

# Culturally relevant social work in Oceania: Reflections and perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** This article presents reflections of junior staff and final year students at a regional academic institution based in Oceania. Reflections are based on the theme, “What culturally relevant social work in the Oceania context encompasses.”

**METHOD:** The reflections were gathered as part of a *talanoa* (discussion) and evaluation focused on the same theme at an international symposium, where students were participants. Even though the *talanoa* also included social service stakeholders, this article primarily focuses on reflections from students and junior staff at the university.

**FINDINGS:** Reflections add to recommendations for social work education at a regional university. Culturally relevant social work for respondents meant that the curriculum needed to be inclusive of alternative forms of assessments; encouraging the use of Pacific language; advocating for more Pacific scholars in social work education; promoting collaborations with other international organisations and institutions; and, most importantly, making the institution a regional hub for Pacific social work education that is research informed.

**IMPLICATIONS:** These reflections are outlined and explored further in this article and recommendations are offered for the continual development and sustainability of social work education in Oceania.

**KEYWORDS:** Culturally relevant practice; talanoa; Pacific social work education;

Social work education globally, in the region, and in Fiji, has emerged in response to growing social needs (Dominelli, 1996, 2004, 2008; Ramacake, 2010; Saxton, 2019). Social work education is built on western frameworks that often do not take cultural understanding and indigenous knowledge into consideration (Durie, 2005, 2011; Helu-Thaman, 2003; Mafile’o & Vakalahi, 2016; Matsuoka et al., 2013). Over the past few years, the emergence, adoption and revival of indigenous ways of knowing and indigenous models of practice are increasingly being recognised and becoming an integral part of social work education

(Mafile’o, 2008, 2009; Meo-Sewabu, 2014; Mila-Schaff, 2006; Ravulo, 2016; Ravulo et al., 2019).

This article reflects our views as future social workers and our perceptions on what should be an integral part of our learning in a regional institution producing future social workers for the Oceania region. We are final-year students and graduates of the social work programme at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and these reflections were collected as part of a *talanoa* discussion that occurred at an international symposium at USP.

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The symposium was part of an initiative to get stakeholders within social services, government, civil society organisation, and academia to have a talanoa aimed at exploring what a *culturally relevant curriculum* would need to incorporate. As final-year students and graduates of the programme, our views and perceptions were viewed as an integral part of the talanoa which led to this article.

These reflections add to the developing discourse of social work in Oceania from perspectives of junior staff, graduates and final-year students in the social work programme at USP. The institution is responsible for 12 regional countries in Oceania and is at the crossroads of developing a curriculum that is relevant and suitable for the work in Oceania.

## Methods

Junior staff, graduates and final-year students who attended the symposium were asked to respond to four questions outlined later. A total of about 15 students enrolled in the social work programme attended the symposium and two student leaders compiled responses that are reflected in this article. The junior staff facilitated the process for the talanoa with students and responses were collected thereafter via email and followed up by phone with the two student leaders. Data were then analysed systematically using thematic analysis.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured and consented to. Pseudonyms are used in place of respondents' real names and consent was given to include responses in this publication. Main themes from the talanoa were analysed and are outlined and summarised in this article. Responses were based on the following key questions:

1. What do you think needs to be included in a social work curriculum to make it culturally relevant for Oceania?
2. How do you see these being taught across the Pacific (in terms of language, delivery and access plus practice)?
3. What is your view or opinion on the future of social work in Oceania?
4. What are some of your reflections on the symposium on culturally relevant social work in Oceania that occurred in February 2020? Discuss some of the highlights, or something you learned, or just your general opinion.

## Reflections and analysis

Several themes emerged from the discussion on what the curriculum should include in order to be culturally relevant. Respondents called for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum and a pedagogy that responds to, and recognises the needs of, communities. Responsive pedagogy included ensuring that assessments were not limited to academic writing but also encompassed artistic presentations such as dance, music, poetry and forms of presentation that are part of most indigenous cultures' ways of being.

Respondents highlighted how current forms of learning and assessments are dictated by the influence of western ways of learning within a classroom setting. This is often a learned skill for students which can then be lost in translation from the student's indigenous language into English. Therefore, a curriculum that encourages the use of alternative forms of presentation and assessment should be encouraged and recognised as a viable assessment form as is expressed here:

I believe culturally relevant social work must integrate indigenous and cultural education programs that are suitable for Pasifika young learners and international practitioners who would want to practice social work in Oceania. Student must be given the space to present their assignments not only through writing but also through art (dance, music, poem) these are unique cultural methods

of telling and conveying significant and symbolic ideas about cultures and tradition in our various heritage in the Pacific. (Mika)

The inclusion of ways of learning that are already ingrained in the culture as highlighted by respondents have been embraced by many Pacific educators (Helu-Thaman, 2003; Mafile'o, 2008, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Ravulo, 2016; Ravulo et al., 2019). Respondents added that the curriculum should also include aspects of cultural identity, traditional knowledge (TEK), and indigenous resilience. This is important specifically as global economic crises are looming in addition to climate change issues experienced by "Small Island States" (SIDS). These issues can lead to displacement of population groups and loss of identity, culture and ways of being. These points highlighted the importance of maintaining forms of indigenous resilience that may be lost as population groups become displaced (Bryant-Tokalau, 2018; Meo-Sewabu & Walsh-Tapiata, 2012).

Maintaining aspects of cultural identity and TEK were highlighted by a respondent as follows:

I believe many of our upcoming generation and probably some current are beginning to ignore cultural practices which is a core value for us Pacific people. May be more case studies needed to be included whereby students see the value of cultural practices in social work ... program should be organised whereby students are exposed to how cultural practices such as "sevusevu" can actually open up the conversation especially when visiting a village for the first time. (Milika)

The respondent clearly highlights how important cultural practices such as the *sevusevu* are in creating an inclusive environment in practice. If done correctly, the *sevusevu* can open doors, lighten the mood and strengthen skills in working

effectively within a traditional Fijian setting. In addition, the inclusion of organic intellectuals from the communities and community knowledge hubs is critical for informing practice. Understanding the significance and *mana* associated with cultural protocols first and foremost, removes the barriers within a cultural setting and ensures that gaps between academia and practice are bridged creating pathways for a meaningful interaction with various cultural settings across Oceania.

Indigenous practice forms are encouraged in social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand where *bicultural* practice is a critical part of social work – bicultural as well as Pacific cultural values and practices (Crawford, 2016; Crichton-Hill, 2018; Dominelli, 2004, 2008, 2010; Gray & Crichton-Hill, 2019; Walsh-Tapiata et al., 2018). The inclusion of such values and practices in the social work registration process in Aotearoa also shifts the perceptions favourably towards best practice in a cultural setting (Social Workers Registration Board, 2017). The incorporation of Pacific cultural practices into the social work programme at USP can set a benchmark for the rest of Oceania.

Another recurring theme that was highlighted is the need to be fluent with literature, frameworks and laws and policies associated with the rights of indigenous and marginalised groups. Therefore, diversity must be embraced, and strengths-based approaches should be used when working with contemporary Pacific Island communities.

A number of points were highlighted in response to pedagogy, including the use of relevant language, delivery, access and practice. Respondents highlighted the following:

Social work curriculum must be taught in vernacular (in the respective languages spoken across the Pacific) for better understanding...students should be able to write their assignments, and

submit their thesis and Ph.D. work in their language ... should be examined by Pacific scholars understanding theories and practice from both worlds. (Jone)

There was a consensus amongst respondents that the inclusion of the languages of the Pacific is critical as English is often the second language spoken. It was also highlighted that unpacking concepts in the vernacular language brings about a deeper understanding of social work practice concepts. Respondents added that, due to urbanisation, most young adults have lost their sense of identity in relation to cultural practices. Respondents felt that cultural ways of being are critical to social work practice and, therefore, the curriculum may need to include practicums that encourage the practice of these skills and, more importantly, increase awareness of the significance of these cultural skills.

Respondents were optimistic about the future of social work in Oceania. They emphasised that practitioners they had interacted with at the symposium were also optimistic about the future of social work in Oceania. This positivity emanated from the discussions on the professionalisation of social work practice in the Pacific as stated here by Seini:

The future is getting brighter because the professionalisation of the social work profession is in progress and also with the establishment of the Fiji Association of Social and Community Workers (FASW) the future is promising.

Respondents discussed that such development is critical for graduates but learning from what has happened in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, along with deciding what will be best for Fiji and the Pacific needs to be self-determined by Pacific practitioners, educators and leaders in social services across the region. Graduates felt that they were part of a programme that is grounded in indigenous knowledge, responding as follows:

We are also at the heart of indigenising the social work program given that the social work program at USP is led by Pacific scholars who are well-grounded about the norms of Pacific people ... who would be able to translate and transcend social work education and practice in Oceania. (Samuela)

We need more indigenous scholars, scholars who are familiar with Pacific identity and the Vanua (land) to lead us through these changing social, cultural and economic times. (Milika)

Respondents agreed that having a program that is “for Pacific and by Pacific” creates and produces effective practitioners for the Pacific. Pacific scholars have also contributed to this discourse (Autagavaia, 2001; Crichton-Hill, 2018; Mafileo & Vakalahi, 2016; Ravulo, 2016; Ravulo et al., 2019). There is a need to build on existing scholarly work by creating a knowledge hub that promotes research-informed social practice for the Pacific. USP is currently the only institution in the region, other than the University Papua New Guinea and the University of Guam, that offers social work education at undergraduate level. Respondents agreed that, as the only regional institution, USP should then work towards becoming the institution of choice for Pacific-specific social work education and practice. USP therefore, should be seen as the knowledge hub for Pacific social work education and ways of practice, highlighted as follows:

Social work program[s] in the Pacific should provide resources to feed the social work curricula in the Pacific for this we need to be at the centre of research and delivering excellence in social work education. (Mika)

Respondents also highlighted that, in the future, the institution should also offer postgraduate social work programmes that can set the benchmark for the Pacific. In addition, USP could consider forming key partnerships with international institutions

and organisations in order to keep up with global trends on social work education and development, as stated by the following respondent:

The program must also offer post graduate certificate and PGDip and also Master of Arts in Social Work to set the benchmark for social work practice in Oceania. (Jone)

Social work in Oceania must also partner up with international organisation in terms of capacity building and curriculum updates and the transitions in the various field of practice so that social work practitioners are updated with trends. (Samuela)

Findings clearly indicate that graduates were interested in pursuing further education and wanted to be part of the development of social work education and practice in Oceania. Postgraduate social work studies were seen as necessary and respondents expressed that social workers and humanitarian work would always be needed across the Pacific, thus further reinforcing the need for ongoing Pacific research contributions.

Discussion also focused on the need to make social work a recognised profession. Students and graduates felt that there were a lot of misconceptions in their own communities across Oceania on the role of social workers:

My view is that social work in the Pacific is not taken seriously by the public like other professions. It's the responsibilities of those who go through social work studies to advocate for it so people on the ground level can understand the roles of social work and not hesitate to ask for help. (Jone)

Jone highlights the need for awareness of the profession and felt that graduates should be the first to advocate for this across the Pacific. Discussions revealed that many

first-year students felt that social work was about volunteering with organisations. This view was connected with student placements which were considered *volunteer work*.

Uncertainty by students on volunteer work social work placements added to the overall discourse of social work education and the profession across the Pacific.

Respondents were asked to discuss some of the learnings from the symposium and reflections on the theme of culturally relevant social work in Oceania. An overriding theme, as noted earlier, surrounded the need to integrate indigenous knowledge in the social work curriculum. To do this effectively, respondents felt that practitioners and academia would need to maintain a platform where information can be exchanged freely to inform training and that academia could organise training and resources that can be made available to practitioners. This would ensure that development of social work education can be done collaboratively with the practitioners, policy makers and the greater social service industry.

A positive observation focused on the respondents' discussion on the launch of a book on Pacific social work (Ravulo et al., 2019) that highlighted Pacific authors who were present at the symposium. Respondents agreed that being part of the book launch by Pacific authors made them realise that goals to publish, and to be social workers are achievable as there were Pacific role models that they could meet and have discussions with about social work education. The symposium therefore provided a platform that was welcoming for respondents and affirming for their cultural identity, as stated by Seini and Milika:

Having been part of such a big occasion is a memorable one especially having to hear and learn from authors and founders of Pacific Models. (Seini)

We need people who can think from their hearts, people who have the interest of

helping someone in need despite of the situations we are facing. (Milika)

A final remark related to the need to work with organisations and key stakeholders in order that USP also considers providing opportunities for continuous professional development training.

I believe more training or may be ... unlearning process should be conducted [for] existing social workers in Fiji ... so that everyone could lift their service to another level, and everyone would then be conversing on the same level. (Jone)

This statement highlights the need to focus on current social workers in the field ensuring that continuous developmental education is offered to ensure that social work education is available to all and there are common understandings in social work education and social work practice skills across Oceania.

## Discussion and conclusions

The responses provide a clear view about how social work needs to develop a curriculum that is culturally relevant. Incorporation of indigenous knowledge in the training programmes, the use of alternative forms of assessments such as art, poetry, drama must be considered moving forward.

As the region consists of various cultural groups – across the colonial constructs of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia – there is a need to encourage Pacific communities to create their own models of practice that can add to the resource hub. The university may need to consider how a resource hub can be established and linked to international universities and organisations which can then collaborate on research, course design, and co-teaching of postgraduate programmes. It must be highlighted that these collaborations must be of mutual benefit rather than dictated

by the international institutions' terms. The need to professionalise social workers is critical and was welcomed by participants at the symposium. However, it is critical that the form of professionalisation is mutually agreed to by social service stakeholders and educators across Oceania and is inclusive of students' voices. Collaborative effort ensures that a mechanism suitable for the Pacific is explored and agreed to.

Moreover, responses indicate the need for the cultural and contextual relevance of social services training, preparing graduates for practice within various fields of practice (Autagavaia, 2001; Ravulo, 2017; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Meo-Sewabu et al., 2008). This is a continual development that cannot be done by the university alone. Development of a culturally relevant curriculum must be developed with key stakeholders across Oceania. The institution will have to organise a systematic way of developing this with those in the social service industry, with community groups, and with regional bodies from across Oceania. Student voices once again are critical to these developments and course evaluations and graduate feedback will need to be collated and reflected upon. These voices need to be systematically heard and considered to ensure that social work education in the region remains relevant.

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