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BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND WORKING TOGETHER –
A FOCUS ON ĀKONGA ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Building relationships with tertiary-level ākonga (learners) is an essential aspect of fostering a positive and productive learning environment, especially where ākonga navigate diverse academic challenges and personal growth. The School of Business at Otago Polytechnic comprises a small team of dedicated kaimahi (staff) teaching across programmes from Level 4 certificates to master's level. Ākonga in the School of Business are typically young adults who are pursuing higher education to prepare for their future careers; however, they may also be returning to study after challenging past experiences, re-training, or looking to pursue a career change. At the end of 2022, there was a real feeling of exhaustion from the recent disruptions caused by the global pandemic, which significantly affected the learning experience, engagement, and sense of belonging of our ākonga, and therefore focused increased attention on fostering positive relationships between educators and learners. Through the pandemic, the School of Business team was committed to providing support and pastoral care, and made concerted efforts to keep a strong connection with ākonga. However, this was difficult when teaching and learning were split between online and on-campus classes. Whilst we had good practices in place, at the start of 2023 it was time to reset and refocus our attention. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were developed to serve as a catalyst for building and enhancing the connections with our ākonga, and to focus on practical actions and fostering beneficial connections within the tertiary learning context.

Our approach was underpinned by two cultural holistic frameworks for health and well-being. Firstly, we drew on Sir Mason Durie's (1985) Māori model of hauora (holistic well-being), known as Te Whare Tapa Whā. This model suggests that, for balanced well-being, four pou (pillars) of life are equally important: physical, spiritual, family and social, and mental and emotional well-being. Each pou relies upon the others to form structure and stability for the whare. Similar to Te Whare Tapa Whā is the Pacific-based Fonofale Model, a traditional Indigenous model in which the posts of the fale symbolise spiritual, physical and mental aspects, culture, and family (Mental Health Commission, 2001). These are the foundations of balanced and positive well-being. The need for connection is implicit within both models and therefore they can be applied as holistic tools for ākonga support and education.

For this study, we focused on ākonga from the New Zealand Diploma in Business (Level 5), a year-long programme, and first-year ākonga from the Bachelor of Applied Management programme at Otago Polytechnic. These ākonga are taught together for the first semester, taking core business papers and then choosing either a Leadership and Management, or Accounting, pathway. This study delves into the pivotal role that relationships play in the tertiary learning experience with a specific focus on the creation and implementation of ILPs as a means to cultivate a supportive academic environment. Martin and Bolliger (2018) assert that when learners are engaged and motivated to learn, they are likely to perform better in their studies, and through more social interaction feel more connected and have overall increased satisfaction. Relationship-building in tertiary

education extends beyond interpersonal dynamics; it is intricately linked to academic achievements, well-being, and overall personal development.

SUPPORTING LITERATURE

It is important to build meaningful relationships with tertiary-level learners by creating a supportive and welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. By valuing this atmosphere, it becomes a critical aspect of effective teaching and further supports an inclusive learning environment. Establishing positive relationships with learners can enhance their academic success (Zepke, 2013), improve their emotional well-being (Riva et al., 2020), and help them develop crucial life and work skills (Gill, 2018). These relationships can be achieved by developing a personal connection through informal conversations, sharing personal experiences, and providing guidance that is constructive and positive. Bowden et al. (2021) draw on Field (2009) to define well-being as a key outcome of student engagement, wherein the student can achieve a sense of purpose and belonging by engaging and connecting positively with peers, educators, and the wider community. Successful learning requires learners to be and feel well physically, socially, and emotionally. Bowden (2013) confirms that building relationships is fundamental to successful student engagement and well-being. While teachers and institutions are not solely responsible for student well-being, they can foster and maintain a culture that helps students keep well (Riva et al., 2020). Such a culture helps support individuals with setting clear goals and instils a belief that these goals are achievable. It offers learning opportunities that help foster these goals and enable learners to retain a sense of personal control over their learning. Belonging can be conceived of as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by both teachers and their peers, and their feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom.

Student engagement emerges as a critical factor influencing the quality of the learning experience and overall academic outcomes. Kuh (2009, p. 683) has defined student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities." Trowler (2010) provides a more in-depth analysis of the term by referring to engaged learners as co-constructors of learning in the classroom, while also emphasising their involvement in structure, processes, and identity-building in the wider community. Bryson and Hardy (2012) offer a framework comprising several influences on engagement. These include students feeling a sense of relevance in what they learn and a balance of choice, autonomy, risk, growth, and enjoyability. In addition, appropriate trust relationships with teachers and on-going dialogue with them are also key to strengthening engagement, along with the creation of a strong sense of purpose and social networks. Thomas (2012) highlights a sense of belonging as a key idea in research on student engagement, and aligns it closely with social and academic engagement, recognising that the "potential mismatch between a student's background and that of the institution may result in students not feeling like they belong and leaving early" (p. 12). This potential mismatch can be remedied by educators fostering a relationship with learners which can further strengthen engagement within classes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Krause (2011) extends the notion of engagement further by arguing that learning occurs in a range of settings, developing from connections with the institution as well as building on prior learning, alongside the learning that takes place in the workplace and community settings.

The social dimension of engagement considers the bonds of identification and belonging which are formed between learners, peers, academic staff, and other key people within the learning environment (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). It is also important to note that engagement is complex, fluid, and can change over time (Trowler et al., 2022). The level of motivation of ākongā to learn is crucial, with Schunk et al. (2008) emphasising that motivation levels can be viewed as the student's desire and willingness to deploy effort toward, and to persist in, a learning task. This view is supported by Fredricks et al. (2004) who confirm that that students must invest cognitively, emotionally, and actively in learning before they succeed.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) are gaining traction as a strategy for promoting learners' education and career readiness. ILPs represent both a process and a tool to document goal setting, which can assist in fuelling students' learning-to-learn skills, such as a sense of agency, intrinsic motivation, and capacity to manage their own learning (Zeiser, 2018). They can be student-directed or lecturer-led plans which are developed in collaboration.

For School of Business ākonga, the ILP was designed to help the learner set goals and achieve academic and professional success while prioritising personal wellness. The tool was also an opportunity to engage and connect with learners face to face, and to understand what their individual needs and goals were. At the start of the ILP meeting, learners were asked details of their course, where they lived (halls of residence, home, or flatting), their commitments outside of study (work, voluntary work, sports, family), as well as any learning support they might require. Understanding why they enrolled on the course provided background to their motivation and also past learning experiences. The second part of the ILP looked at goal setting, both academically for the upcoming semester as well as for specific study or career goals. In addition to establishing objectives, there was a conversation about the necessary steps to attain those goals and any additional assistance that might be required. This stage also highlighted any obstacles to achieving the goals and the availability of support. This platform effectively guides less confident learners to the necessary support teams such as Student Success or Accessibility. This was especially effective for some learners who had not disclosed that they were neurodiverse or had a disability and now felt comfortable in disclosing this, and discussing a plan of support to assist them with their studies. Within the printed ILP, some strategies for success were shared around time management, communication, study strategies, and health and well-being. Dependent on the ILP meeting, actions and further arrangements were discussed and included with any follow-up requirements.

INITIATIVES

In addition to the ILP process, activity initiatives were introduced to build relationships across ākonga year groups and School of Business kaimahi, starting with a full-school orientation. This provided a great opportunity to acknowledge the start of the year and recognise top students from our previous year, along with ākonga participating in the School of Business Great Race with teams made up of year one, two, and three ākonga. As part of the activity initiatives, we also asked the learners what type of activities or events they would like to see during the year, which included a quiz night, sports day, shared lunches, lunchtime board games, and study groups.

METHOD

To assess the impact and understanding of the Individual Learning Plan, 50 first-year students were invited to participate in an online survey using Qualtrics. Having gained Category A ethics approval, a link to the survey was sent out via a gatekeeper. The survey consisted of 12 questions, and ākonga were asked to provide insights into their initial experiences of study, their ILP meetings, and activity initiatives. At the end of the survey, there was also an option to express interest in participation in an interview or focus group.

RESULTS

Of the 50 students approached, 21 completed the online survey. While seven ākonga stated they were interested in participating in an interview, only two actually participated in the semi-structured interview process.

To enhance the meeting and the ILP's implementation, students were given the opportunity to partially complete the ILP before the scheduled meeting, with 11 students indicating they had initiated this process. The majority

found the ILP document comprehensive and easy to complete. Students were asked how useful aspects of the ILP meeting were. Notably, the survey results (Figure 1) indicate a positive reception of the one-to-one ILP meetings, with students emphasising the significance of “understanding available support,” “being able to ask questions,” and the “discussion and action of setting individual goals” as extremely useful.

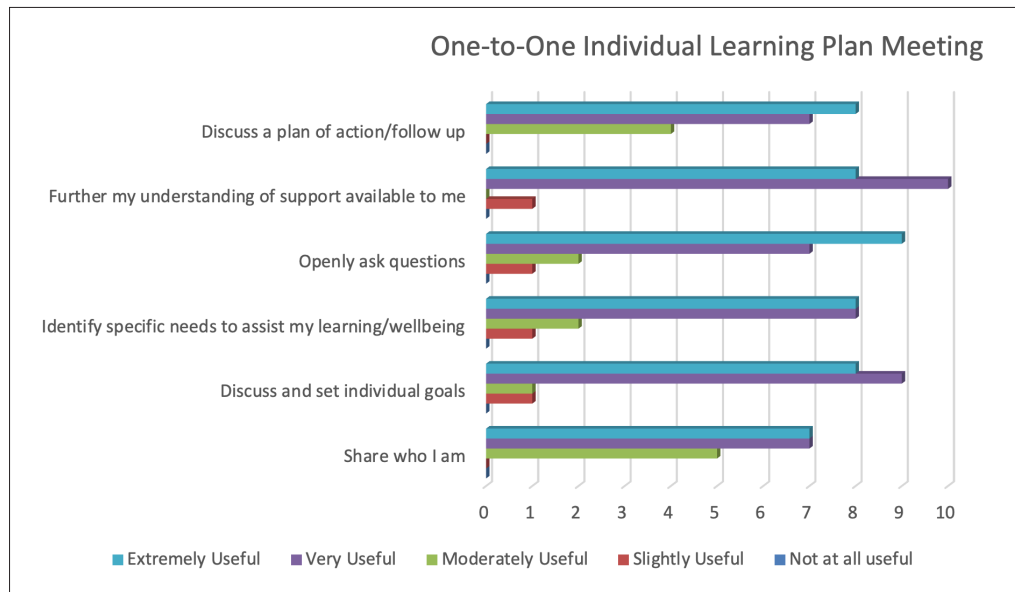


Figure 1. Survey results: Usefulness of ILP meeting.

During the initial eight weeks of the course, weekly study sessions were introduced to support first-year students in academic writing, referencing, and general study skills. Following this, students formed their own study groups, both on and off-campus. Of the 21 survey respondents, nine attended the weekly sessions, and three engaged in student-led study groups. Reasons for non-attendance were primarily related to scheduling conflicts rather than a lack of interest.

The interviews provided an opportunity to delve further into the ILP. The two interview participants focused on the key themes of confidence, relationships, self-awareness, and support. The one-to-one meetings with lecturers were cited as instrumental in building a relationship with a member of the team. The interviews revealed an increase in self-belief arising from the identification of personal strengths and weaknesses. Students demonstrated an enhanced awareness of taking ownership of their learning, emphasising the importance of accountability in achieving academic goals. Both participants noted that their confidence was bolstered by participating in School of Business activities as it provided an opportunity to facilitate connections with peers.

One interviewee emphasised the ILP's role in planning the balance between home and study commitments, positively impacting goal-setting and future focus. Moreover, the ILP meetings provided valuable insights into the broader support services offered by Otago Polytechnic. Participants expressed that being well-informed about available support resources and how to access them empowered them to proactively address challenges. They emphasised the importance of preventative measures and building their 'toolbox,' rather than support services being the metaphorical ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Overall, our research validated the pivotal role of building relationships and fostering connections in developing a successful learning journey. It is evident from our findings that robust interpersonal connections significantly contribute to a positive educational experience. Ākonga felt more comfortable approaching kaimahi with their academic and personal concerns, based on their initial ILP contact, enhancing trust and support and strengthening the connection beyond the formality of the ILP. This sense of belonging and trust is essential in both a Fonofale approach and Te Whare Tapa Whā model where it is encouraged that ākonga build a rapport and be a part of a collective that is nurturing and considerate of their values and beliefs (Simati-Kumar Chand, 2020).

Providing ākonga with the tools and guidance needed to enhance their study skills can empower them to navigate the challenges of study with confidence and resilience. The development of a strong sense of belonging within the school can be seen as a factor of student success. Ākonga who feel a genuine connection to their academic community are more likely to engage actively in their studies, participate in extracurricular activities, and contribute positively to the overall learning environment, which fosters a supportive community where students feel encouraged to succeed (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Viola, 2021).

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Based on initial results, to broaden the impact of the ILP the initiative should be extended to encompass all incoming School of Business ākonga across all programmes. Furthermore, the process should allow for re-evaluation of the ILP as ākonga progress through successive years of study, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness throughout their academic journey as well as promoting a culture of continuous improvement and a sense of belonging and connection with the school. As ākonga progress, further self-development will be encouraged, along with mentoring of new ākonga by more senior ākonga.

Additional shared lunches and collaborative activities involving both students and staff should be introduced. These events should be designed to create a sense of belonging and connection, and an environment that facilitates meaningful interactions between peers and kaimahi. By encouraging a sense of community, these gatherings aim to strengthen the bonds with the school and enhance the overall student experience.

As a team, the collaborative sharing of insights will aim to promote a culture of knowledge exchange and encourage the adoption of successful practices. This will foster a sense of community and enhance the overall learning experience for ākonga within the School of Business.

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