A Comparison Between Asian and Pacific Islands Students in Their Use of Academic Advising Services

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In New Zealand, there is growing evidence to suggest an academic achievement disparity between Pacific Islands and Asian university students. The present study investigated an aspect of this disparity and considered students’ intentions to seek academic support services and their actual uptake of those services. One hundred and fifty two tertiary students participated in the study. Students were asked if they intended to access academic support services and whether they actually accessed these services. In addition, levels of academic achievement were obtained from academic records. The findings clearly showed a difference in grade average scores, with Asian students obtaining higher scores than Pacific Islands students. There were, however, no differences between the two groups in their actual use of academic advising services despite the Pacific Islands students indicating greater intent to seek assistance. The lower grade achievement and the higher intention to access services suggest there are definite implications for educationalists.

Keywords: Asian students; Pacific Island students; academic achievement; academic advising services; learning skills intervention; self-regulation

Academic advising services endeavour to provide students with opportunities for the development of study-related learning and management skills, especially those students experiencing various forms of academic difficulties (Kuh, 2008). Such services are called a number of different names including “student learning centre”, “academic skills development unit”, “study skills centre”, and “academic language and learning services”, to provide but a few examples. The services that they deliver are further aimed at assisting faculty-based teaching by complementing the content-based instruction provided in faculties with relevant skills-based instruction (e.g., Manalo & Leader, 2007); in effect, therefore, the services contribute to increasing the likelihood of student retention and achievement (Addus, Chen, & Khan, 2007; Lowe & Toney, 2000-2001). In New Zealand, the concept of academic advising was conceived in terms of a system for the provision of advice on academic matters to students in general, and instruction on academic survival skills to students perceived as being at-risk or identified as not succeeding (Tarling, 1999; Van Rij-Heyligers, 2005). For example, at the university where this study was conducted, students are provided assistance on a one-to-one basis through academic counselling or they are encouraged to attend group-based study skills programs aimed at imparting methods for the development of self-regulated study strategies, and reading and writing skills at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (AUT University, 2010). As New Zealand is a multicultural society, most academic advising services provided at the tertiary level include programs that are aimed at addressing...
the needs of particular groups of students, including cultural groupings such as Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pacific Islands students.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a rapid growth in New Zealand in the numbers of people who belong to two broad ethnic categories, Pacific Islanders and Asians; these increases have been associated with high rates of immigration (Johnston, Poulsen, & Forrest, 2003, 2008). Apart from a large cohort from South Africa, many of the immigrants to New Zealand in the 1990s and the early part of the new millennium have come from countries in the Asia-Pacific region where English is not the native language, countries such as China, India, Japan, and Korea in the Asian region, and Samoa and Fiji in the Pacific Islands region (Johnston et al., 2003). There was an established Asian and Pacific Islands population in New Zealand prior to the 1990s, but in 1986 New Zealand changed its immigration policy, thus allowing for a major increase in immigration (Johnston et al., 2008). For example, between 1991 and 2006 the Asian population in Auckland (New Zealand’s largest city) increased by 358%, while the Pacific Island population rose by 58%. These were dramatic changes given that during the same period the New Zealand European population decreased by 4% (Johnston, et al., 2008). These developments in immigration have been having a significant impact on the demographics of New Zealand and, in turn, affecting the work of educators in schools (Goddard, Billot, & Cranston, 2006) and universities (Ho & Bedford, 2008). To put this in perspective, the total population in New Zealand was estimated to be 3.5 million in 1991 and 4.2 million in 2006 (Ministry of Social Development, 2010b). The actual proportion distributions of the ethnic groups in 2006 was estimated as 77% European or Other (“New Zealander”); 15%, Māori; 10%, Asian; 7%, Pacific peoples; and 1%, Middle Eastern, Latin American, African (Ministry of Social Development, 2010a).

One issue that has been of concern to New Zealand educators for some time is the marked difference in academic achievement between Asian and Pacific Islands students, with the former group consistently achieving higher grades than the latter (Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland, 2002; Nakhid, 2003; Otunuku & Brown, 2007; Statistics New Zealand & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010). These differences in achievement have been impacting on the academic success of these groups. Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae (2006), for example, reported data showing that between 1996 and 1999, the overall pass rates of Asian students in one university ranged from 79.3 to 90.7%, while the corresponding range for Pacific Islands students was from 63.3 to 64.4%.

A number of possible explanations for this disparity have been put forward (e.g., Nakhid, 2003; Otunuku & Brown, 2007; Phan, 2007). These explanations are often related to background issues in the form of societal and familial histories. The notion that many Asian students come from a background that is entrenched in the Confucian ethos of learning coupled with a highly competitive, industrialised and business oriented society, as compared with the less densely populated, communal social environments, and passive learning behaviours surrounding Pacific Islands students, could provide some clues as to why the achievement discrepancy occurs (Holmes, 2005; Johnston et al., 2008; Kember, 2000; Otunuku & Brown, 2007). Moreover, some authors have noted a tendency for educational advancement not to be reinforced or instilled as a value for Pacific Islands students at secondary school, and this has been cited as another possible contributing factor (Nakhid, 2003).

Another factor that may need to be considered in attempts to understand the discrepancy in academic achievement between Asian and Pacific Islands groups is students’ goal orientations. Approach-avoidance systems of explanation (e.g., Cury, Fonseca, Moller, & Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Covington, 2001; Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sideridis, 2005; Skaalvik, 1997; Zweig & Webster, 2004) have been usefully employed in constructing conceptual frameworks for understanding student learning behaviours, including why students approach and engage in certain tasks and not others (Covington, 2000). For example, students who voluntarily seek educational assistance to refine their study techniques or remediate their academic progress can be viewed as engaging in an approach orientation to learning. Such an orientation can be contrasted with the more avoidant orientation taken by students who experience academic problems but avoid utilising available support services.

In considering students’ goal orientations, it is additionally important to be aware that, at any one time, most students are probably dealing with multiple and sometimes competing goals, such as those relating to their academic and non-academic aspirations (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005). Students’ choices in extracurricular activities and any decisions to proactively seek academic assistance will depend upon how they compare and prioritise different goal options; some goals will inevitably be perceived as being more valuable than others (Boekaerts, de Koning, & Vedder, 2006; Hijzen, Boekaerts, & Vedder, 2006).

Previous research studies have noted the lower uptake of support services on offer – particularly counselling and mental health support services – from international students, including students coming from the Asian and Pacific Islands regions (e.g., Mori, 2000; Narikiyo & Kameoka, 1992). Benseman et al. (2006) also noted that, with the Pacific Islands students in New Zealand who participated in their study, there was generally low awareness about the available support services – including those that may be relevant for students struggling with the demands of academic life. This is particularly disconcerting given reports from other researchers about Pacific Islands students tending to utilise
study approaches that lack the necessary cognitive strategies that could bring about successful outcomes (Phan, 2007; Richardson, Landbeck, & Mugler, 1995).

Mori (2000) noted that in some cultures, including many Asian cultures, disclosing personal problems to someone who for all intents and purposes is a stranger—like a counsellor—could be viewed as shameful and indicative of immaturity and weakness. Yi, Lin and Kishimoto (2003) commented that many students who come from Asian cultures do not seek professional psychological help until they have exhausted their own immediate circle of friends and family. However, even though in some Asian countries like Japan and Korea a general lack of motivation and apathy appear to affect many students at the tertiary level (e.g., Manalo, Koyasu, Hashimoto, & Miyauchi, 2006; Shimoyama, 1996; Tetsushima, 1993), this problem appears not to affect Asian students living and studying in other countries. Manalo et al. (2006), for example, found that Japanese students in New Zealand universities manifested lower levels of amotivation (i.e., perceiving no contingencies between outcomes and one’s own actions) compared to Japanese students in Japanese universities. Ngo and Malz (1998) described Asian American students as manifesting at least normal—if not higher—levels of academic motivation. Thus, although Asian students may in general have some reservations about making use of professional services to resolve personal and academic difficulties, problems in academic motivation and performance appear not to be an issue for Asian students living and studying in Western countries like New Zealand.

The main objective of the present study was to find out whether there might be differences in intention to use and actual use of academic advising services between Asian and Pacific Islands students. A further objective was to find out whether the use of academic advising services results in any discernable improvements in academic achievement for these student groups. By addressing these objectives, the authors hope that it may then be possible to determine the areas where tertiary academic advising services may need to focus more of their efforts and resources. In other words, should more effort and resources be focused on (a) raising awareness about the nature and range of services available to students, (b) ensuring that students do make use of these support services, or (c) ensuring that the services that are on offer directly address student needs so that tangible performance improvements follow.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 152 undergraduate students (38 Pacific Islands; 114 Asian) who were enrolled at a New Zealand university. One hundred and ten (110) were female, and 42 were male. Their average age was 24.89 years (SD = 8.51). The students came from a number of different subject disciplines, but mainly in education and the social sciences (but no actual data were collected on subject department affiliation), and their participation in the study was completely voluntary.

Procedure and measures used

This investigation was conducted over a three-semester period in 2005 and 2006. At the beginning of each of the three semesters, students mainly from the faculties of education and the social sciences were invited to participate in the study at the end of their formal lectures. Participation entailed completion of a brief student information sheet which requested demographic information and students’ intention or otherwise to seek academic support (i.e., “If you were in difficulty in your studies, would you consider seeking support from a student support service at this university?”). In addition, students were asked for informed consent to allow the researchers to have access to their student records. Access was sought to gather information about the students’ academic grades and to find out if they had used academic advisory services.

Thus the following measures were obtained for each participant and incorporated into the study design: (a) intention to use academic advisory services as taken from the student’s response to question seven of the student information sheet: note that the sense of intention expressed here was conditional on whether the student subsequently experienced difficulty, (b) actual use of the academic advisory services which was obtained from the University students records system, (c) ethnic affiliation (Pacific Islands or Asian; data from other ethnic groups were collected but the analyses and reporting of these have not been included in this paper as they fell outside of the parameters of the questions being addressed), and (d) grade average for the semester in question. For grade averages, letter grades were worked out from students’ end of semester cumulative summative marks and then converted to a numerical value in a manner similar to that employed by Edwards (2005). The conversion scale used was as follows: A+ = 11, A = 10, A− = 9, B+ = 8, B = 7, B− = 6, C+ = 5, C = 4, C− = 3, D = 2, E = 1. Instances of “Did not complete”, where the student did not receive an actual mark or grade, were excluded from this conversion process.

Data analysis

In this study, two main computational steps were taken in analysing the data. First, using an analysis of covariance procedure (ANCOVA), participants’ grade averages were compared according to their ethnicity and actual usage of students support services. Gender and age were treated in the analysis as possible confounders as these could conceivably have had an impact on the results (e.g., Heckhausen & Dweck, 1998; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005). Hence, in the ANCOVA that was carried out, ethnicity, actual access of services, and gender were the independent variables; grade
average was the dependent variable; and age was used as a covariate.

In the second step in analysing the data, cross tabulation and log-linear values were computed and compared for those groups intending to access academic advising services and those groups who actually accessed these services, according to the two ethnic groupings.

RESULTS

The ANCOVA yielded a significant main effect due to ethnicity, \( F(1, 23) = 23.28, p < .001 \). This means that the grade average obtained by the Asian students (\( M = 6.32, SD = 1.97 \)) was significantly higher than the average obtained by the Pacific Islands students (\( M = 4.6, SD = 1.97 \)).

Access of academic services, gender, and interactions associated with these variables were not significant. This means that the participants’ grade averages did not significantly vary according to gender, or to their use/lack of use of the services on offer. However, the inclusion of age as a covariant proved to be significant. This indicates that the difference in academic performance evidenced by the two ethnic groups was more pronounced among older students.

Table 1 shows, according to ethnic affiliation, the comparative numbers of participants who accessed or did not access academic advising services. A chi-square analysis revealed no significant difference between the Pacific Islands and Asian student groups in their actual access of the services, \( \chi^2(1, N = 152) = .01, ns \).

Table 2 depicts a further cross tabulation that delineates between intention and actual access of the academic advising services according to the participants’ ethnic affiliation. The figures here show that almost all the Pacific Islands students (97%) and most of the Asian students (86%) intended to make use of the services if faced with academic problems. However, for both groups, less than half of those who intended to access the services subsequently did so: 43% and 47% for the Pacific Islands and Asian students, respectively.

A log-linear modelling procedure was carried out using a 2 (ethnicity) x 2 (intent to access) x 2 (actual access) model. The likelihood ratio higher order analysis showed that there was no significant three way effect, \( \chi^2(1, N = 152) = .35, ns \); but there was a significant two way effect, \( \chi^2(4, N = 152) = 10.76, p < .05 \). The Pearson higher order analysis showed that there was no significant three way effect, \( \chi^2(1, N = 152) = .20, ns \); but there was a significant two way effect, \( \chi^2(4, N = 152) = 9.317, p < .05 \). The log-linear statistics confirmed that the actual accessing of academic services was not different across the ethnic groups. However, the intention to access those services was different, with Pacific Island students being more intent to seek assistance. As noted, however, the intention to access academic services often did not translate to actual access of those services.

Table 3 shows the participants’ pass/fail records associated with ethnic affiliation and access of academic advising services. The pass/fail figures depicted here were based on whether students obtained an average grade of at least 3 (equivalent to a C–) which was categorised as a “pass” (in line with the institutional pass criterion); grade averages below 3 as well as “Did not complete” records were categorised as “fail”. The table reveals that the pass rates of Pacific Islands students were similar whether they accessed or did not access the services on offer (56% for those who used the services, and 55% for those who did not). Furthermore, these pass rates were clearly lower compared to those of the Asian students whose pass rates likewise appeared minimally affected by their use or lack of use of those services (90% compared to 86%, respectively).

Table 1
Numbers of Pacific Islands and Asian Students Who Accessed/Did Not Access Academic Advising Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Accessed Services</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islands</td>
<td>16 (42%)</td>
<td>22 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>49 (43%)</td>
<td>65 (57%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Numbers of Pacific Islands and Asian Students Who Accessed/Did Not Access Academic Advising Services as a Function of Their Stated Intention to Access Those Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Intended to Access Services</th>
<th>Accessed Services</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(% according to intention to access services)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 (43%)</td>
<td>21 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>46 (47%)</td>
<td>52 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>13 (81%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Numbers of Pacific Islands and Asian Students Who Obtained Pass or Fail Grade Averages as a Function of Whether They Accessed or Did Not Access Academic Advising Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Accessed Services</th>
<th>Grade Average (% according to access of services)</th>
<th>Totals (% for ethnic group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12 (55%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>44 (90%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>56 (86%)</td>
<td>9 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further log-linear modelling procedure was carried out using a 2 (ethnicity) x 2 (pass/fail) x 2 (actual access) model. The likelihood ratio higher order analysis showed that there was no significant three way effect, $\chi^2(1, N=152) = .10, ns$; but there was a significant two way effect, $\chi^2(4, N=152) = 16.96, p < .01$. The Pearson higher order analysis showed that there was no significant three way effect, $\chi^2(1, N=152) = .10, ns$; but there was a significant two way effect, $\chi^2(4, N=152) = 18.77, p < .01$. The log-linear statistics confirmed that the actual accessing of academic services was not different across the ethnic groups. However, the pass/fail performance was different across ethnic groupings with fewer Pacific Islands students obtaining pass grade averages.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study confirm previous reports that Pacific Islands students at the tertiary level have, on average, significantly lower levels of achievement compared to their Asian counterparts (e.g., Hawk et al., 2002; Nakhid, 2003; Otunuku & Brown, 2007; Statistics New Zealand & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010). It is therefore important to consider viable strategies for rectifying this apparent underachievement among the Pacific Islands group of students.

Discrepancy between intention and actual use of services among Pacific Islands students

Although the Pacific Islands students indicated a significantly higher level of intention to make use of academic advising services, the results also showed that their subsequent actual use of these services did not differ from the Asian students. These findings suggest one of two possible explanations. First, because the academic services were largely advertised as appropriate when students encountered problems in their studies (e.g., in the survey itself, the question asked was “If you were in difficulty in your study, would you consider seeking support from a student support service at this university?” – italics added), it is possible that fewer Pacific Islands students encountered problems in their studies, or perceived that they were experiencing such problems. However, given the lower success rate of this group, this explanation is unlikely. The second more likely explanation is that many of the Pacific Islands students encountered internal and external obstacles that prevented them from making use of those services.

Internal obstacles that could deter students from making use of support services include perceptions of a mismatch between their needs and the kinds of assistance on offer, inadequate organisational competence (e.g., to make concrete plans for when to use the services and to follow through in actually using them), and various kinds of fears that could be associated with the use of such services (e.g., being judged as less academically competent, stigmatisation). For Pacific Islands students in particular, Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2005) pointed out the importance of “being made to feel part of the whole experience” (p. 216) of using the service and that their cultural beliefs and practices are integral parts of the way that service is provided. External obstacles could include poor accessibility of the services on offer (e.g., difficult to find), and administrative and other procedures that could make it difficult for students to use such services (e.g., unhelpful reception staff, non-user friendly forms to complete). O’Shea (2005), for example, emphasised repeated, multi-format advertising of the support services for Pacific islands students so that those services would remain current in students’ minds throughout the semesters. It is outside the scope of the present paper to examine the internal and external obstacles to service access that the Pacific Islands student participants encountered. Such obstacles, however, are clearly important to identify and address if Pacific Islands students are to be more effectively encouraged to actually use academic advising services.

The issues of facilitating a sense of belonging among student users, and integrating cultural beliefs and practices into services that are offered, are – as Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2005) noted – crucial in providing effective support for Pacific Islands students at the tertiary level. Tertiary education environments in Western countries like New Zealand not only look different but also operate with a degree of formality that is different from what many Pacific Islands students are accustomed to in their countries of origin (if
they are from new immigrant families) and their local home and community environments. In tertiary environments, providing a support service that Pacific Islands students can identify with in terms of appearance, mode of operation, and underlying value systems, would likely impact on decisions that the students make about whether or not to access that service. Thus, numerous critical questions need to be asked about how such a service ought to be provided. For example: Should such a service be provided on an appointment only basis, or should students be encouraged to simply drop-in when they require support? Should students be required to make individual consultations, or could they bring friends and/or family as support? Should students be required to complete written forms for records, or could they talk through the issues they require support in while other details about them could be accessed through existing institutional records? Decisions on questions like these could make a big difference as to whether students from Pacific cultures (or many other minority cultures for that matter) would feel sufficiently comfortable about actually accessing the support services that are offered to them.

If the high level of intention to access academic services found with the Pacific Islands participants in this study can be confirmed for Pacific Islands students in general (i.e., beyond the students in the institution where this study was conducted), it would be an encouraging sign that perhaps the reluctance to make use of such services noted by earlier researchers (e.g., Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002) is no longer there for most current students. The change in view toward the use of such services may in part be attributable to the support and information that many Pacific Islands students who progress onto tertiary studies receive from their high school teachers (Benseman et al., 2006). The lack of congruence between intention and action suggests that instilling a willingness to make use of available support services may be best carried out prior to the students’ entry into tertiary studies and that, in the tertiary institutions themselves, greater focus ought to be placed on efforts to convert willingness to actual use of academic advising services.

Reasons for continuing to promote students’ use of academic advising services

As no significant difference was found in the present study between the success rates of students who made use of academic advising services and those who did not, some readers may question the wisdom of continuing to promote the use of such services. Hence it would be prudent to address the question of why the services provided appeared not to afford any form of performance advantage for the ethnic groups of students investigated in this study. One possible explanation is that services of this kind would have limitations in their impact on students’ academic performance – depending on the kinds of services provided and accessed by students. Based on their meta-analysis of research that dealt with study skills interventions, Hattie, Biggs, and Purdie (1996) observed that certain forms of interventions appeared to have a greater positive impact on student performance, such as when “strategy training was used metacognitively, with appropriate motivational and contextual support” (p. 129). In comparison, they found the “typical study skills training package” not as effective. In the university where the present study was conducted, academic advising comprised of a smorgasbord of services and training programs, including ones that could be considered as promoting metacognitive development, and ones that would fall into the category of being typical study skills training packages. These services would have almost certainly varied in their impact on students’ academic performance, with some being more effective than others in facilitating successful outcomes. It may therefore not be surprising that, as a whole, the Asian and Pacific Islands students who made use of these services did not evidence any significant academic performance advantage over their counterparts who did not access these services.

Another possible explanation is that the academic advising services were in fact effective in promoting more successful outcomes, but this was amongst students who were experiencing problems in their studies and were achieving lower academically in the first instance. The net effect of the services, therefore, would have been to raise these students’ performance to a level that was equivalent to that of students not experiencing difficulties in their studies. Viewed this way, the services would be addressing the performance discrepancy between students “at-risk” of failure and those who are typical or average in their performance. A number of previous research studies have appraised the effectiveness of learning support programs in similar terms (e.g., Manalo, Ede, & Wong-Toi, 2010; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Heming, 1996). Manalo et al. (2010), for example, considered the learning disabilities (LD) program they described as achieving its objective because the students with LD who made use of its services evidenced retention and pass rates on a par with the institutional averages (i.e., they were achieving retention and pass rates that were higher than the typically lower rates for students with LD).

Considering the two possible explanations provided here, it would not be unreasonable to continue promoting students’ use of academic advising services despite the lack of performance advantage shown in the present study by the Asian and Pacific Islands students who used such services. Such a position would be in line with evidence reported elsewhere for the value of such services in facilitating better academic performance among students. Hattie et al. (1996), for example, generally found evidence for benefits arising from the provision of study skills interventions – although they recommended, on the basis of their findings, the contextualization of such interventions and focusing in particular on the development of learner autonomy and
metacognitive skills. Robbins et al. (2004), in another meta-analysis, found a moderate effect size for academic-related skills on academic performance, and a strong effect size on retention – clearly suggesting that there are benefits in providing opportunities for student development of such skills at the tertiary level. In the New Zealand context, Manalo, Marshall, and Fraser (2009) reported on tangible evidence, drawn from 22 learning support programs, that the provision of learning skills instruction and advice positively impacts on retention and completion rates of students. The groups catered for by these programs included undergraduate and postgraduate Asian and Pacific Islands students.

Implications for educational practice

Two related problems were identified in the present research study: first, that a large proportion of Asian and Pacific Islands students do not actualize their intentions to make use of academic support services and, second, that when they do make use of such services no discernable advantage in their performance outcomes eventuate. The latter is especially pertinent to Pacific Islands students who were confirmed in this study as achieving lower compared to Asian students. Serious considerations therefore need to be put in place to formulate practical ways of ameliorating this situation.

As noted earlier, it would be important to address internal and external obstacles that might have prevented students from acting on their initial intentions to use academic advising services. Solutions to this problem need to go beyond simply increasing efforts at advertising the services and deploying more resources toward unspecified service improvements. For example, to address possible perception mismatches between actual student needs and services on offer, it would be crucial to ensure not only that services are decided and designed on the basis of evidence, but also that they are portrayed to students in ways that would avoid misunderstandings of their content, relevance, and potential value. Thus, if students in a particular discipline are found to frequently misinterpret the requirements of assignment questions, skills development workshops and individual advice could be offered that specifically state their objective as that of avoiding such misinterpretations. To this end, offering a workshop on “Understanding and meeting the requirements of assignments in [subject discipline]” would likely attract more of the intended group of students to attend than a workshop with a vague and commonly used title like “Assignment writing skills”.

One likely reason for students not accessing academic advising services is that they do not see personal value in those services, as Adams, Chen, and Khan (2007) found. Thus, what could appear as “avoidant behaviour” may be related to a failure in value perception as much as to a failure in converting goal-orientation to actual behaviour (Covington, 2000). The situation may be further complicated for Pacific Islands students, for the majority of whom church, family, and their wider cultural community place major requirements and responsibilities which inevitably impact on their study performance (Mara, 2006). Many of the goals related to these outside commitments may appear more important and valuable to students (e.g., Boekaerts et al., 2006, discussion of the importance students place on non-academic goals such as building up friendship networks). Hence, it would be sensible to contextually situate within these wider cultural communities any efforts at addressing value perception problems among Pacific Islands students. For example, academic achievement and use of academic advising services need to be instilled as valuable and congruent with church, family, and cultural community aspirations – not only among the students themselves, but also among key members of their communities. Institutional staff, especially those involved in the management and provision of academic advising services, need to take more concrete steps toward such community development so that their academic expectations of students are not at odds with the non-academic expectations of the communities that the students belong to. In fact, if done properly, members of those communities could play a pivotal role in promoting more positive attitudes toward academic goals in students.

However, irrespective of the value that students place on the use of particular services, if those services consistently fail to deliver on desired outcomes (e.g., better academic performance results for students who use it), maintenance of any such value would be difficult if not impossible. Thus, within tertiary institutions, it is important to constantly review the performance of support services. Such reviews should not only focus on assessment of achievements against any specified objectives, but also on whether the services are realistically placed to meet such objectives. Where academic advising services for at-risk groups of students are concerned, it is even more crucial that systematic evaluations are carried out to find out whether students who make use of such services are tangibly benefiting as a consequence (e.g., whether they are staying on, passing their courses, and achieving better grades). Without such evaluations, it would be difficult to constructively address any shortcomings that may be vital toward the successful development of such services. For example, where academic advising services for Pacific Islands students are concerned, it may be important to ask whether current advisors possess the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate the development of students’ metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies – and, if not, to determine what professional development actions could be taken to rectify this. Although checking the possession of the necessary knowledge and skills would be applicable to all student advisors, it is especially important in the case of advisors employed to help students from
ethnic minority groups. The reason is that the selection of such advisors are often made on the basis of both their affinity with the target group of students and the knowledge and skills they possess. With ethnic minority groups who generally possess lower academic achievement in the society at large, attracting candidates with the exact set of knowledge and skills required for the position may at times be difficult. If approached from a formative, developmental perspective (see, e.g., Kellaghan & Stufflebeam, 2003), such reviews and evaluations need not be threatening to the parties concerned, and they could lead to mutual learning and the formulation of more concrete, efficacious steps toward the achievement of shared goals (e.g., in this case, the development of tangibly effective academic advising services for Pacific Islands students). Otunuku and Brown (1996) suggested that teachers of Pacific Island students need professional development so that they are able to give challenging but appropriate direction regarding task achievement and utilisation of self-regulation strategies. In addition, it is crucial that teachers learn ways to engage with Pacific Island students to deliver realistic and culturally attuned feedback to avoid promoting a negative academic frame of reference (Nakhid, 2003; Otunuku & Brown, 2007). Such an approach would also be relevant when advising students from other ethnic groups.

Anaae et al. (2002) suggested that there is a need for more specialised support engaging specifically Pacific networks as students may be more willing to approach this network for academic assistance. This report also highlighted the need for existing services for Pacific students to be more integrated and accessible; engaging more culturally appropriate mechanisms to enhance cultural competency and safety; and to ensure regular reviews of service delivery are put in place especially in relation to the Pacific Island advocacy units within the university. In addition, applied research into Pacific Islands issues by Pacific Islands academics and researchers need to be employed to investigate how academic advising can fully assist Pacific Islands students in achieving their goals. Another important issue that was highlighted in the present study was the question of whether academic advising services ought to be focused on the needs of students experiencing problems in their studies, or if they should aim to enhance student academic performance irrespective of the presence of problems. In light of the findings here about the low actual uptake of services from both Asian and Pacific Islands student groups, the latter approach of making the services relevant to all students is perhaps more appropriate. Taking that approach would mean that students would be encouraged to use the services even if they feel they are doing fine in their studies: the services would be aimed at enhancing their academic skills so that they could achieve even better. Taking this approach may help reduce some of the stigma associated with the traditional use of such services (i.e., perceptions that only “dummies” and low achievers make use of them – see, e.g., Van Rij-Heyligers, 2005), and hence encourage more students to actualize their intentions to use the services. One possible consequence of this would be that more students would pro-actively develop academic skills they require and hence avoid problems they could potentially encounter later in their studies.

Limitations and directions for future research

The present study has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sub-ethnic categories within the Asian and Pacific Islands categories were not obtained during data collection; hence, ethnicities such as Tongan and Samoan, Indian and Chinese could not be factored out during the analyses that were carried out. Second, the low sample size for the Pacific Islands group meant that some constraints were experienced when analysing the data, especially with regard to the students’ intentions and actual access of the services in question. Nevertheless, the small sample size and heterogeneous nature of the samples were taken into account during the analyses of the data and interpretation of the results.

There are also a number of important issues not addressed in the present study that would warrant investigation in future research. One of the most important of these is that, although a difference in academic achievement was confirmed between Asian and Pacific Islands students, the results of this study offered no clear indication as to why that difference exists. The students’ use or otherwise of academic advising services proved not to be a viable explanation. It is possible that differences in their goal hierarchies and value systems influence their academic achievement (cf. Boekaerts et al., 2006); such a possibility would need to be examined in future research, perhaps through collection of qualitative data via student learning journals and/or focus group interviews.

It would also be worthwhile to investigate in future research whether systematic modifications of academic advising services, such as those provided in the university where the present study was carried out, would result in higher proportions of students actually making use of those services, and produce discernable academic performance advantage for students who use those services. Manalo et al. (2009) identified five recurring themes that appeared to promote the success of the learning support programs they described in their report. These themes pertained to: the attention given to the preparation, organisation, and implementation of the programs; the knowledge and experience of the advisors involved in delivering the programs; the methods used to determine the relevant skills to cover, the teaching materials to use, and the ways of delivering these to students; the relationships considered, developed, and nurtured between various stakeholders; and the establishment of other supporting mechanisms linked to the programs provided. Finding out whether modifications based on “best practice” guidelines such as this (or any
other appropriate theories or models) would result in better measurable outcomes would be a worthwhile future research endeavour – especially where services for underperforming groups of students are concerned.

REFERENCES


