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Engagement With a Support Programme and First-year Academic Outcomes: Analysis of Administrative Data for Pacific Students Enrolled in a Health Sciences Programme in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This study examines if Pacific students' academic background and engagement in a student support programme was associated with first-year students' academic success, and retention. This is a cohort study of linked administrative and attendance data for Pacific students (N=1532) enrolled in a first-year Health Sciences programme, at a New Zealand university, between 2013 and 2025. Statistical regression models were used to test associations between engagement or preparation with academic outcomes. We found engagement in support programmes was significantly associated with first-year success independent of students' academic background. However, arriving at university with the best possible academic preparation had the greatest influence on their academic success. These findings reinforce the need for early, targeted interventions that address both academic and cultural dimensions of student success, particularly for those who are less prepared upon arrival. Strengthening collaboration with secondary schools, improving early academic preparation, and ensuring adequate resourcing of support programmes are essential to achieving equity in health professional pathways for Pacific students.

Keywords: academic performance, first-year health sciences, student retention, student engagement, Pacific cultural support, pre-enrolment preparation.

Introduction

The University of Otago is one of New Zealand's leading providers of health professional training. Entry into competitive health professional programmes (HPPs) such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, physiotherapy, and medical laboratory science typically occurs through a range of pathways which include the Health Sciences First Year (HSFY) programme, postgraduate or alternative entry. Most students enter through the HSFY pathway (University of Otago, n,d,). Academic success in HSFY is closely linked to prior academic performance at secondary school, with students who achieve well in high school more likely to succeed in HSFY and gain entry into competitive HPPs (Kokaua et al., 2014; Van Herpen et al., 2017).

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Pacific peoples make up approximately 9% of New Zealand's population (Stats NZ, 2024) yet continue to experience significant disparities in both health and educational outcomes compared to other ethnic groups (Ministry of Education, 2020; Ministry of Health, 2023). These disparities become particularly pronounced during the transition from secondary school to tertiary study, a critical point of inequity, especially in terms of academic preparedness, cultural adjustment, and access to support systems (Sopoaga et al., 2013; Crawford & Turvey, 2019). These transitional challenges have been shown to adversely affect Pacific students in their first-year of university (Sopoaga et al., 2013; Middleton et al., 2019). Associated factors include low socio-economic status, financial hardship, and limited access to academic resources, all of which may increase stress and reduce available study time (Thomas, 2002). Many Pacific students are first-in-family and often are trying to find balance between family expectations and their studies, which can make university more challenging (Lessky, 2025; Mayeda et al., 2014). While these barriers are well recognised, and growing efforts have deepened our understanding of how they interact with institutional support systems, this knowledge is not yet fully embedded in wider institutional practices or support structures (Leach, 2013; Airini et al., 2009).

Despite increases in Pacific student numbers in recent years, they remain under-represented in HPPs. While the University of Otago has implemented equity targeted admission pathways for Māori and Pacific students, Pacific students make up only around 4.8% of enrolments in health professional programmes at Otago, about half of the proportion in the general population. This underrepresentation is more pronounced when considering the higher proportion of Pacific peoples in younger age groups compared to the general population, 19% and 13%, respectively (Stats NZ, 2024; Sise et al., 2024). This persistent gap raises important questions about what factors continue to shape outcomes for Pacific learners, even within equity-focused frameworks.

To understand this gap, traditional models such as student integration theory frame success in terms of academic and social integration into university life (Pham et al., 2026). However, these models often give less attention to cultural dimensions of belonging and institutional fit. Although belonging is widely recognised as important for students in general, evidence from the New Zealand context indicates that Pacific and Māori students may place greater value on feeling a sense of belonging and having their cultural identities respected (Leach, 2013; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). One study found that students became more aware of their cultural identities once they came to university and noted that many with Pacific and other ethnicities became aware of how important their cultural identity was to their development and academic journey (L. Sopoaga et al., 2024).

A lack of cultural identity and belonging for Pacific students reflects broader systemic dynamics within New Zealand's tertiary education system, where universities have historically been structured around dominant European norms. These norms underpin institutional policies, teaching practices, and campus cultures, often marginalising Pacific and Māori ways of knowing, being, and engaging (Leach, 2013; Airini et al., 2009). In response to these limitations, culturally grounded models have been developed to offer more holistic understandings of Pacific student success. One such framework is the Folauga model (F. Sopoaga et al., 2024), a Pacific model for student success, presented as a culturally contextualised adaptation of Tinto's (1975) theory. The Folauga model includes Pacific concepts such as the ama (float of a canoe) to represent identity and culture, and lako (booms) to represent holistic wellbeing which encompasses psychological, physical, spiritual, and social domains (F. Sopoaga et al., 2024).

Previous studies showed HSFY Pacific students had poorer performance compared to non-Pacific students. Gender, previous school results, socio-economic status, first-year accommodation type, ethnicity, and citizenship were associated with academic performance (Sopoaga et al., 2013). Other studies have shown student engagement and academic success are multi-dimensional, shaped by academic, psychosocial, and contextual factors (Krause & Coates, 2008). Prior academic performance, self-efficacy, social integration, and employment commitments were also highlighted as strong predictors of university success, suggesting targeted support would improve student outcomes (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Institutions have also responded to the challenge of enhancing performance with programmes designed to improve the first-year experience for Pacific students. In 2011, the University of Otago established the Pacific Orientation Programme at Otago, with a specific focus on supporting the transition of Pacific students into the first-year in Health Sciences (University of Otago, n.d.). This programme was further developed to include a range of other support programmes for Pacific students and is now called the Pacific Opportunities Programme @ Otago (POPO). This programme provides a culturally responsive early orientation, a peer mentoring system and academic support embedded within departmental teaching (Sopoaga et al., 2013; 2017). Nationally, the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 outlines broader strategic goals to increase Pacific student participation and

success in tertiary education through strengthened relationships, pathways, and systems (Ministry of Education, 2020). Culturally grounded programmes like POPO are designed to respond to the unique experiences of Pacific students navigating a university environment often shaped by dominant European norms. POPO has utilised components of the Folauga model to support student success, focussing on strengthening connectedness to culture and affirming students' identity (F. Sopoaga et al., 2024). Additionally, holistic health and wellbeing approaches integrating spirituality, mental, physical and social wellbeing are incorporated in the programmes for student support. The benefits to students extend not only to academic outcomes but also to a broader sense of cultural belonging and institutional fit, factors known to enhance engagement and persistence (Mayeda et al., 2014; Leach, 2013).

In New Zealand, living in a residential college and engagement in the early POPO programme was shown to significantly enhance GPA for Pacific students (Sopoaga et al., 2017). Broader international research supports these findings, with models of student retention emphasising social integration as a key driver of success. Students living in residential colleges are more likely to persist, achieve higher academic results, and engage in campus life, reinforcing the importance of supportive, community-oriented environments in higher education (Tinto, 1975; Thomas, 2002; Zepke et al., 2010; Kokaua et al., 2018).

Another New Zealand study of administrative data developed an Early Academic Preparation Index that established and validated a pre-enrolment screening tool to identify levels of academic preparedness among HSFY students (Kokaua et al., 2014). This work demonstrated that routinely collected pre-entry data could meaningfully predict first-year academic outcomes and inform the targeting of academic support. That study found significantly positive factors in the Traffic Light Category (TLC) statistical models included: passes in secondary school sciences papers; living in a residential college during their first-year; multiple ethnicities; coming from a wealthy neighbourhood; and working in their previous year. The models were assessed with strong predictive ability for HSFY first semester success.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. While programmes like POPO provide academic and cultural support, many Pacific students continue to face barriers that affect their academic performance and long-term retention. The aim of this study is to understand the independent and combined effects of academic background and engagement with support programmes on Pacific students' outcomes in the first-year of a health sciences degree at a New Zealand university.

Methods

This study is a cross-sectional study of HSFY student cohorts enrolled between 2013 and 2025, using administrative records from the University of Otago .

Participants

For this study, an extract of individualised University of Otago administrative data was provided to the POPO team for all Pacific HSFY students enrolled from 2013 to 2025. Study participants included individuals who identified with one or more Pacific ethnicities and had enrolled in the University of Otago's HSFY programme at the start of each year from 2013 until 2025. Students who withdrew from HSFY in their first semester of study were excluded from the study. Students are given an opportunity of withdrawing before their first exams with no impact on retaking HSFY in another year.

Procedures

Administrative datasets were cleaned prior to analysis: duplicates and exclusions were removed, and data were de-identified before analysis, with unique study IDs assigned to replace personally identifiable information. Counts of fewer than five were suppressed in line with University of Otago data governance and privacy requirements and recommendation from the ethics committee, in order to mitigate the risk of potential secondary identification.

Ethics

Ethical approval was given by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (25/1299) and all procedures complied with university data governance, confidentiality, and Pacific data sovereignty principles.

Exposures

Two main variables of interest are the focus of this study: TLC score and engagement in the POPO student support programme provided to Pacific students at the University of Otago. The TLC score is a pre-entry indicator of likely success in HSFY,

based on students' prior academic preparation, and developed from routinely collected University of Otago administrative data. It draws on secondary school academic attainment and subject preparation relevant to HSFY. Based on this score, students are grouped into four categories indicating likelihood of success: minimal (Maroon), low (Red), moderate (Amber), and high (Green). The method for calculating the TLC score is described in an earlier publication (Kokaua et al., 2014).

To describe POPO engagement, three levels of students' participation were identified: those who attended 5% or fewer tutorials and other support events provided by POPO in their first semester (minimal engagement); those who attended more than 5% but fewer than 40% of all events (part-engaged); and those who attended 40% or more of the programme (engaged). While 5% or less tutorial attendance was classified as effectively no attendance the total number of weeks available for tutorials varied from year to year, 40% was adopted as an acceptable threshold for engagement for our administrative reports.

Outcomes

These outcomes allowed consideration of students' academic progress at the end of the first semester, numbers who progressed to semester 2 and their overall success during the first year. Academic outcomes in the HSFY were: passing all semester 1 papers; still in HSFY in semester 2; passing all papers taken in their first-year; and mean grade point average (GPA). As noted above, students were excluded if they withdrew in semester 1. Thus, of those who completed semester 1, if students did not pass all semester 1 papers, they were no longer eligible for consideration for many of the competitive health professional programmes in year 2. At which point some choose a different programme of study. POPO engagement is an outcome for the regression model including TLC as the sole exposure variable. A one-point increase in GPA means a student grade increases a single increment, The preferred outcome for a student in HSFY is to progress to a HPP. Many HPPs require students to pass all papers in HSFY and highly competitive programmes such as medicine require high average GPA. Students who do not pass all semester one courses are required to enrol in an alternative programme. Outcomes assessed at the end of the HSFY year were second-year retention at the University of Otago and enrolment in a health professional, any health sciences, or a general sciences programme of study.

Sociodemographic and geographic confounding variables

Our primary interests are in outcome differences between the exposure groups, but it is important to take account of factors that may confound these comparisons. Sociodemographic and geographic variables collected for this study included: students' age, gender, ethnicity, geographic region of home, and the deprivation level of the neighbourhood where they lived before enrolling at the University of Otago; enrolment in a foundation programme prior to undertaking HSFY study; and living in a residential college during their HSFY academic year.

Students can identify with up to three ethnic groups. In New Zealand two common approaches are used to categorise ethnicity. "Total response" ethnicity, where students are classified as Pacific if they identified a Pacific ethnicity in any of their three answers, was used in this study allowing individuals to identify with more than one ethnicity (Ministry of Health, 2017). Deprivation was represented using the NZ Deprivation index (NZDep) from the 2013 Census, for students enrolled between 2013 and 2017, and 2018 Census, for 2018-2025 students (Atkinson et al., 2014; 2020).

Statistical methodology

Descriptive analyses have been presented as raw student numbers and percentages calculated directly as a proportion of the total number of students as opposed to rates calculated using a statistical model. Odds ratios for binary outcomes were calculated using logistic regressions; and coefficients for GPAs used simple linear regression models. Effect sizes are presented as "unadjusted" where statistical models included only the outcome and exposure variables and "adjusted" where exposure and confounding variables were included on the right-hand side of the regression equation.

Stata/SE version 18 (StataCorp, 2021) was used for statistical analyses and final tables and graphs were created and formatted in Microsoft Excel. Reporting of analyses was informed by the Strengthening Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guideline (von Elm et al., 2007).

Results

The initial data extract included 1563 students identified using administrative enrolment data. From this extract, 31 students were excluded as subsequent review of course enrolment data showed they withdrew from the HSFY programme in their first semester of study. Thus, the final cohort comprised 1532 Pacific students enrolled in HSFY from 2013-2025.

A summary of the demographic breakdown for the cohort is shown in Table 1. The HSFY cohort was young, most were aged under 19 years (56%), female (67%) and had more than one ethnicity (58%). Most came to university from outside the South Island; 40% from Auckland and 32% from other parts of the North Island; and 9% were from outside Aotearoa. Most students came from moderately deprived areas in NZ (65%), many (29%) came from homes considered the most deprived areas. Most students (68%) lived in a residential college in their first-year. Prior to coming to university, a small proportion (7%) had studied at the university's foundation studies programme.

Table 1

Descriptive analysis Pacific HSFY students enrolled between 2013 and 2025

		Total	
		N	**% of Total**
Total, enrolled in Semester 1 HSFY		1563	
Total with Exclusions (withdrawals)		1532	100%
Gender	Female	1032	67%
	Male	500	33%
Age	16 to 19	851	56%
	20 to 29	541	35%
	30 and older	101	7%
Region	Auckland	611	40%
	North Island (rest of)	487	32%
	South Island	253	17%
	International	141	9%
Multiple Ethnicity		895	58%
Previously enrolled in Foundation		114	7%
Deprivation	Wealthiest	96	6%
	Moderate	996	65%
	Most deprived	440	29%
Residential College		1045	68%

Table 2 shows the Maroon group was substantially larger than the other academic preparedness groups, comprising 39% of Pacific HSFY students. There is a small but significant association between students' preparation and their engagement (p=0.006). Students in the two most prepared groups, Amber and Green, were slightly overrepresented in the most vs least engaged students (46 % vs 40%, respectively).

Table 2

Pacific HSFY student's engagement by TLC group

				POPO engagement[#]					
		Total		Minimal		Part-Engaged		Engaged	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
TLC	Total	1532	100%	342	100%	856	100%	334	100%
	Maroon	601	39%	130	38%	349	41%	122	37%
	Red	322	21%	75	22%	188	22%	59	18%
	Amber	352	23%	82	24%	183	21%	87	26%
	Green	257	17%	55	16%	136	16%	66	20%
	Chi-Sq	Chi-sq=0.2153, p=0.00540							

Note. [#]Engaged students attended at least 40% of POPO tutorials or events, part engaged attended between five and less than 40%, and minimal attendance was five percent or less.

Figure 1 shows that prior to 2025, while Pacific HSFY student numbers have doubled since 2013, the greatest increase was in students with Maroon or Red prior academic preparation at enrolment. Since 2015 the numbers of Green, most academically prepared, students were comparatively consistent, not significantly increasing, with between 15 and 25 students per year (p=0.1) compared with significant growth in Maroon or Red groups (p=0.02). An exception was in 2024, where 30 students were in the Green category.

Results also show that while most, 78%, of Pacific HSFY students at least partly engaged with POPO at some time in Semester 1, one in five (22%) were considered engaged (attending more than 40% of all POPO tutorials or mentor sessions). Figure 2 shows that while numbers of engaged students have been slightly but not significantly falling (p=0.09) and minimally engaged students increased (p=0.02), the greatest increase was in partly engaged students (p=0.008).

Figure 1

Pacific students in TLC groups, by academic year; 2013-2025

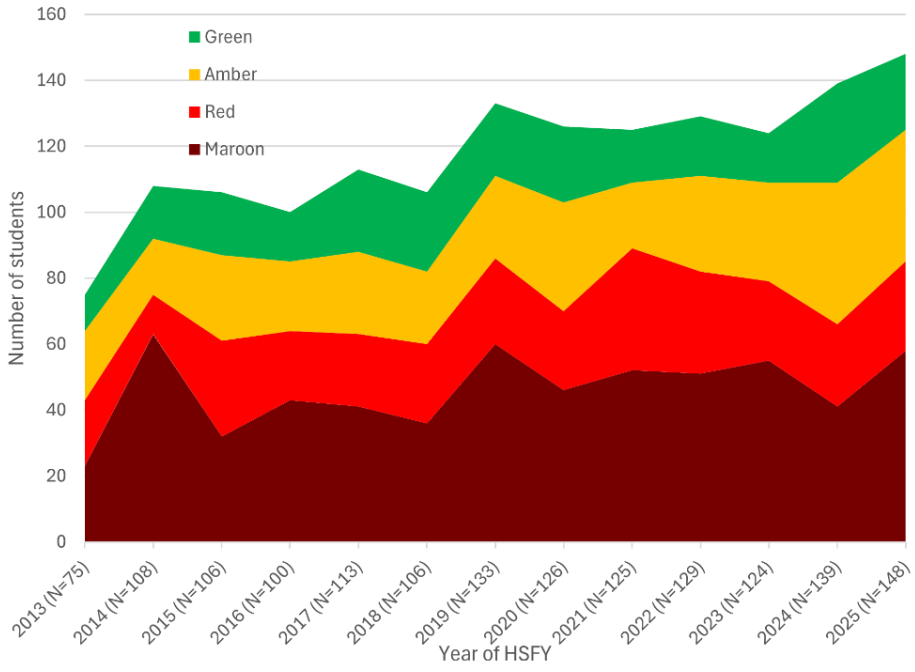
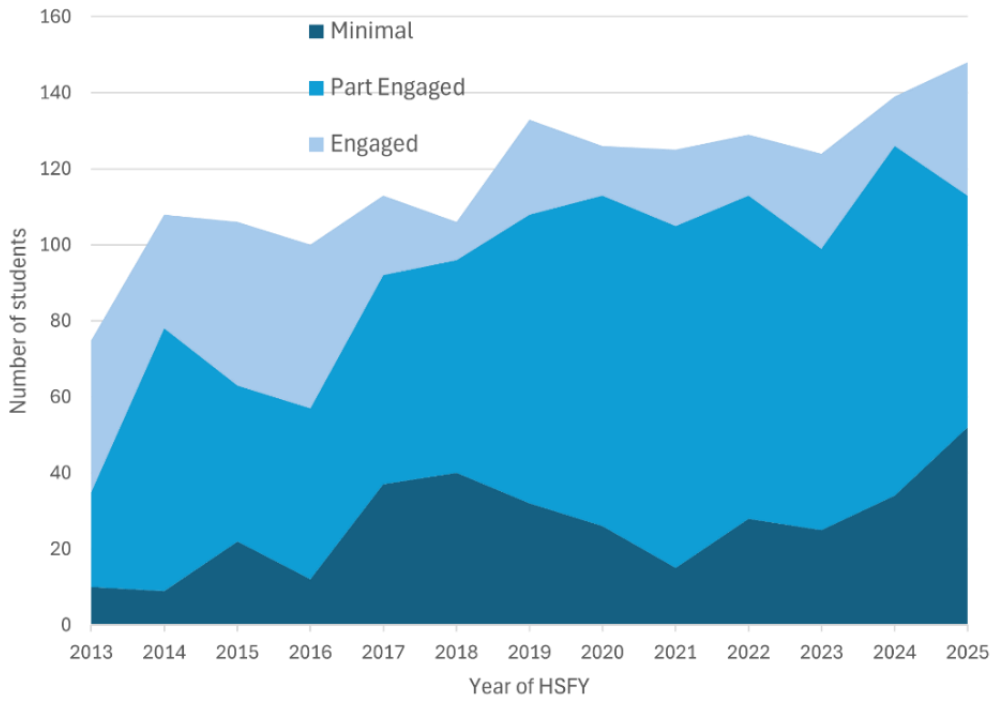


Figure 2

Pacific students in POPO engagement groups, by academic year, 2013-2025



Academic Results

Table 3 presents adjusted regression results comparing POPO engagement groups by level of engagement (minimal, part, or engaged), adjusted for differences in TLC and other covariates (unadjusted univariable regression output is reported in Appendix, Table A1). Findings in Table 3 show that TLC was weakly associated with POPO engagement, in that the most prepared students were more likely to engage with POPO than least prepared (p=0.05). Compared with Pacific HSFY students with minimal engagement, students who were engaged with POPO had higher odds of first-year pass rates (Semester 1 OR = 2.5, 95% CI = 1.6-3.7, p<0.0001; Year 1 OR = 2.4, 95% CI = 1.3-3.8, p=0.003), entry into health professional programme (OR = 2.0, 95% CI = 1.1–3.6, p=0.03) and retention beyond year 1 (OR = 2.3, 95% CI = 1.3–4.3, p<0.006). We found that higher POPO engagement by Pacific HSFY students was associated with positive first-year academic outcomes, including higher first-year academic achievement (GPA increase = 1.1, 95% CI = 0.8–1.5, p<0.0001). Surprisingly, for several outcomes, for example a passing grade in their first-year papers, these results suggest that those who partly engaged were as successful or worse than students who didn't engage.

Table 3

Adjusted effect [1] sizes for POPO engagement and TLC groups on academic outcomes for Pacific students in HSFY, 2013-2025

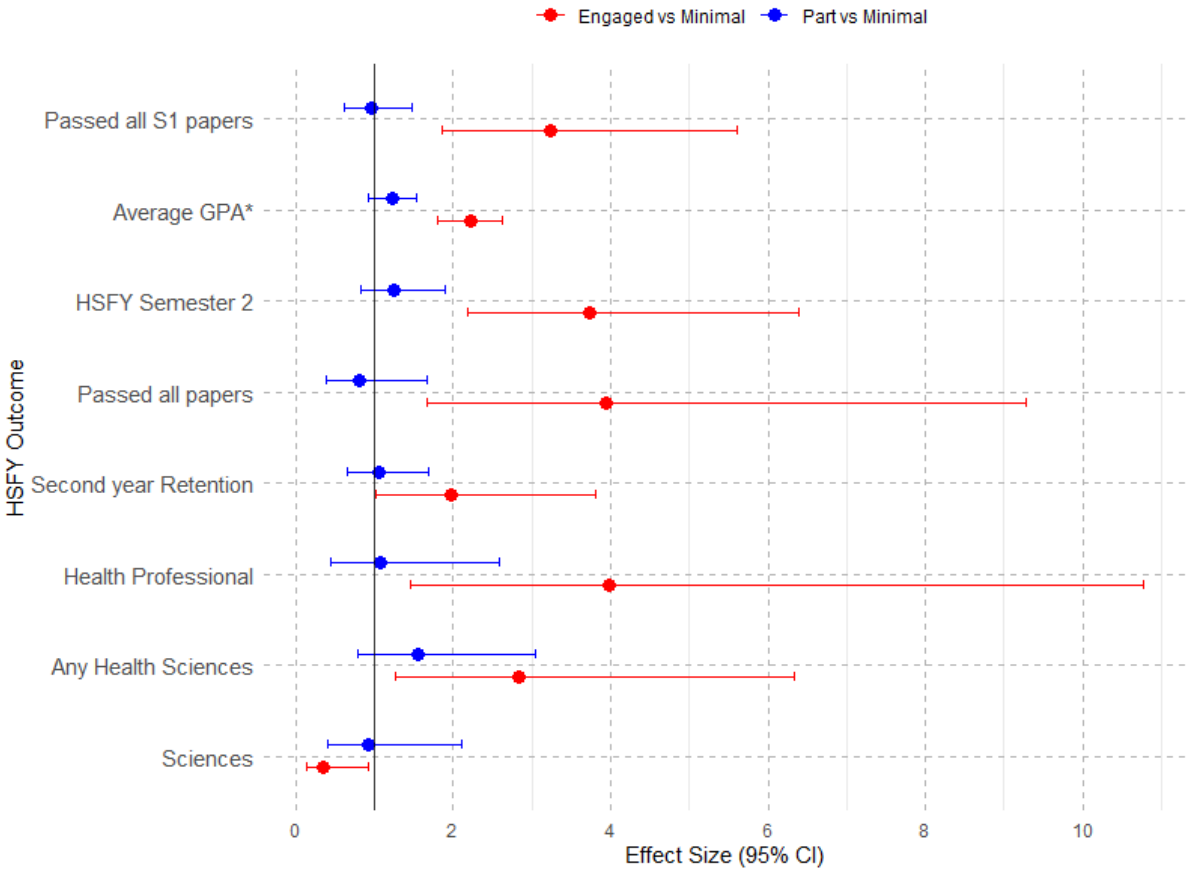
	POPO engagement [2]		TLC		
	Part vs Minimal	**Engaged vs Minimal**	**Red vs Maroon**	**Amber vs Maroon**	**Green vs Maroon**
	OR/*Coeff* (95% CI)	**OR/*Coeff* (95% CI)**	**OR/*Coeff* (95% CI)**	**OR/*Coeff* (95% CI)**	**OR/*Coeff* (95% CI)**
POPO engaged	NA	NA	1.053	1.188	1.595
			(0.72,1.55)	(0.81,1.75)	(1,2.55)
Passed all S1 papers	0.671**	2.516***	1.842***	3.004***	11.229***
	(0.49,0.92)	(1.7,3.72)	(1.26,2.69)	(2.07,4.36)	(7.04,17.91)
Average GPA [3]	-0.038	1.122***	0.425***	1.01***	3.039***
	(-0.3,0.22)	(0.79,1.45)	(0.12,0.73)	(0.7,1.32)	(2.67,3.41)
Passed all FY papers	0.643**	2.247***	2.561***	6.576***	41.63***
	(0.43,0.98)	(1.35,3.75)	(1.44,4.56)	(3.8,11.38)	(21.76,79.64)
Still HSFY in Semester 2	1.023	3.273***	1.972***	3.304***	17.616***
	(0.75,1.4)	(2.17,4.93)	(1.38,2.81)	(2.3,4.74)	(10.54,29.45)
End-of-year outcomes					
Second year Retention	1.833**	2.324**	1.302	1.245	2.59**
	(1.22,2.76)	(1.27,4.25)	(0.79,2.14)	(0.75,2.07)	(1.31,5.12)
Health Professional	0.566**	2.128**	1.194	1.77*	5.37***
	(0.34,0.95)	(1.18,3.85)	(0.61,2.35)	(0.91,3.43)	(2.6,11.07)
Any Health Sciences	0.899	1.79**	1.182	1.324	3.482***
	(0.58,1.41)	(1.05,3.04)	(0.7,2)	(0.77,2.28)	(1.9,6.38)

Notes. [1]All models are adjusted for year of study, age, gender, foundation. College, home location, and ethnicity. [2] Engaged students attended at least 40% of POPO tutorials or events, part engaged attended between 5% and less than 40%, and minimal attendance was 5% or less. [3] GPA is a continuous measure and the reference for its effect size is zero, while the others are categorical variables whose comparisons are shown as odds ratios with a reference value of one. *Significant with p-value<0.05. **Significant with p-value<0.01. ***Significant with p-value<0.0001

Similarly, the results for TLC groups were adjusted for POPO engagement. Table 3 also shows that arriving at university with the best possible academic preparation had the greatest influence on nearly all indicators of student academic success. The best prepared HSFY students in the Green group, compared with the least prepared Maroon group, had greater odds of passing all their first-year papers (OR = 41.6, 95% CI = 21.7-79.7, p<0.0001) with higher grades (first-year GPA increase = 3.0, 95% CI = 2.7-3.4, p<0.0001). After their first year, compared with Maroon students, Green students had greater odds of remaining enrolled in their second year (OR = 2.6, 95%CI = 1.3-5.2, p<0.0001) and entering a HPP (OR = 5.4, 95% CI = 2.6-11.2, p<0.0001).

Figure 3

Adjusted effect sizes for POPO engagement on academic outcomes for Maroon and Red Pacific students in HSFY, 2013-2025



Note. All models are adjusted for year of study, age, gender, foundation. College, home location, and ethnicity: *GPA is a continuous measure scaled so the reference for this is one, all other effect sizes are odds ratios that automatically have a reference equal to one.

Figure 3 and Table 3 show that, despite the reduced power from a smaller sample size with this comparison resulting in wider confidence intervals, POPO engagement has a substantial positive effect on first-year outcomes for Pacific students in the least prepared, Maroon or Red groups. Compared with those who did not engage, Maroon or Red students who engaged with the POPO programme were substantially advantaged. Engaged students had 3-fold greater odds of passing all Semester 1 papers (95%CI = 1.8-5.7, $p<0.0001$), 4-fold greater odds of passing all their first-year papers (95%CI = 1.7-10.0, $p<0.002$) and 3 times greater odds of entering a HPP (95%CI = 1.3-9.4, $p<0.017$). As observed in the cohort overall, Maroon or Red students who partly engaged with POPO were not advantaged over minimally engaged students.

Discussion

The TLC scores have emerged as a strong predictor of academic success among Pacific students in the HSFY programme. Students with higher TLC scores consistently demonstrated better academic outcomes, including higher pass rates, greater retention, and higher GPA scores, as well as increased likelihood of entry into HPPs. These findings reaffirm prior research highlighting the importance of academic preparation before tertiary study (Sopoaga et al., 2013; Tinto, 1975; Krause, & Coates, 2008). Furthermore, these findings extend the earlier findings to include a wider range of outcomes over a longer sequence of student cohorts.

However, academic preparation alone does not fully account for success. This study also found that engagement with the POPO contributed positively to academic outcomes—particularly in Semester 1, where early success is critical to progression into HPPs. Students engaged with POPO were more likely to pass all their papers, achieve higher GPA scores, and continue

into their second and third years of study. Our findings show that this was especially true for students in Maroon and Red groups, suggesting that POPO acts as a vital intervention for those at greatest academic risk.

The interaction between TLC and POPO engagement reveals that while arriving well-prepared provides the greatest advantage, targeted support can meaningfully bridge gaps for less-prepared students. This aligns with previous literature which stresses the value of early and culturally responsive interventions in improving retention and success for minority groups in tertiary education (Thomas, 2002).

Despite these positive outcomes, challenges remain. POPO engagement levels have declined, particularly among students in the Maroon or Red TLC groups. This is concerning, as these students are both least prepared and least likely to seek support. Addressing this gap is essential, especially as Pacific enrolments in HSFY continue to grow. Strategies to improve sustained engagement must account for the complex demands on Pacific students' time, including cultural, familial, and financial pressures.

While these findings show that culturally grounded programmes like POPO contribute to ongoing academic outcomes. This study supports previous research (F. Sopoaga et al., 2024; Leach, 2013) supporting the positive retention effects of culturally grounded programmes. Importantly, our results show that while POPO engagement benefits all Pacific students, it is especially impactful for those who are less academically prepared to succeed in higher education prior to enrolling at university.

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of this study is our ability to report on the progress of students who interacted with the university's POPO programme and link it to routinely collected administrative data gathered by the University for all Pacific students enrolled in HSFY. This has allowed the POPO team to test whether POPO engagement and TLC are significantly associated with student success and adjust for other socio-demographic factors in the students' background.

A limitation is that while we can monitor students who engaged in the POPO programme, we are unable to say if and where non-engaged students received academic support. The POPO team is currently undertaking a qualitative research project that seeks to understand the reasons for non-engagement. Furthermore, in 2026 we have implemented a programme to monitor Pacific student engagement in other support programmes provided by the University of Otago. Yet there is potential for further study to investigate how different aspects of POPO engagement contributed to different outcomes.

Conclusion

The introduction of the POPO programme in 2011 enabled the University of Otago to respond proactively to the increasing enrolment of Pacific students in the university's HSFY programme. This study confirms that both academic preparation and engagement with culturally responsive support enhanced Pacific student success in HSFY and beyond.

The TLC is a robust predictor of academic outcomes, and Green students consistently outperform their peers. However, POPO engagement independently improves academic outcomes across all TLC groups, particularly for students with lower academic preparation. These findings underscore the importance of early, targeted and culturally relevant support strategies in addressing systemic barriers to equity.

The persistent underrepresentation of Pacific students in HPPP despite rising Pacific enrolment in first-year tertiary studies signals the need for continued investment in programmes like POPO. Strengthening early student preparation through collaboration with secondary schools, employment of student evaluation tools, and early whānau engagement could further improve preparedness and participation. Institutions must also address resourcing challenges to ensure that programmes like POPO can grow alongside the student cohorts they serve.

Ultimately, the success of Pacific students in health sciences is shaped by interconnected factors: early academic preparedness, effective support systems, and culturally affirming learning environments. When these are in place, Pacific students not only succeed—they thrive, contributing meaningfully to the development of a more diverse, representative, and equitable health workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand and throughout the Pacific region.

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