

## **Commentary**

# **I have cultural pride in a Western space: University cultural clubs**

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### **Abstract**

Tertiary institutions perpetuate colonial legacies, teaching Eurocentric curriculums and using English as the language of instruction with little regard for non-European pedagogy. Many students from non-Western backgrounds have felt they needed to neglect their cultural ways of being and knowing to assimilate in university classes.

University cultural clubs aim to be a safe space for different ethnic groups to gather on campus. As a former member of a university cultural club – the Griffith Pasifika Association, I tell our story and provide an analysis of our experience. I feel much of my cultural and academic success is attributed to this group, and for many of its members, this association is a family, where we can learn about our cultural heritage. This club was not only a space for supporting students from the Pacific Islands, but also for solidifying member's cultural pride. This association has caused necessary disruption to the traditional Eurocentrism of tertiary education, but, through this process, the University itself has now become a new domain for cultural pride for Pasifika students.

**Key words:** cultural pride, Pasifika students, Pacific Island student, minority student clubs/associations, tertiary/ university education.

## **Introduction**

Higher education has long been a centre for the proliferation of Western discourse (Smith, 2013). Many of these institutions are Eurocentric in nature with a silencing of the knowledge systems of other cultures (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Enari & Matapo, 2021). As a result, many minority students have had to abandon their cultural ways of learning in academic programs (Suali'i-Sauni, 2008). Fortunately, university cultural clubs have been a safe space for people of different ethnic groups to celebrate their cultures on campus. Cultural clubs have provided disruption of Western hegemonic norms for the benefit of its students of diverse backgrounds.

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In this commentary, we analyse the Griffith Pasifika Association, a cultural club in an Australian University which was established to support Pacific Island students. It is the intention of this article to advocate for the inclusion of culturally diverse knowledge systems in university curricula.

## **Pacific Island people and Westernised education**

To gain a better understanding of Pacific Island people in formalised Western education, one must first acknowledge its introduction to the islands. The colonial legacy is still evident across education systems as notions of scholarship are Eurocentric in nature (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). Formalised education in the Pacific was introduced so colonial values, beliefs and traditions would be internalised (Meleisea, 1987). Sadly, the introduced Westernised education systems were perpetuated across the Pacific without implementation of native knowledge and culture (Tuia, 2013). As a result, knowledge generation through Western education sought to disregard and erase the validity of Pacific knowledge systems and wisdom.

As Pacific people internalised the education of the West, they also migrated to countries such as New Zealand, Australia and America (Enari & Matapo, 2021). Migration from the Pacific to Australia can be recorded as early as the 20th century, with large Pacific communities established in Australia in the 80s (Faleolo, 2020; Va'a, 2001). This group has been able to use New Zealand as a migration stepping stone, via the Trans-Tasman agreement. Through their New Zealand citizenship status, many Pacific Islanders have been able to live and work in Australia (Stanley, 2017; Faleolo, 2020).

Although Pacific people have become increasingly visible in Australian society, through over-representation in rugby and music (Ravulo, 2015), our cultures still remain invisible in education pedagogy. Shujaa (1994) believes that mainstream school curricula further perpetuate the erasure of other ethnic groups because the content taught derives from Eurocentric ideals and values (Shujaa, 1994). Sadly, the absence of Pacific Island knowledge in educational institutions meant many had to forsake their cultural knowledge at school. This was disruptive to students as they were taught their cultures and beliefs at home, only to be taught Western ways of being at school (Kearney, 2011). Examples of educational disconnect include many of the Pacific students being taught collective responsibility to others at home, whilst being taught contradictory values of individual educational success at school. As a result of the disconnect, many Pacific students faced educational conflict and confusion (Tagaloa, 1998). At home, Pacific Island students were raised upon notions of collective wellbeing, only to be taught contradictory messages of individual responsibility at school. With the disconnect of teachings between home and school, Pacific Island cultural clubs became a space where students could embrace their cultural being in academic institutions.

## **Our story**

The aim of cultural clubs in higher education is to create space for those of similar cultural backgrounds to support each other. The Griffith Pasifika Association was established in 2011 with the purpose of "promoting and enhancing the university experience of Pacific Island students" ("Pacific Islander and Maori students", 2021). Much of their work is focused on supporting Pacific Island students academically throughout their educational journey. Many students in this group have either been the first in their family to go to university, or have faced immense financial hardship to attend (Stanley, 2017). Much of the research done on Pacific island people in Australia is framed through a deficit lens and portrays them as an underachieving underclass (Ravulo, 2015). The Griffith Pasifika Association has been pivotal in reshaping the narrative of Pacific Island people, as their mere enrolment in university,

challenges these negative stereotypes.

The Griffith Pasifika Association has implemented several educational initiatives, which include homework study groups and workshops among Pacific Island elders, which encourage Pacific island high school students to go to university. This program can be deemed successful by the increase in Pacific Island student enrolment and graduates who attribute their success to this group. 74 percent of Griffith Pasifika Association graduates surveyed were in full time work, with 91 percent of them in degree related jobs (Students Equity Outreach, 2015). The group was also proactive in establishing pathways for Pacific high school students to reach University, and scholarships for its members experiencing financial hardship (Chenoweth, 2021; Logan City Council, 2016). As a former member, I too have personal experiences of the effectiveness of these programs, which helped support our academic pursuits. I was able to receive help from other members in the group with my homework and also gained ideas on how to implement my culture into some of my University assessment presentations.

When reflecting on my time in the Griffith Pasifika Association and speaking to other members, many would ask, 'what makes this group effective?'. To which many of us agreed, 'it made me proud of my culture, it let me know I could use it to succeed in this palagi (European) University'. When analysing how the Griffith Pasifika Association evoked cultural pride among its members, one could not ignore their cultural performances. The Griffith Pasifika Association has a dance group who perform various cultural items both within the University and among the community. What made the performances an effective expression of cultural pride was the power it had among the performers (Enari & Faleolo, 2020; Enari & Taula, 2021). Seeing Pacific Island students showing their sacred dances in a Western University, which does not traditionally welcome our culture, was empowering. The students' engagement in their culture within the University evokes guidance, protection and wisdom from their ancestors (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021). Sharing cultural performances among those in the University space also helps bridge understanding between Pacific Island and non-Pacific Island peoples, as it provides visible access for a non-Pacific audience to view the power in our culture.

The cultural pride felt among the performers was both internal and external. Many of the performers felt an internal sense of achievement in displaying their culture to others. As someone who led these dance groups, we would have long conversations among ourselves on how we felt a personal sense of achievement and satisfaction in 'representing' our culture (Mila-Schaff, 2010). The performer's cultural pride was also reinforced by family members, friends and fellow Pacific Islanders who were proud and grateful that their cultures were on display in an Australian university (Fa'aea & Enari, 2021; Faleolo, 2020). Interestingly, further positive reinforcement was also made by non-Pacific Islanders, who were impressed with the pride the performers exerted. Some of the non-Pacific audience members used terms such as 'beautiful' 'humility' 'sacred' and 'powerful' when describing how they felt about Pacific Island culture, after watching the performances.

The association was not only a catalyst for cultural empowerment and an avenue for cultural understanding between the Association and non-Pacific Islanders, but also a space for its members to gain knowledge, their Indigenous way. For example, many of the students were able to learn their culture and languages through practising and performing their dances. Their performances were not only for entertainment, but an oral presentation of village honour, history and genealogical links.

For Pacific Island people, knowledge is generated and validated by the collective, for the collective (Galuvao, 2016; Matapo & Enari, 2021). This cohort receives knowledge through participating in communal events and engaging their senses upon what they "see, hear, touch, taste, and smell" (Tagaloa, 2008; 130). Pacific Island people are more educationally responsive when their cultural knowledge, values, spirituality and customs are upheld

(Leauepepe, Matapo & Ravlich, 2017). Although this group helped foster Pacific Island pride and academic success, their cultural knowledge systems were still absent from the University curriculum.

## **Looking forward**

Although cultural clubs such as the Griffith Pasifika Association are much needed in the University, as scholars we must also push to implement Pacific Island knowledge systems and those of other ethnic communities in the curriculum.

Inclusion of non-Eurocentric knowledge systems within universities are vital, as they ground and validate the being of minority groups in the classroom (Matapo & Baice, 2020; Rangiwai et al. 2021). The absence of other cultural ways of being in university curriculum contribute to the further silencing and colonisation of non-European students. Tertiary institutions should allow further ways to connect the cultural values and teachings of students into teaching pedagogy. By implementing the cultural heritage of students in the curriculum, the institution can become a safe haven of belonging and diversity of ideas. The inclusion of non Western knowledge systems in university curriculum also allows for better understanding between migrant communities and the academy. Through this understanding, universities are able to increase their scholarly knowledge, whilst minority communities' knowledge systems become visible in the higher education space.

Minority groups have navigated Western systems through their cultures across multiple sectors, including health, sport and business (Mila-Schaff, 2010; Ofe-Grant, 2018; Marsters et al, 2020). We must consider Pacific Island and other minority groups when creating strategies and engagement in education, ensuring we take a strengths-based position. As educational institutions are relied upon to train future leaders, we must ensure the curriculum is reflective of the cultural diversity of its students. As Pacific people, the use of our cultures in universities helps strengthen our own standpoint and decolonise knowledge formation (Enari, 2021; Enari & Matapo, 2021). Looking at the diverse cultural background of the students in university campuses, it is ever more important to draw upon the collective knowledge of non-Eurocentric philosophies. The epistemologies and narratives of minority groups, their communities, mountains, oceans and ancestors can help guide the direction of tertiary education today. May the academy allow them in. Alofa atu.

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