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A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ANXIETIES AMONG HIGHER  
EDUCATION STUDENTS: STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

Mallory Tomsett, Kelly Warren, Rachael Burke,  
Fenella Wilson and Chrissie Keepa

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# A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ANXIETIES AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

We are now entering a new era of higher education that has been inevitably shaped by our recent social history and shared experience of learning and teaching. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the education system and has forced educators and students alike to adapt to new ways of learning and teaching (Tarkar, 2020). Jehi et al. (2021) describe the rapid transition of delivery and learning modes, and, most significantly, how the suspension of formal classes that offered the traditional face-to-face learning experience removed the physical opportunity for students to build social and emotional connectivity.

Professional conversations across our early childhood education team revealed a shared perception that there is now an unprecedented level of student anxiety related to almost every aspect of their learning journey. This is observable in both our undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Students' expectations of how they would learn were rocked when they were thrown into a space of the 'unknown' (Te Whatu Ora, 2022). Our observations, coupled with conclusions from the literature, suggest that in an unknown future, higher education institutions must take a proactive approach in supporting students' social and mental well-being.

Our teaching team has met regularly as a community of practice (Wenger, 2009), adopting a theoretical platform of critical reflections as part of continuous professional development. We took, as a starting point, our shared belief that we were observing the same noticeable shift in student anxiety discussed in the literature. This article will describe where we have sought to extend the discussion through categorising the range of exhibited anxieties as 'academic anxiety', 'social anxiety', 'change anxiety' and 'cultural anxiety'. Recognising that this new era of education will require a re-imagining of traditional teaching and learning delivery, we explore some of the approaches that we are now taking to support students with these types of anxieties.

To contextualise the discussion, we begin with an overview of our programme, outlining the expectations that our students have of us as a provider, and that we have of them, as adult learners preparing for a professional career. We hope that this article will offer not only some practical, transferable strategies to address student anxieties, but will exemplify the key role that critical reflection plays in education. Professional conversations and critical analysis of our own practice can help educators to gain a deeper understanding of their own professional work and make improvements to create better outcomes for students in their learning (McGarr et al., 2019), which is what we are trying to do here.

## BACKGROUND

The early childhood education suite of programmes on offer at our institute comprise two undergraduate programmes and one postgraduate degree. Our teaching team of 11 are based at offices on both our institute's two main campuses in Rotorua and Tauranga, and regularly travel between the two to deliver the same lectures to students at each location. Kaiako teach across both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. All of our programmes are bilingual. It is expected that students make progress on their language and tikanga development each year, regardless of prior knowledge, exposure and confidence, or lack thereof.

As part of the programme, students must participate in practicums each year, in which they attend an early childhood centre for the required number of weeks, depending on their year level. Practicums are essential, as students gain hands-on experience working with children, experienced kaiako and whānau. Students do not get to pick the centre that they work in and this alone can cause some anxiety. Students on practicums must have strong interpersonal skills and communication skills as they are required to complete tasks while in the centre. These tasks often require permission from whānau to complete observations of their child and share the child's learning journey – and some students can find this requirement challenging. The expectation of students while on practicum is to attend 100 per cent of their practicum days. This too can cause students anxiety when they need to make up days and this impacts their other class work, or their whānau.

Another focus within our programmes is connectivity and the importance of building respectful relationships. In any early childhood centre, teachers will always be working in a team, so students need to be able to work with others and accept others' views, opinions and cultural perspectives. In the early childhood sector, students and qualified teachers alike do not get to pick the colleagues they are working with, or the children and whānau who attend the centre; therefore social and interpersonal skill development is crucial.

## METHOD / THEORETICAL PLATFORM

Research has identified that it is imperative for teachers to reflect on their teaching as this is crucial to their professional development and the quality of their work (Saric & Steh, 2017), as they learn from their own practice (Mentor et al., 2011). As our programmes focus heavily on reflection for our students, we understand the importance of modelling our own critical reflection. When challenging and interrogating practice, we do not do it in isolation, but as a team.

We work as a community of practice which emphasises the learning that we do together, through robust conversations, with the focus on how best to support our learners (Wenger, 2009). With this focus on collaborative process, we have paid attention to some of the good practice indicators for successful communities of practice (Gerritson, 2007). First, we are highly conscious that a successful and high-functioning team must ensure high levels of trust and respect, where input is invited, all ideas are listened to, timelines and responsibilities are shared, and decision-making is consensual. Second, we believe in the value of face-to-face meetings where possible, in an era in which video-conferencing and working-from-home *can* emphasise independence rather than reciprocity of roles, tasks and responsibilities (Tarkar, 2020). To maintain a sense of balance, we share hosting and chairing duties by alternating meetings at each campus, supporting an ethos of distributed leadership (Gerritson, 2007). When setting our meeting agenda, we allow time to discuss our collaboration, how we are feeling, and recent challenges or successes. Third, we recognise and utilise individual strengths and share expertise, including conceptual planning, curriculum alignment, industry liaison, tikanga and te reo. Finally, respect for fellow members also facilitates an important function of communities of practice: engaging members in quality conversations rather than simply perpetuating existing practice or 'ticking the box' (Knowles, 2017).

Within our community of practice meetings, we have had multiple discussions in which the theme of rising student anxiety was a constant focus. Having arrived at our four main themes of *academic/performance anxiety*,

*social anxiety, change anxiety and cultural anxiety*, we explored what we were each doing in our classrooms to support our students and build resilience for their continued studies. From this, we found five key strategies that we have found helpful. The remainder of this article describes the anxieties we have observed and the five responses we have developed – acknowledging that as with any experiential learning (Knowles et al., 2005), we will continue to reflect on, and evolve our approaches.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Academic/Performance anxiety

Academic anxiety can be defined as *ākonga* self-doubt in their abilities, nervousness and worry over grades, and overall negative imagery of themselves as academic learners (Mooney, 2022). While the concept of academic anxiety is not new to the tertiary environment, studies have indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increased incidence (Zeng et al., 2022).

At our institution, anecdotal evidence of various year one domestic cohorts highlights academic anxiety related to learner confidence. Students report previous negative experiences, inclusive for some of a belief that they are not academically capable, a perception that can be carried from their previous learning environment into their tertiary study. It is highly probable that lost schooling time and the lack of interaction with peers due to lockdowns, illness and working from home have only increased this lack of confidence. For international students, the main academic concerns centre around the expectations of high performance and the accompanying stress (Mooney, 2022), again, almost certainly exacerbated by being away from home during an international health crisis.

In our community of practice, the teaching team has noted behavioural indicators such as negative self-assessment of their abilities, low self-esteem, avoidance of tasks, low levels of participation in discussion, poor study skills, procrastination of tasks, refusal to ask for help, avoidance of communication with tutors, and in some cases withdrawal from study. Bülbul and Odaci's (2023) analysis of academic anxiety studies in the literature confirms that these phenomena are part of a much larger, global trend and therefore needful of a considered and sustained teaching team and organisational response.

### Social anxiety

Social anxiety is an umbrella term that speaks to a spectrum of discomfort experienced in relationship with others. While this wide diversity can make definition problematic, social anxiety is broadly being “fearful or anxious about or avoidant of social interactions and situations that involve the possibility of being scrutinized” (American Psychiatric Association, cited in McNeil & Randall, 2014, p. 9). At our institute, anecdotal evidence suggests that social anxiety is growing in prevalence, seeing surges in pastoral care needs.

While our intentional teaching practices, such as *whakawhānaungatanga*, deliberately build upon a community sense of belonging, anxiety can prevent authentic participation, directly contradicting its purpose. There is also the social anxiety of contributing to classroom discussion: *ākonga* can feel that their contribution could be wrong, may have a fear of failure, get nervous when speaking to a group, or feel constrained by cultural differences. Zakrajsek (2017) suggests these differences may include shyness, English-as-a-second-language, and lack of knowledge about the response expected. As our students are often from a range of backgrounds and experiences, we believe these factors do contribute to the overall heightened levels of social anxiety we are observing.

## Change anxiety

According to Stallman (2011), issues with mental health such as anxiety can impact significantly on students' ability to assimilate to a tertiary environment and participate in class discussions; further, students already experiencing mental unwellness are more likely than peers to struggle with change (Kessler et al., 2007). Change anxiety encompasses a feeling of fear of the unknown, and can include a change of environment, change of people within class settings, change of lecturers, change of papers or courses, transition process such as moving into the work force or changing levels within the degree, moving to another country or simply doing something 'new' within the classroom setting. Change can be overwhelming, and it is not uncommon for students to feel anxious and stressed during their tertiary years.

Demographics play a key part. Kessler et al. (2007) discuss a strong sense of vulnerability between the years of 18 to 25, an age-range in which many students attend tertiary education, with its new expectations and responsibilities, pressure to succeed and fear of falling behind (Gurbuz et al., 2019). At our institute, the majority of our students are school leavers, and change anxiety is evident through disclosure during enrolment interviews, as well as behaviour within the classroom setting such as a lack of participation with peers and kaiako, disadvantaging engagement with programme content, and skill development.

Stallman (2011) explains the importance of resilience for students to cope with change anxiety but raises concern about an over-reliance on mental health support systems where research has found that some tertiary students are seeking support from general practitioners rather than counsellors. Other authors conclude that students are not always referred promptly to mental health services, perhaps being deemed not serious enough to require such support (Megivern et al., 2003).

## Cultural anxiety

With an increasing number of families from a wide range of cultural backgrounds living in Aotearoa New Zealand, the country is now being described as "super-diverse" and facing emerging challenges due to new levels of cultural complexity (Chan, 2019). In a super-diverse society, contemporary migrants are heterogeneous, and therefore likely to experience a range of inequalities and challenges that teachers may not be aware of. Similarly, tamariki at early childhood centres are increasingly diverse, and teachers need to have the skills to support, acknowledge and value each student's cultural background (Kendall, 2015). Te Whāriki (the Early Childhood Curriculum) also states that children are now growing up in a diverse society, in which there is a wide range of cultures and ethnicities (Ministry of Education, 2017). As Chan (2019) argues, this can be difficult without reverting to tokenism and cultural stereotyping. International students, or those from migrant backgrounds, may find it particularly difficult to navigate the social, cultural and academic world of Aotearoa New Zealand (Coburn, 2020).

For international students, the main concerns centre around mastering language, academic, social and financial requirements (Cheung, 2013); that is, anxiety stemming from a change in cultural context. However, this kind of cultural anxiety may not be limited to international students. Jones (2001) has written about the apprehension shown by Pākehā students when Māori and Pacific teachers take positions of authority. This is supported by anecdotal evidence from our institute where some Pākehā students expressed anxiety about spending time at the culturally unfamiliar environment of the marae where they were positioned as learners. For Māori and Pacific students, cultural anxieties may be generated by a tertiary environment that privileges Western educational theories, therefore homogenising practices according to dominant discourses and marginalising Māori and Pacific knowledge systems (Matapo, 2021).

## FIVE STRATEGIES WE HAVE FOUND HELPFUL

### Being present

One strategy for supporting student well-being and reducing anxiety is through introducing mindfulness practices within the classroom environment. Kabat-Zinn (2003) refers to mindfulness as paying conscious attention to the present moment whilst acknowledging, but not being distracted by, other stimuli, or more simply, being present in the here and now (Good et al., 2016). The argument being, if we are able to pay attention to the present moment, we are less likely to worry about the future, a major cause of anxiety. For our students within their future vocation of working alongside tamariki in early childhood settings, the ability to be present is not only vital for relationship building but also as the foundation of the practice of observing tamariki.

This strategy of being present is implemented at the start of each class, inviting students to 'be present' and to attend to the subject at hand. We unpack this as focussing on the subject, avoiding unrelated kōrero, and paying attention to others when they are speaking/sharing. A transition period is given at the start of class, and after breaks, so students can move out of their prior focus and/or discussions and attend to practising the skill of being present. For some, the distraction, and even the addiction, of their smartphones (Zeng et al., 2022) has proven a challenge in regards to this practice. This is quite a culture shift; however, as our approach has been reinforced over time, students are now more frequently taking on the responsibility for reminding their peers to put their phone away, to listen to others, and to move away from those who continue to be distracted by their phones.

### Focusing on self-care

Our shared observation is that anxiety paves the way for reduced participation, hindering both planned and spontaneous discussion and activities, and compromising the growth of the group through shared experiences. We need to address this immediately, so that early learning is not lost. One method of mitigation we have recently trialled across three different classes, is to introduce the concept of self-care.

During class orientation on day one, a *growth box* was presented. A tray holds a memo cube of paper, a supply of pens and a post box. When clarity is required and students are unable to seek it during class, for whatever reason, they post it anonymously to the box. The contents of the box are revisited during *He Hokinga Mahara* (a looking back, orientation process at the beginning of the next session). To introduce the box, each student was asked to supply one important fact that was conducive to successful learning for them. The responses fell into typical categories: the need for silence during reading, a variety of activities to maintain interest, mental health issues, neurodiversity, allowing autonomy in group choice, regular movement, availability of PowerPoint presentations for multi-modal absorption and time to process. Sharing the responses back to class during the second session highlighted our diverse community and the need to agree on a safe learning environment, along with a 'friendliness with error' and other growth dispositions. The shared examples were also used to introduce the same diversity within our early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 2017; 2019). While class-wide interactions are growing in line with increasing trust and relationship between students and teacher, verbal feedback suggests the box may have accelerated this natural process.

A further strategy to highlight the need for self-care was used during the year one orientation session. Sharing a holistic model for teacher transformation (McFarland, 1993), the class was led on a preliminary journey of looking inwards; specifically at the holistic aspects of their spirit (from a secular perspective), emotions, mind and their body. The exploration, although personal, was linked to teaching roles of reflective practice and role-modelling self-care approaches for tamariki (Ministry of Education, 2017). Strategies such as breath work, positive affirmation, expressive communication, understanding and empathy, nutrition, exercise, rest and connection to nature were explored. Additionally, ākongā were offered provocations for self-awareness and belief systems that led towards a personal initial life/career mission statement. The immediate feedback was positive and offered

an important framework to enhance their well-being during study and throughout their teaching career. A week later during a session exploring Kaupapa Māori theory, synergy was 'discovered' with the holistic focus in Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985) and Te Wheke (Pere, 1991).

### **Utilising the Māori health system**

In exploring the Te Whare Tapa Whā concept of Māori health, students were reminded of the inextricable nature of the four human dimensions explored during orientation (McFarland, 1993). Using a whare (house) as a metaphor, the model identifies four walls representing taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha tinana (physical well-being), taha whānau (family well-being) and taha hinengaro (mental well-being), each supported by whenua (the land) as a nod to her tūpuna (ancestral) status. Students need all walls to be strong to be successful in their health and their education and needs to be viewed holistically (Ministry of Education, 2017).

While students reconnected to the earlier exploration of their individual selves, some were new to cosmic relationships as an extension. Kaupapa Māori sees each individual as one part of a collective, unable to be viewed in isolation. This calls attention to one's responsibility to and from others for the overall health of the group, which may be empowering for those suffering anxiety, knowing that their contribution is both necessary and valued, provided the conditions of the whare are in alignment.

### **Emphasising relationships and belonging**

Teaching practices such as whanaungatanga build strong reciprocal relationships through learning about one another to ensure that students develop a sense of belonging, and knowing their well-being is being prioritised. (Ministry of Education, 2017). Whanaungatanga examples can be as simple as sharing stories of meaning with others, consensus building and collaboration where everyone's ideas and opinions are shared and valued as meaningful. At times, during stressful periods such as assessment due dates, it could be that students need that time to unpack what might be going on in their lives to be able to move forward with the day, a term that has been used recently by students as "taking a load off."

Sammons et al. (2020) suggest that a strategy to encourage belonging and well-being is through the sharing of cultural artefacts. This strategy was used during a noho marae experience at our institution, where a group of international and domestic students were asked to bring an object that was culturally significant to them. Taking turns introducing their object and explaining its significance to them and their culture revealed many remarkable stories of resilience, aroha, whānau and childhood. The sense of belonging fostered here was due to all members of the group showing their willingness to listen, be open, and to learn about each other's culture. This experience had long-term effects with deep, long-lasting bonds formed between students. It was particularly significant for Māori students in this class, who communicated later how empowering it was to have their culture positively acknowledged within the sacred space of the whareniui. Kaupapa Māori principles including manaakitanga, aroha, tuakana/teina, ako kotahitanga, and tino rangatiratanga result in uplifting the mana of all participants and enhancing both individual and collective growth. Education Council (2017) also values whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, pono and whakamana and these are our guiding principles and responsibilities as registered teachers. In class, such whanaungatanga practices usually take place after karakia and himene, allowing students to move past anxiety and settle into their learning.

### **Acknowledging multiculturalism**

In our post-graduate programme, the majority of students hail from a diverse range of international backgrounds. Lessons always begin with a karakia, waiata, and basic te reo Māori greetings. By around the third week, students are invited to teach their classmates greetings from their own cultures, which are then revisited each week.

Hearing a friendly greeting in your own language is a positive way to set the tone for the class each week and students always enjoy this. As Nuttall (2005) has pointed out, such simple strategies are a way to support multiculturalism and to ensure that everyone feels that they belong and are valued.

Chan's (2019) research focuses on the importance of fostering strong relationships between teachers and culturally diverse whānau in the ECE context, and many of the ideas are relevant to the tertiary classroom. Chan argues that "it is the teacher's responsibility to proactively initiate relationship building" (p. 256) by facilitating respectful dialogue in order to explore differences and similarities in each other's beliefs and practices. This includes culturally diverse communication styles: some may be comfortable to ask questions in class, others may prefer a private chat after class, or an email or class forum. It is important to remember that most international students are completing their studies in a second (or even third or fourth) language, so even those who seem to be coping easily will still be grappling with translation issues and language barriers. Students from overseas often experience high anxiety about academic assessments or different learning practices, based on their educational experiences in their own countries (Coburn, 2020).

As well as clear and patient communication, other strategies that have been effective for our international students include bringing in Learning Facilitators and Faculty Librarians for targeted sessions, setting up online forums around assessments, workshopping tasks as a class, providing plenty of time for interactive activities and ensuring that students are well supported by the International Department. These opportunities for dialogue and exchange provide the chance for all students to work together which can also build trust and strengthen relationships even further (Chan, 2019).

Another challenge identified by international students at our institution is the difficulty making friends with domestic students on campus. This is supported by research which suggests the friendship gap appears to be particularly large between students that come from cultures that are markedly different to the host society, such as between Aotearoa New Zealand and Asian countries (Coburn, 2020). Here again, the concept of whanaungatanga and noho marae described above can assist, mixing undergraduate and post-graduate students from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, ages and life experiences. Reciprocal learning activities build cross-cultural connections and foster tuakana-teina relationships; food sharing and the communal sleeping experience can be the start of openness towards others from different cultures and classes. Back on campus, and on a more regular basis, students from different classes are brought together for the weekly te reo Māori classes which are an important component of our programme. After all, in order for early childhood teachers to nurture the diverse cultural identities of tamariki, the teachers themselves need to feel a sense of belonging (Arndt, 2018). This process begins in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

Today's students have been through a period of significant change with delivery and learning modes, and the arising challenges. As a team, our early childhood education community of practice's robust professional conversations have confirmed the extraordinary level of anxiety described in the literature as a post-pandemic phenomenon, and allowed us to progress our understanding by noting four categories of anxiety. We believe academic, social, change, and cultural anxiety will continue to be big factors in our programmes and placement settings.

This article has outlined some of the strategies that we have used to reduce anxiety: introducing mindfulness and being present in the moment; ensuring that students are taking time for themselves and taking care of their holistic well-being; encouraging self-reflection through the Te Whare Tapa Whā model; building relationships and a sense of belonging through whanaungatanga experiences; and embracing multiculturalism in our superdiverse setting. There are exciting times ahead, and as a team we find that working, sharing and strategising



as a community of reflective practitioners has helped us to accept the challenge of turning anxiety-beset learners into confident and effective graduate teachers. We hope that this account of how we work, and what we have come up with, will spark others to share their own critical narratives of building student resilience and success.

**Mallory Tomsett** is a qualified certified early childhood teacher with over 17 years of teaching experience in early childhood sector. She has a Master of Education from Waikato University. Mallory started in 2021 as an academic staff member within the Education Department at Te Pūkenga | Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, leading programmes in early childhood education and is now a Senior Academic Staff Member.

**Kelly Warren** is an academic staff member within the Education Department at Te Pūkenga | Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. She has a Master of Education from Massey University. Kelly's previous experience was as Curriculum Advisor for New Shoots Children's centres. She has contributed to the 2019 rewrite of *Take Another Look-Tirohia anō: A guide to observing children* (3rd ed.). Kelly has taught in the Education programme since 2022.

**Rachael Burke** is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Te Pūkenga | Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. She has a PhD, Master's and B.A (Hons.) in Social Anthropology from Massey University, and her research interests include inquiry-based learning and implicit cultural practices in early childhood education settings.

📧 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0465-7707>

**Fenella Wilson** is a certified early childhood teacher and a Montessori trained guide. Fenella previously owned a Montessori preschool in the Bay of Plenty and joined Te Pūkenga | Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology as an Academic Staff Member for early childhood education in 2022.

**Chrissie Keepa** is a Senior Academic Staff Member at Te Pūkenga | Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology within the Education department. Chrissie has a Master's in education and Bachelor of teaching and learning with a strong focus on te ao Māori and te reo Māori within the education sector.

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