2021; Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018; Naepi et al., 2017; Naepi, 2019). Despite the representative body for New Zealand's eight universities recognising the need and implementing initiatives to increase Pacific and Māori participation in higher education (Universities New Zealand, 2024), current success rates indicate that these goals have not been achieved (Kidman & Chu, 2019; Naepi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the underrepresentation of both Pacific learners and Pacific academics in New Zealand universities is a significant issue, attributed to interconnected and complex factors including systemic and structural racism that perpetuates these inequities (Baice et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2013; Leenan-Young et al., 2021).

Perspectives of, and Practices Within Higher Education for Pacific communities

The importance of integrating Pacific cultural values and methodologies within New Zealand's higher education system has been highlighted in research conducted over the past four decades. Studies by Chu and Reynolds (2023), Harper (2018), Luafutu-Simpson et al (2015), and Towner et al (2017) have shown that Pasifika students thrive in support systems and culturally sensitive environments that respect their values and foster meaningful connectionswith educators. Good organisational practices and engagement strategies are crucial for Pasifika student success and motivation in tertiary education, while culturally responsive teaching practices enhance educational outcomes.

Naepi et al.'s (2017) chapter "A Cartography of Higher Education: Attempts at Inclusion and Insights from Pasifika Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand" explored how higher education institutions in New Zealand have attempted to include diverse perspectives, particularly those of Pasifika peoples. It critiqued the superficial use of "diversity" initiatives, saying that, despite Pasifika input, these initiatives often devolve into mechanistic checklists that often fail to challenge the dominant Eurocentric norms. Similar concerns about the tokenistic implementation of diversity initiatives for Māori have also been expressed (Hoskins & Jones, 2022). By drawing on Pasifika scholarship and methodologies like social cartography, Naepi et al. (2017) highlight the need for genuine inclusion that recognises and integrates Pasifika ontologies, epistemologies and cultural practices into institutional frameworks and processes.

A later mixed methods study by Averill et al. (2020) explored perceptions of Pacific cultural values in New Zealand's education policy, aiming to improve opportunities for learners with Pacific heritage. The findings revealed that Pacific teachers possess a deeper understanding and enactment of these values compared to their non-Pacific counterparts. This highlights the importance of fostering a deeper understanding of Pacific cultural values to better align educational practices with policy objectives. Further underscoring the significance of culturally responsive education, Chu-Fuluifaga (2022) identified successful practices of 12 phenomenal Pacific educators in New Zealand's tertiary education system. This study, conducted through talanoa groups with 56 students and the educators revealed how relational processes and cultural engagement methods created deeply meaningful and effective learning experiences for Pacific students. Additionally, works such as "Pacific Educators Speak: Valuing Our Values" by Rimoni et al. (2022) and "A Relational Approach to Learning Environments: Learning from Pacific Wisdom" by Reynolds (2022) emphasise the importance of nurturing Pacific values and relational approaches in educational settings, contributing to create supportive and effective learning environments.

While these studies delve into the understanding and enactment of Pacific cultural values within education policy and practices, there is growing emphasis on the need for systemic reforms in tertiary education. Naepi (2019), in her analysis of Pacific staff representation within the New Zealand's academic workforce stressed the need for extensive reforms that go beyond mere cultural inclusivity. Recommendations were made for transforming New Zealand universities to better serve diverse

knowledge systems and communities, as depicted in Table 1 (p. 231). These recommendations are further reinforced by Pacific academics in the 2021 special issue of the Journal of New Zealand Studies, titled "Uplifting Moana Perspectives: Emerging Pacific Researchers and New Directions in New Zealand-Based Pacific Research" (Thomsen et al., 2021). This special issue addressed critical issues within academia, including structural underrepresentation, transcending disciplinary boundaries and transforming the education institutions. The authors reject the notion of a scarcity of Pacific research, asserting that the underrepresentation of Pacific scholars in academia is a structural issue, rather than one of scarcity. It calls for the academic to embrace Pacific ways of knowing, doing, relating, and being, and highlights the potential of transcending disciplinary boundariesto foster an inclusive academic environment. This article is situated within the context of transforming and indigenising academia. The research collaboration described herein highlights the importance of these efforts. The following section (Methodology and Analysis) outlines the framework and methods used to implement these transformative actions.

Methodology and Analysis

This study is grounded in a framework of Pacific research methodologies (PRM). These methodologies have deep historical roots tracing back to early Pacific philosophers and indigenous knowledge systems (Anae, 2019; Gegeo, 1998; Helu-Thaman, 1988; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Naepi et al. 2020). Over the past thirty years, PRM has seen a resurgence among Pacific researchers in New Zealand and the broader Pacific region. Firmly rooted in the ontologies and epistemologies of Pacific peoples, these methodologies emphasise cultural context and relational ethics. Relational ethics are fundamental to Pacific research methodologies (PRM), focusing on the concept of vā, which signifies the sacred and social spaces between individuals and their environments (Anae, 2019). The Samoan phrase teu le vā underscores the importance of valuing, nurturing, and maintaining these relationships (Airini et al., 2010). PRM also acts as a form of decolonial resistance, challenging colonial research practices that have historically marginalised Pacific peoples. It seeks to affirm and prioritise Pacific ways of knowing and being. Within this PRM framework, the study draws on the processes of talanoa, the lalaga (weaving metaphor), and collaborative reflective analysis.

Talanoa

The reflective data excerpts in this article were derived from talanoa and e-talanoa between the Pacific researchers from 2022 to 2024. Talanoa methodology is deeply rooted in the traditions and values of Pacific communities where researchers engage in open, respectful conversations with participants, fostering genuine relationships and co-creating knowledge that reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of Pacific peoples (Ponton, 2018; Vaioleti, 2006, 2013) and has become prominent in educational research (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020). This method, pioneered by Timote

Table 1 Recommendations for change needed in Aotearoa universities

What universities are	What universities need to be	
Uni-versity Spaces and places that reinforce a monocultural knowledge system	Plural-versity Spaces and places that deem all knowledges worthy	
Colonial Structured racism excludes Indigenous bodies and ontologies/epistemologies	Indigenised Inclusive of Indigenous bodies and ontologies/epistemologies	Decolonised Indigenous bodies and ontologies/epistemologies understood as equal partners in creating and sustaining the university
Neoliberal Input/output-focused with an economic production function	? Imagined outside of our current economic system	

From "Why Isn't My Professor Pasifika? A Snapshot of the Academic Workforce in New Zealand Universities," by S. Naepi, 2019, *MAI Journal, 8*(2), p. 231 (https://doi.org/ 10.20507/MAIJournal.2019.8.2.9). Copyright 2019, MAI Journal. Reprinted with permission

Vaioleti (2006) and the late Sitiveni Halapua (2008), is deeply rooted in Tongan ontologies and epistemologies and is highly valued for its cultural significance. Talanoa, defined as "to talk (in a formal way), to tell stories or relate experiences" (Churchward, 2015, p. 447), serves as a means of imparting and sharing knowledge across generations and among people, places, lands, and the spiritual aspects of our worlds (Ka'ili, 2017). Traditionally, talanoa has been a face-to-face practice, but it has evolved over time due to multiple factors, including global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have led to its adaptation to online spaces, using digital tools to maintain its essence (Fa'avae et al., 2022; Faleolo, 2021). The term e-talanoa denotes this online method of engaging in research, fostering dialogue, and sharing knowledge in digital spaces (Fa'avae et al., 2022).

Lalaga (Lālanga)

In our study, we applied the lalaga (lālanga) metaphor as a framework to integrate and synthesise the insights gathered from Pacific academic researchers, who are co-authors of this paper, alongside the outcomes of the reflective activity undertaken during the research process. Lalaga (lālanga) is a weaving process, a common practice across the Pacific Islands, used to create a range of mats including fine mats that are traditionally gifted on special occasions as they hold high status (Ministry of Education, 2024). The lalaga (lālanga) metaphor represents the process of weaving together different strands of knowledge, experiences, and values to create a cohesive and meaningful whole. The two spellings, "lalaga" and "lālanga" reflect different orthographic conventions used in Pacific languages. "Lalaga" is a common spelling in some Pacific languages, while "lālanga" includes a macron (ā) to indicate a long vowel sound, which is used in languages like Tongan to denote pronunciation differences (MacIntyre, 2008). Both spellings refer to the same concept of weaving, but the use of the macron helps clarify pronunciation and can vary based on linguistic and regional preference.

In research, lalaga is seen as the art of interweaving stories to cultivate a deep exchange of knowledge (Veikune et al., 2020). This method has been used as a means of weaving theory and practice (Penn, 2010), to describe the joint effort of Pacific educators and Pālagi (non-Samoan / European) in the work they do (Lee & Toso, 2015), and as a whole-school approach focused on building relationships between students and staff (Leaupepetele & Batchelor, 2022). In our study, we identified common themes from the talanoa and reflective responses, weaving them together to illustrate their interconnectedness and collective impact on research practice. The process of lalaga also enabled us to craft a comprehensive account that captured the diverse perspectives and experiences of the Pacific scholars, while also facilitating the construction of a cohesive framework that demonstrates the practical application of Pacific values in research. This article serves as a guide for other researchers to understand and implement these values into their own work. Furthermore, by interweaving the scholars' reflections, we highlight the relational aspects of their contributions and how these relationships enhance the overall research process.

Collaborative Reflective Analysis

Consistent with PRM, this study employed a collaborative reflective approach to analysis,enabling researchers to gather rich, detailed observations that are not easily attainable through methods such as surveys (Vaioleti, 2006). Indigenous methodologies, such as PRMs, highlight the immersive role ofresearchers in co-creating knowledge during the research process. They also emphasise the importance of reflexivity in data analysis, including the exploration of the roles and perspectives of researchers and participants (positionality). These methodologies advocate for approaches that prioritise meaningful outcomes for Pacific communities (Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Smith, 2021). This article details the insights from a collaborative reflective analysis activity completed by Pacific scholars, who are also coauthors of this paper, after the Pacific Research Showcase. In the reflective exercise, and guided by lalaga metaphor, the Pacific scholars responded to four questions (as detailed below) during iterative talanoa and in writing, exploring how the values of relationships, reciprocity, and respect shaped their individual and collective research practices. By interweaving the scholars' reflections, this study emphasises the relational aspects of their work and the ways these relationships enhance the overall research process.

Reflective Questions

1. Why was it important for you to engage in the Pacific Research Showcase focused on relationships, reciprocity and respect?
2. What do these three values mean to you and why are they important in your research contexts and from your cultural understandings?
3. What was/is of key importance to you when making these values more visible to other members of our faculty?
4. What questions or provocations do you have that people (Pacific and non-Pacific should be contemplating to extend our knowledge, understanding, and embodiment of these values from your cultural contexts but also in relation to research?

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts: (1) the planning and coordination of the Pasifika Research Showcase, and (2) the responses to the reflective questions, which highlight the focus on fostering Pacific wellbeing and academic partnerships.

Planning and Coordination of the Pasifika Research Showcase

In 2022, two of the co-authors who held the role of Associate Deans Pacific, responsible for promoting Pacific research within the faculty, had the idea to

host a Pacific Research Showcase. The faculty, comprising various academic disciplines and programmes within Education and Social Work, serves as a hub for education and research. This showcase was designed to foster collaboration and celebrate achievements within the faculty's academic and research community. This innovative initiative was driven by a dual purpose: firstly, to enrich broader research and teaching discussions by foregrounding the unique perspectives and methodologies of Indigenous and Pacific research and researchers; and secondly, to illuminate the rich tapestry of Pacific scholarship established within and beyond the institution, while acknowledging its multifaceted and nuanced nature. Funding and technical support was provided from the Associate Dean Research in the faculty. Planning focused on highlighting Pacific academic excellence, with invitations extended to members of the faculty's Komiti Pasifika—a faculty-recognised staff committee of Pacific academic and professional staff. A key feature of the showcase was the inclusion of a keynote speaker, alongside seven Pacific scholars and the Associate Deans Pacific, who all accepted the invitation to present and highlight their unique research contributions.

Keynote Speaker and Pacific Scholars

The keynote speaker, Dr Naepi, is a senior Pacific researcher in the Faculty of Arts at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, specialising in equity in research and higher education. The Pacific scholars, representing a diverse range of genders, ages, professional disciplines and cultural perspectives from Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Fiji.

Team Meetings and Showcase Format

For the Pacific Research Showcase, the team met regularly over a six-month period through a combination of traditional face-to-face talanoa sessions, e-talanoa briefings and workshops, and email exchanges. An online webinar showcase organised into two subsequent webinars (i.e. morning webinar and afternoon webinar) was deemed to be the best option, allowing more people from the faculty to participate. The showcase was facilitated by the Associate Deans Pacific. The first of the two webinars comprised of four doctoral Pacific scholars, while the second webinar featured five academic Pacific scholars. As the keynote speaker, Dr Naepi's opening address set an overarching framework that emphasised equity in higher education. Each scholar prerecorded a 12-min presentation sharing their research insights. The showcase was advertised through faculty channels, and attendees registered through an online sign-up form. On the day of the webinar, both webinar sessions included a live question and answer segment, allowing the audience to pose queries and engage interactively. The thirty attendees were also invited to provide feedback on the impact of the showcase.

Fostering Pacific Wellbeing and Academic Partnerships: Emphasising Relationships, Reciprocity, and Respect

In this section (2), we explore the responses to the reflective questions, which fall under four themes: commitment to enhancing Pacific wellbeing; the interconnections between relationships, reciprocity and respect; honouring cultural heritage while challenging the homogenisation of Pacific peoples; and fostering alliances through Pacific and non-Pacific academic partnerships.

Commitment to Enhancing Pacific Wellbeing

The Pacific researchers were collectively motivated by their sense of belonging to a community of Pacific/Pasifika scholars within their Western institution and the desire to nurture and strengthen relationships within this group. The Pacific scholars highlighted how being connected and sharing collaboratively is a source of strength for Pacific researchers or those of the Moana (a term used to describe the great Pacific Ocean—see Māhina, 1999; Thaman, 1988; Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024), who are engaging in knowledge systems that challenge the prominence of the Western academy. Their participation in the Showcase aimed to build connections with their Pacific and non-Pacific research communities, while recognising the scarcity of Pacific academics in higher education in general and the resulting sense of disconnection:

> *I believed the Showcase would epitomise our collective 'alofa' (love) and 'fa'aaloalo (respect) in supporting the knowledge of non-Pacific/other colleagues. It also meant that in coming together, we could "dig more deeply" [see* Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017*, p. 5], spiritually and relationally, into who we are as peoples of Oceania in a colonial institution such as ours. (Pacific Presenter 1)*

All the Pacific scholars expressed a shared aspiration for their research to enhance the well-being of Pacific communities. They emphasised the importance of conceptualising research projects rooted in a commitment to uplifting Pacific communities, honoring people's time, and valuing relationships as sacred and enduring. One presenter illuminated this sentiment, stating::

> *It involves me thinking about how my research can uplift and enrich the lives of Pacific communities. This thinking happens when the project is conceptualised and continues in my honouring of people's time, acknowledging their contributions, and viewing all relationships as sacred and enduring. (Pacific Presenter 1)*

Interconnections Between Relationships, Reciprocity and Respect

The Pacific scholars presented numerous examples illlustrating the connections and threads between the values of relationships, reciprocity, and respect, and

their significance in research. As emphasised in the following quote, approaching encounters with alofa (love), gratitude, and care, while also nurturing connections and actively fostering reciprocity, demonstrates the interconnections among these values.

> *In my research, respect means reminding myself that while my role as a researcher affords me the pleasure and possibility of encountering other people's worlds, knowledge, expertise, and ideas, I must do so with alofa, gratitude and care. Relationality means cherishing my connections with my co-researchers, teacher-researchers, and participants and doing things that show them I am supportive, trustworthy, and committed to goals broader than our project. Relationality means accepting that the knowledge I gain from my research must be valued, protected, and looked after, not taken for granted. This sense of responsibility for what I might gain from others upholds teu le vā or attending to the relational space between us [see* Anae, 2019*] and nurturing the harmony in our interconnectedness. Reciprocity, for me, is where respect and relationality meet. (Pacific Presenter 1)*

While all three values are important, respect holds particular significance, especially at the outset of research and working relationships, as highlighted in the following excerpt:

> *Respect from the outset was important for setting the tone. Initially connected to the notion of Motutapu [see* Johansson Fua, 2020*;* Johansson Fua et al., 2021*], consideration of negotiated entry was at the forefront of work with school communities—communities who, at the time, were navigating COVID restrictions in their homes, workplaces, and schools. (Pacific Presenter 4)*

Honouring Cultural Heritage and Challenging the Homogenisation of Pacific Peoples

The Pacific scholars acknowledged the multiple worldviews shaping their work, reflecting their multifaceted identities, rich cultural heritage and varied lived experiences. By embracing their diversity, they were able to incorporate a range of experiences and insights, which enhanced the overall quality and relevance of their work. The Pacific scholars demonstrated respect for their cultures by highlighting distinctive methods, philosophies, and values rooted in their heritage, illustrating how these are integrated into their reserach. In doing so, they actively challenged the homogenisation of Moana peoples.

> *...participating in the showcase was to demonstrate the respect I have for my own culture. Moana knowledges are vast and distinct, yet we are often clumsily lumped together as though our shared papa'anga [genealogy] make us culturally indistinguishable. By introducing the tangi ka'ara method to my non-Moana colleagues during the showcase, I intended to simultaneously share a Māori-centric method whilst challenging the homogenisation of Moana peoples and our ways of knowing and being. (Pacific Presenter 2)*

For example, Pacific Presenter 6 noted their approach, grounded in their identity and place in the world, and integrated with the values of relationships, reciprocity, and respect, leads to better outcomes and more harmonious working relationships.

> *In my research, I draw on multiple itulagi [side of heaven, worldviews] which reflects the multiple worlds I occupy as a Sāmoan, Western educated living in the state of New Zealand, as tangata tiriti. In one sense I am challenging the long-held hegemony of Western knowledge through the incorporation of Sāmoan philosophies and values in my research. However, in light of our commitment to "relationships, reciprocity and respect," the way I articulate what I am doing is less anti-establishment and looks more towards building new theories and ideas by taking the best from multiple worldviews. I find this approach, underpinned by the three values in focus here, produces more favourable outcomes, and more harmonious working relationships. (Pacific Presenter 6)*

Building Alliances Through Pacific and Non-Pacific Academic Partnerships

Building alliances between Pacific and non-Pacific academics is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. All the Pacific scholars acknowledged that achieving success for Pacific in academia is not a solitary endeavour; it requires collaboration and support from non-Pacific academics. This partnership is essential to ensure that Pacific scholars are not isolated like a remote island but are integrated into the broader university community. Such alliances can promote mutual understanding, respect, and reciprocity, which are fundamental Pacific values. By working together, both Pacific and non-Pacific academics can drive transformative outcomes that benefit the entire academic landscape.

> *To make progress in academia, Moana peoples also need the support of non-Moana academics: we cannot be our own remote island cut off from the rest of the university. (Pacific Presenter 2)*

The Pacific scholars acknowledged that exploring how Pacific values align with established research paradigms can help clarify cultural concepts for non-Pacific colleagues. This approach may support non-Pacific researchers in better understanding and effectively integrating Pacific values while collaborating with Pacific researchers in their projects, resulting in positive outcomes.

> *Often, because our colleagues are not familiar with our cultural concepts, they appear to be confusing, mystical in some ways. Once we're able to outline what they are and demonstrate how they work within a research context our colleagues become more familiar and more at ease. As a result, some are wanting to engage more Pacific values and Pacific researchers in their projects which is a positive outcome. (Pacific Presenter 6)*

Many of the Pacific scholars emphasised the importance of demonstrating unity and service, noting that the varied and heartfelt presentations offered non-Pacific colleagues a deeper appreciation of respect, relationality, and reciprocity.

So, when we came together for the Showcase to share diverse Pacific perspectives, I knew non-Pacific/other colleagues would see how we do so with a strong sense of lotogatasi [unity] and tautua [service]...This experience gave more profound meaning to the values of respect, relationality, and reciprocity. Hence, all of this was and is important to highlight for our non-Pacific/other colleagues, so they can appreciate who we are, why we do what we do while being enriched by what holds us together in our everyday lives. (Pacific Presenter 1)

Discussion

The Pacific Research Showcase emerges as a vital response to the growing political challenges facing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, reinforcing the urgent need to create educational environments that value all forms of knowledge and inclusively embrace Indigenous bodies, ontologies, and epistemologies, as envisioned by Naepi (2019). Rimoni et al. (2022) note, while education policy mentions nine Pacific values, it often lacks depth in explaining how these values are considered, lived, demonstrated, or nurtured by Pacific people, or how they can be enacted in educational settings. This study's findings showcase how the values of relationships, reciprocity and respect are deeply interwoven in the work of these Pacific scholars and their commitment to enhancing Pacific wellbeing. It emphasises the importance of honouring cultural heritage and challenging the homogenisation of Pacific peoples.

The findings from this study underscore the critical importance of establishing and sustaining academic partnerships between Pacific and non-Pacific communities. These collaborations are essential for fostering mutual understanding, sharing knowledge, and addressing common challenges. By working together, these communities can leverage their unique strengths and perspectives to achieve greater academic and societal impact. The potential of such partnerships may extend to enhanced research capabilities, increased access to resources, and the ability to address complex issues that require interdisciplinary approaches.

This study emphasises Pacific ontologies and epistemologies, focusing on the Pacific Research Showcase and the applications of talanoa and the lalaga process. These reflections illustrate the type of knowledge required that can help transform Aotearoa universities, as proposed by Naepi (2019). The practical examples of planning and implementing the Pacific Research Showcase offer a framework for relationality, reciprocity, and respect that complements existing frameworks for indigenising universities. Collectively, the Pacific scholar's reflections signal how ethical and culturally sensitive research is practiced, the importance of fostering and maintaining collaboration and connections and upholding the integrity of gained knowledge within diverse research contexts. Daily interactions and activities demonstrate the incremental steps that can drive sustainable change within academic settings (Hoskin & Jones, 2022). Both Pacific and non-Pacific academics can gain valuable insights when Pacific-led initiatives, rooted in Pacific knowledge systems

like the Research Showcase in this paper, are supported and valued alongside those based on Western knowledge systems.

Given the lack of Pacific academics within New Zealand universities (Baice et al., 2021; Naepi, 2019) these Pacific scholars play a crucial role. In addition to their individual contribution within their respective fields and institutions, as a Pacific collective, their strengths and contributions bring diverse perspectives and expertise to the forefront of scholarly inquiry (Baice et al., 2021; Hau'ofa, 1994; Meiklejohn-Whiu et al., 2022; Salesa & Kiro, 2020; Smith & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 2022; Wolfgramm-Foliaki & Smith, 2020). Working collaboratively serves a dual function: it supports the revitalisation of Indigenous relationships of exchange and connection, while simultaneously nurturing and empowering researchers and educators through the creation of Indigenous scholarship communities (Salesa & Kiro, 2020). Collaboration also reflects a commitment to relationality that is embedded in the ways of being of many Pacific communities, and as illustrated in the Research Showcase, can create interconnected cultural, social, intellectual, and research networks that transcend disciplinary boundaries. As a result of such collaborations, other opportunities to support Māori and Pacific learner achievement may also emerge (Salesa & Kiro, 2020). Pacific scholars are well placed to research educational inequities and raise awareness among their non-Pacific colleagues due to their lived experiences, which provide insight into systemic barriers and issues. Additionally, their research skills enable them to develop evidence-based strategies and solutions that are both culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of their Pacific communities.

While the study's findings are specific to the context of the Pacific Research Showcase in the respective faculty, and may not be easily generalisable to other settings, it does provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Pacific communities in educational environments. These insights can inform future research and policy development focused on enhancing educational outcomes for Pacific students. Furthermore, this study presents a focused exploration of a subset of the nine Pacific values referenced in education policy (Ministry of Education, 2018; Rimoni et al., 2022), offering a detailed and nuanced understanding of these three specific values. Some may conclude that the selection of participants (Pacific scholars) is biased, however, they were intentionally chosen for their valuable contributions to their communities and academia. While the study is based on insights from nine Pacific scholars, it lays a strong foundation for future research, highlighting the potential for significant long-term impact on transforming and indigenising academia through further investigation and longitudinal studies.

Reflective Provocations: Questions for Extending Knowledge and Embodying Pacific Values in Research

Through the reflective exercise, the Pacific scholars identified key questions for those involved in Pacific research, urging them to thoughtfully consider the ethical and cultural dimensions of their work:

- Who benefits the most from research involving Pacific communities? If researchers gain more than the communities, how can we address this imbalance to ensure respect and give back to the Pacific communities?
- What considerations should we give to our insider–outsider positionality regarding the assumptions, biases, and motivations we bring to our research? How do these factors influence our approach to the research process and the use of findings to generate positive change for Pacific communities?
- How can Pacific values coexist with others while retaining their integrity as deeply Pacific?
- How might Pacific and non-Pacific researchers collaborate to foster a climate of relational ethics that benefits Pacific and all communities?

As a research collective, we suggest that these questions encourage a deeper understanding of engaging in ethical, culturally sensitive research and drawing on methods that respect Pacific values and build meaningful, reciprocal relationships.

Conclusion

The collaborative research efforts described in the development and facilitation of the Pacific Research Showcase exemplify academic advocacy, demonstrating a commitment to elevating diverse knowledge systems and the rich learning opportunities that Pacific researchers and research offer. Tangible actions and initiatives have the power to facilitate the integration of Pacific knowledge and perspectives into the broader educational research and policy landscape, enabling both Pacific and non-Pacific researchers to deepen their understanding and application of these values. The aspirations of Pacific scholars, past, present, and future, demonstrate their contributions and vision for the peoples of the Pacific. These aspirations encompass enhanced Pacific wellbeing, the interconnections between relationships, reciprocity, and respect, the honouring of cultural heritage, and alliances formed through Pacific and non-Pacific academic partnerships. By recognising and integrating Pacific knowledge into broader educational research and policy structures, we can create a system that enriches and benefits not only Pacific communities but everyone involved in fostering inclusive and diverse learning environments.

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