Evaluating Vocational Tertiary Education Programs In A Small Remote Community In Aotearoa, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary vocational programs offered in a small remote town in Aotearoa, New Zealand, were delivered in partnership with indigenous community organizations and other stakeholders to prepare people for future regional developments in primary industries. An evaluation investigated the impact of these programs on students, their families, and the community. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff, students, and community stakeholders. Student outcomes were high across all programs evaluated. Participants attributed the high success rate for students, the majority of whom were indigenous, to the strong relationships developed and fostered between community people, students, and teaching staff and to the relevance of the programs with clear links to the region's economic development goals. They emphasized the importance of educational pathways from school into tertiary education. Tertiary study impacted not only the students, many of whom were previously disengaged from education, but also their extended families. The evaluation confirmed the value of partnering with communities to deliver vocational education that meets their identified needs.

Keywords: vocational education, indigenous education, second chance education, community partnerships, educational evaluation

BACKGROUND

Most tertiary education organizations in Aotearoa, New Zealand, are situated in larger cities and provincial towns, although increasingly, many of these institutions also offer educational programs in smaller and more remote settings. Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology[1] is a large regional institute of technology with campuses in two provincial cities, delivering a broad range of vocational, technical, and professional programs. In addition to programs taught from its urban campuses, the organization has been delivering programs in more rural and remote areas for many years. An earlier study of barriers and enablers to study for students studying away from our organization's main campus found that students greatly appreciated the opportunity to study close to home, were highly motivated to succeed, and appreciated the close and supportive relationships with their tutors (Watt & Gardiner, 2016).

The evaluation reported here focused on programs offered in Ōpōtiki, approximately a two-hour drive from the two main campuses. In making decisions about which programs to offer in this location, the institution worked closely with community organizations that reported that many young people were leaving school without qualifications, and that many wanted to stay close to family, but needed to learn basic and job-related skills. The programs have been delivered in partnership with several Māori[2] organizations and stakeholder groups including the local high school. They were chosen to prepare local people to work in local employment, and also to re-engage youth. Further

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[1]Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology is a new institution in the Bay of Plenty, created in May 2016 from the merger of Bay of Plenty Polytechnic in Tauranga and Waiariki Institute of Technology in Rotorua.

[2]Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa, New Zealand.

information about the changing nature of employment in Ōpōtiki is provided below.

Delivery has differed for the various courses. For the most part, tutors have travelled from the main campuses to teach, with student support offered by local organizations. Block courses have also been offered, for example in horticulture, to ensure programs meet the needs of full-time employees in the kiwifruit industry.

In the 2013 Census, 8,436 people reported living in the Ōpōtiki district, of whom approximately 50% live in the town itself (www.stats.govt.nz). Approximately 60% of the population are Māori; unemployment is higher than the New Zealand average at 11% (Buchan & Wyatt, 2012). Age group profiles show a drop in numbers of young people aged 25-40, as many people leave the district for study and employment (www.stats.govt.nz). These trends are similar to those found in rural areas in other Western countries, such as the United Kingdom (Jamieson, 2000) and Australia (Hugo, 2002), with American researchers noting that following the global recession in 2007-9, rural employment in the U.S.A. fell dramatically and has not yet recovered (https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/employment-education/rural-employment-and-unemployment/).

As in many rural areas, the local economy in Ōpōtiki is mostly driven by primary industries like agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and fishing (Buchan & Wyatt, 2012). Both the median income for working-age people and the number of people with formal qualifications are lower than the national average (www.stats.govt.nz).

Despite being classified as an area of high deprivation (Atkinson, Salmond, & Crampton, 2014), Ōpōtiki is a small town with big dreams. Local Māori are a majority shareholder in a large aquaculture venture 8.5 km off the coast, which in 2016 began to produce mussels and mussel spat in commercial quantities. To assist with the processing of mussels, the local authority plans to develop the local river mouth into a harbour with wharf and marina. Local and central government will finance this development (Ōpōtiki District Council, 2015). In the future, mussels will be brought ashore for processing in a plant to be built adjacent to the harbor. It is anticipated that from 2021, a large and growing volume of mussels will be able to be processed in Ōpōtiki. The council has esti-

mated that the harbor development project will create up to 450 new jobs, provide a seven-fold return on investment and indirectly result in improved social statistics for the district (Ōpōtiki District Council, 2015).

These planned developments have implications for education and training. The *Bay of Plenty Tertiary Intentions Strategy 2014-2019* (Bay of Connections, 2014a) notes the importance of delivering relevant trade and industry training locally in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, and of engaging "second-chance" learners in tertiary education. "Second chance" education refers to alternatives to regular school that provide opportunities for people who did not complete school to re-engage in education (Ross & Gray, 2005; te Riele, 2000). Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, sometimes because of personal or social circumstances, but also because of school-related factors (McGregor, Mills, te Riele, & Hayes, 2015; Ross & Gray, 2005). School structures do not suit all students; indigenous students may be particularly disadvantaged (Ross & Gray, 2005).

In addition, the *Māori Economic Development Strategy* (Bay of Connections, 2014b) calls for the alignment of training to regional market needs, a focus on pathways and transitions from school into employment and training, and alignment of tertiary education provision with the needs of Māori organizations. Investment in people generally and youth in particular is seen as vital to the region's economic growth (Hudson & Diamond, 2014). Our institution has the opportunity to contribute to this development through providing educational opportunities that will assist in workforce development toward expansion in horticulture, marine farming, and the harbor development.

The New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 (Ministry of Education, 2014) has "delivering skills for industry" (p. 9) as its first priority. The challenge for tertiary education providers is to ensure that students have access to skills that will lead to career opportunities. To support this priority, six vocational pathways have been introduced with the goal of improving students' ability to move through education and into employment (http://youthguarantee.net.nz/vocational-pathways/the-six-vocational-pathways/). However, as researchers have pointed out, the pathways that young people follow between study and work

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are very often complex and non-linear (Ross & Gray, 2005; te Riele, 2000). Students want to know that their chosen programmes of study will bring them good prospects of desirable employment, meaning that education must be demand-driven rather than supply-driven (Watts, 2009). In addition, because of the changing labour market, job seekers need to actively manage their skills acquisition (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006) and ensure they develop flexible and transferable skills such as social skills and confidence (McGregor et al., 2015; Ross & Gray, 2005). Very often they do this via non-linear or spiral pathways (Ross & Gray, 2005).

Changes have occurred rapidly in both education and employment, with knowledge increasingly available through technology; learners require skills in appraising the value of this readily available knowledge (Siemens, 2005) and in transferring what they learn into the workplace (Eraut, 2004). However, educational institutions are not always connected with the workplaces their graduates will encounter, hence a call for better connections between these sectors (Fredman, 2013; Helms Jørgensen, 2004).

It is unlikely in such a rapidly changing world that formal education can provide all of the learning required for employment success. Increasingly, learning opportunities are being made available in workplaces, through such mechanisms as internships, work placements, and work-integrated learning (Billett, 2004; Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Employers want graduates who are employable, work-ready, and able to engage in continuous skill development (Cooper et al., 2010).

Researchers have noted that youth are critical to the sustainable future of communities (Henderson, 2016), and have called for education institutions to align themselves more closely with local communities as one strategy in meeting local employment needs (Ministry of Business, 2015). However, Australian researchers have reported that the links between education and work are not straightforward or simple, with many young people finding it difficult to make this transition (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016).

Tertiary Education at a Distance

Researchers have noted that tertiary education in remote settings away from larger campuses is often quite different from on-campus education. Students living in rural areas are likely to be subject to a number of stresses (Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009). Challenges such as family pressures, violence, poverty, and associated financial concerns are also found in urban communities, but in rural settings like Ōpōtiki, these are compounded by isolation and lack of employment and education opportunities (Hill, 2014). In addition, rural schools can experience difficulty in attracting high-calibre teachers (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Opportunities for tertiary education are not always readily available close to home, meaning students will need to move away or travel in order to study.

In rural areas of New Zealand, it can be common for young people, particularly those who have successfully completed school qualifications, to move away to continue their education at tertiary level (Bay of Connections, 2014a). Similar trends have been described elsewhere. For example, Lynne Jamieson (2000) in her study of youth in rural Scotland found that around half of school leavers moved away once they left school, especially those of higher social class. However, she also reported that participants' reasons for staying or going were complex, and related to family and community ties, as well as better job prospects and education available elsewhere. Attachment to a place influenced people's decisions to stay in their community (Jamieson, 2000). It is likely that students in Ōpōtiki will have similar patterns, with some moving away for study or employment, and others staying because of family ties and attachment to the place. Students from Māori communities have strong ties to particular localities, as well as extended family and community obligations that will affect decisions to move away for study, and to return.

Bambrick (2002) has reported that in Australia, satellite campuses are pedagogically and financially challenging. Students in remote areas may be disadvantaged, are often indigenous (Bambrick, 2002; Thomas, Ellis, Kirkham, & Parry, 2014), and may have additional stresses in their lives, such as poverty, violence, or family commitments (Owens et al., 2009). As tertiary institutions work to improve access to education in more remote areas, many of the students are likely to be vulnerable learners who may not have previously experienced suc-

cess in education. Many are unable to move away to study because of cost and other commitments (Bambrick, 2002; May, 2009; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009).

In New Zealand, there has been a call for institutions to improve access to tertiary education, in particular for Māori students, and to create an environment that is suitable for a diverse student population (Bay of Connections, 2014a). There is a need for flexible delivery (Bambrick, 2002), and organizations need to respond proactively to the diverse needs of students (Whiteford, Shah, & Nair, 2013). For instance, research has demonstrated that indigenous students are more likely to succeed in environments where their own culture is reflected, and where they have opportunities to establish relationships of trust with their teachers (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). They also prefer classrooms in which learning of theory is closely followed by opportunities for putting this theoretical learning into practice (Fraser, 2016). It is important for providers to be responsive (Skill New Zealand, 2001), flexible, and open (Hoffman, Whittle, & Bodkin-Allen, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). Researchers have noted a need for dialogue between providers and community to ensure programs match local needs (A. Morgan, Saunders, & Turner, 2004).

Smaller campuses often have smaller classes and enthusiastic staff (Bambrick, 2002; May, 2009). Although some researchers have observed that distance students are more likely to drop out (Owens et al., 2009; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), others note that students often perform better (Bambrick, 2002) and that improving access does not necessarily have a negative impact on academic standards (Whiteford et al., 2013). Experiencing success close to home may inspire some students to continue their study away from home on a larger campus; moving to campus requires commitment and support (Thomas et al., 2014).

Undoubtedly, students studying remotely have a different experience from on-campus students (Bambrick, 2002), and isolation can be a barrier (Owens et al., 2009). They need a realistic, authentic environment and a sense of belonging (Owens et al., 2009). Support and technology are seen as important factors (Owens et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2014), as are teachers who are enthusiastic and skilled communicators, and willing to establish good relationships with students (C. Morgan, 2001; Owens et al., 2009; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999).

To ensure success, tertiary education providers need to work in partnership with communities (Cortese, 2003; Hohepa, Jenkins, Mane, Sherman-Godinet, & Toi, 2004; Tarena, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014) and engage families (Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013). They also need to work closely with local schools (Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2007; Thomas et al., 2014) and ensure scaffolding from school to tertiary while providing students with clear information about career pathways (Bidois, 2013; Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013; May, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014).

Māori and Indigenous Tertiary Education

Researchers have reported that organizations need to ensure that programs are learner-centered and meet students' literacy and numeracy needs (McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; Skill New Zealand, 2001). For indigenous students, it will be important that programs also meet their cultural needs by allowing them to express themselves in their own language, creating reciprocal and respectful relationships, and ensuring they can see themselves and their lives reflected in the curriculum (Bishop et al., 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Skill New Zealand, 2001). New Zealand research notes the importance of Māori pedagogies and values in programs where there are high numbers of Māori students (Bidois, 2013; May, 2009; Mayeda, Keil, Dutton, & Ofamo'oni, 2014). Māori pedagogy places a high value on relationships, both between students and teacher and amongst students. Other important factors are group work, multisensory approaches, and reflection (Stucki, 2010). Māori pedagogies such as the Te Kotahitanga approach challenge deficit thinking and ensure Māori students have positive learning experiences that use and reinforce Māori cultural values (Bishop et al., 2009).

Research in New Zealand and Australia has found that in the classroom, indigenous students will be more likely to suceed in a family-like atmosphere where they feel a sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2013; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; Owens et al., 2009). Unsurprisingly, New Zealand's Ministry of Education (2015) has found that for Māori students, better qualifications lead to better employment out-

comes, and therefore improve income levels. In addition, Māori with post-school qualifications are more likely to live longer (Ministry of Education, 2015). Historically there has been a significant gap in tertiary education participation and achievement between Māori and non-Māori as a result of colonization and hegemonic historical expectations that Māori will assimilate themselves to a Western education system. Education in both schools and tertiary institutions in New Zealand has for the most part followed a monocultural model both in the curriculum and in pedagogical practices (Bishop et al., 2009; Walker, 2004). As a result, Māori achievement has lagged behind that of non-Māori for many years (Walker, 2004). Ministry of Education (2015) statistics show that Māori tertiary completions have increased from 20% in 2007 to 30% in 2014, but non-Māori completions during this period increased from 40% to 50%. The 20% gap between Māori and non-Māori completions remains. Other measures of success are also important for Māori. Colleen McMurchy-Pilkington (2009) reported tertiary students gained important social skills and soft skills such as self-confidence. Successful students also become role models for others in their families and communities (McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014).

Students need to develop skills for employment and also skills that equip them for life, so provision of real-life experiences is important (Hoffman et al., 2013; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009). Other factors that affect educational outcomes are student support (Hoffman et al., 2013; Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013; May, 2009) and good relationships with passionate tutors who are culturally aware (Hoffman et al., 2013; May, 2009; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009).

Many students in remote centers are likely to be "second chance learners." In talking about indigenous students in several New Zealand contexts, Stephen May (2009) reports:

> Those tertiary programs in which they are involved thus represent for many of these second-chance adult Māori learners their first unqualified experience of educational achievement/success and give them the confidence to continue with further study (p. 5).

Lack of success for Māori at school has been attributed to colonization and to an education system that has functioned to reproduce European culture and marginalize Māori (Walker, 2004). Other writers have similarly noted that indigenous students are disadvantaged in mainstream schooling (Ross & Gray, 2005). Researchers have also found that many young people are likely to engage in more meaningful learning away from schools, learning generic life skills and vocational job-related skills (McGregor et al., 2015; Sanguinetti, Waterhouse, & Maunders, 2005). In a rapidly changing globalised world, the skills and attributes needed for work are changing also. Rather than blaming students who drop out or are excluded from school because of structural factors, it is important to design learning environments that are student-centered, with high-quality teachers (te Riele, 2000), and a curriculum that is holistic and flexible (Sanguinetti et al., 2005) and allows students to choose and negotiate their study (McGregor et al., 2015). Researchers have found that in the right kind of environment with more reasonable rules, and in which they are treated like adults, youth, including indigenous youth, will reengage successfully with education (McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009; te Riele, 2000, 2007). In creating such an environment, researchers have emphasized the importance of teachers creating trusting relationships with students, being willing to listen, and providing them with support (McGregor et al., 2015; Sanguinetti et al., 2005; te Riele, 2000).

Evaluating Educational Impact

Self-assessment and evaluation are important for tertiary education providers committed to continuous self-improvement to achieve excellent student outcomes (Alzamil, 2014; Burnett & Clarke, 1999) and drive change and transformation (Cortese, 2003; Fiddy & Peeke, 1993; Law, 2010). Although the most common kind of evaluation within education is course evaluation (Burnett & Clarke, 1999; Stein et al., 2012), the Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence website (www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz) reveals a growing number of both workshops on evaluation and reports of evaluations mostly driven by a desire for program improvement.

Impact evaluation is often considered a useful way to measure program outcomes. Both

quantitative and qualitative methods can be used (Befani, Barnett, & Stern, 2014; Ravallion, 2001; Rogers & Peersman, 2014; White, 2010). Qualitative evaluation can provide in-depth explanations for success, better understanding of the context, and useful information for improvement (Bell & Aggleton, 2012; Rogers & Peersman, 2014).

Educational evaluation needs to be independent (Fiddy & Peeke, 1993), flexible (Kettunen, 2008), and student-centered (Law, 2010; Youngman, 1992), and needs to engage communities and stakeholders (Reed, 2015). Possible measures of the short-term effectiveness of educational programs include student outcomes and student satisfaction (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999); longer-term measures might be that graduates achieve better jobs and higher income (Scott, 2005).

Jennifer Greene (2013) notes that mixed methods evaluations improve the credibility of evidence through allowing for diverse standpoints and voices to be heard, resulting in richer, deeper, and better understanding of outcomes, contexts, and processes. Qualitative mixed-methods can also attend to the relational aspects of the program/s and settings and, because of attention to process and contexts, the evidence is more likely to be actionable.

In Ōpōtiki, because of the broad range of programs being taught and the way in which these offerings had expanded over time, it was timely to evaluate the impact that the institution's presence and programs were having on students and the community and to consider how this delivery has impacted on the institution. The aims were:

1) To evaluate the impact of Ōpōtiki programs on students and on the community;

2) To gather information about the suitability, value, and success of programs offered in 2015;

3) To gather feedback from students and community organizations about possible future programs.

METHOD

Because the institution was interested to learn more about the impact its programs were having in Ōpōtiki in order to improve, a mixed-method case study approach was considered most suitable. Information to meet the evaluation aims was collected from the following groups:

- Tutors (face-to-face, phone, or email interviews);

- Senior management (face-to-face interviews);

- Students and former students (focus group interviews);

- Key community stakeholders (focus group or individual interviews).

Participants

The table below summarises the number of participants in each group.

Participant Groups	Numbers
Staff	14
Community Stakeholders	10
Students	55

Students from the following programmes participated in focus groups:

- Certificate in Maritime and Fishing Technology Level 3

- National Certificate in Beauty Services (Cosmetology) Level 3

- Certificate in Beautician and Cosmetology Level 4

- National Certificate in Horticulture Level 4

- Certificate in Preparation for Law Enforcement Level 3

- National Certificate in Aquaculture Level 4

At the time the evaluation was carried out, the total number of students enrolled in these programmes in Ōpōtiki was 94 (59% of those enrolled in 2015) as the evaluation was conducted in the second semester, and some courses had already been completed in the first semester. The students who participated in the

focus group interviews were all those students who were in class on the days on which the focus groups were held. Participation was voluntary, but all students consented to participate.

Because of the nature of the focus groups, the researchers did not record the ethnicity or age of participants. However, it is likely that the percentage of Māori participating in the focus groups was similar to the overall ethnicity of students enrolled in Ōpōtiki programmes (71% Māori). It is also likely that the age profile was very similar to the overall cohort (35% under 25 years).

Staff interviewed included eight tutors teaching on the programmes currently being taught and six other staff who had management responsibilities for programmes taught in Ōpōtiki. About half of the staff interviewed were Māori. The community stakeholder group included participants from four organizations; eight of these participants were Māori.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Students were asked their views about their study, what they had liked and what the challenges were. They were asked about their intentions for further study or employment on completion of their course and what their families thought about their studies. Community stakeholders were asked about their relationships with the institution and their perceptions of the suitability, value, and success of the programs offered. They were also asked about the impact they believed these programs were having on the community or on particular groups. Tutors were asked about their experiences, what kinds of community support they and the students received, and about the success and value of the programs.

Course and program completion data for 2015 and student course evaluation data were also analysed to determine educational outcomes and students' satisfaction with the courses, supports, and services offered.

Participation in the evaluation was voluntary and all participants were provided with full information prior to giving written consent. They were assured that their contributions would be anonymous and that any personal disclosures would be kept confidential. The evaluation was conducted by two evaluators not connected to the programs being evaluated, and was approved by the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic Research Committee.

Findings

A total of 217 students enrolled in the institution's programs in Ōpōtiki in 2015. Seventy-one percent were Māori; 34% were under 25 years old. Course and qualification completions in 2015 were high, ranging from 75% up to 100%. Course evaluations were very positive, with 93% of students who completed an evaluation reporting that they were satisfied with their course overall. The table on the next page shows the program completions for each program.

Student feedback.

Students reported that their study had impacted on many aspects of their lives. Many reported improved motivation and self-confidence, for example:

> We wake up in the morning and we've got reason to be somewhere, we belong, we've got a purpose, we belong somewhere, it's like family. There's commitment.

> When we got here a lot of us were shy, quite withdrawn and now we can't shut up.

> Most of these ladies have joined the gym, motivation is the key. When (the tutors) got here we were a bit slumpy, but now you can see how interested we are.

Others spoke about their prospects for further study and employment:

> I want to get on to the mussel farm over in Coromandel, see if I can get a bit of knowledge there, so when this one opens up I can share my knowledge with younger ones here… I want to get into aquaculture.

> My girl wants to go on the boats … she wants to go to sea. I'm here for the mussel factory.

One teenage girl said:
> I do think the courses are a good opportunity… 'cause kids my age are dropping out of school, there's not much opportunity around this town…

there's not much job opportunities so having these courses actually does give teenagers my age (a chance) to actually experience something new … so these courses actually help us to learn the things we want to do instead of focusing on other things that are not going to interest you in the future.

These comments show that participants believed their study was providing them with skills and qualifications that would be useful for future employment, and that they could see these connections.

The building of relationships with one another and with tutors was very important for student success. Students appreciated the support they received from their tutors, and the efforts made to design flexible study opportunities that fit around their busy lives. One person said:

I can probably speak for everybody here that (tutor) has changed our lives. We don't want her to go, we don't want our course to finish; she has inspired us all to improve ourselves.

This appreciation of tutors was echoed by others:

I think it all comes down to the tutor, thoughtful of us as people and individuals… being culturally aware was very important. Culture matters when you come into a shared space like this.

Our tutors are the bomb! They teach us in different ways and relate to us in different things, they're easy to get along with and talk to.

These participants highlight the importance of having tutors who were approachable, inspiring, and able to enter into their culture, in short who were willing to develop authentic relationships with them.

Relationships with fellow students were also important. In one class, someone reported, "this group is so tight knit, if somebody can't make it, someone else goes and picks them up."

Some participants also reported that their relationships with others who were already studying helped them decide to enroll. In the beauty courses, more mature students mentored younger ones. In the Certificate in Maritime and Fishing Technology, the younger students were able to help older ones with using the Internet to access resources.

Beginning education locally also inspired some students to consider continuing

Table 1. *Completion Statistics for Programs Taught in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, 2015.*

	EFTS[3]	Number of students	Percent Success (by EFTS)
National Certificate in Beauty Services (Cosmetology) Level 3	21.23	49	92.7 %
Certificate in Beautician and Cosmetology Level 4	5.40	9	88.9 %
Certificate in Kiwifruit - Orchard Skills Level 3	20.39	106	100.0 %
National Certificate in Horticulture (Introductory) Level 2	2.13	14	89.1 %
National Certificate in Horticulture Level 4	4.88	10	90.3 %
Certificate in Preparation for Law Enforcement Level 3	1.73	3	75.4 %
National Certificate in Aquaculture Level 4	1.52	14	92.9 %
Certificate in Maritime and Fishing Technology Level 3	27.39	31	92.6 %

[3]EFTS = Equivalent Full-Time Student

further study elsewhere. They tasted success and gained confidence in their abilities. Several of the students we spoke to were planning to move away to study at a higher level, now that they had demonstrated that they could do it. When summing up the success of her class, one student noted, "the book is ours, we just got to write it now. You've given us this opportunity so it's up to us to take that on board and go further to better ourselves, we've got the tools."

Tutor feedback.

Tutors said that all the programs they were teaching in Ōpōtiki had value for students and community. This was because programs had been chosen in partnership between the institution and community groups, and were designed to either provide students with skills that would equip them for employment that fitted with current regional development (e.g., mussel farm and harbour, horticulture) or serve as a stepping stone for further study. Comments included:

> These programs are vital to the economy and local employment.

> Ōpōtiki is oriented to the ocean and kaimoana (seafood).

> Creating job opportunities, allowing you to still live in Ōpōtiki and work.

Horticulture tutors noted that local indigenous groups were reclaiming land that had previously been leased to larger organizations, and since they were now running the orchards themselves, they needed to upskill themselves and their staff.

Tutors provided many examples of positive changes they had observed in students, which had also had an impact on their family, and described students as role models within the community. One tutor reported:

> What I've seen happen in students has been far more than I expected to see… clearly a lot of my students, they're very exposed to one type of life and haven't had much opportunity to get out there, so they experienced something that was new… they've been exposed to

far more content because of the life they've been living prior… but they also changed very much in themselves. Their self-confidence was far higher… they got more value out of certain things than I would have expected.

Another had been impressed by the feedback from families and community:

> So the value is fantastic actually. It was really huge for some of those girls… we even had their men coming in saying how it had changed these girls' lives… I had the police come in and say how amazing it was. They came in actually to say thank you to me.

The significance of these comments lies in the evidence from family and community that studying has had a very big impact on the lives of both the students and their wider families, broadening students' horizons and giving them a glimpse of further possibilities for their lives.

The tutors also emphasized the value to students of practically oriented programs, field trips, and programs that offered opportunities for work experience. They noted that most of the students had been out of education for a long time, and many had not completed high school.

Community stakeholder feedback.

All of the feedback obtained from key community stakeholders about the programs was very positive, with this group also noting the impact participating in study was having on many students who were previously disengaged from education. They noted that many had lives marked by stresses, such as poverty and violence. One reported:

> Many come from difficult backgrounds… We're getting them from crisis to being contributors, and the tohu (qualification) is a symbol of their achievement.

Stakeholders anticipated employment opportunities would grow in Ōpōtiki in the future, and wanted to see their own young people develop the skills to meet the likely increased

demand. They made many suggestions for programs that could be offered in the future. The most often recommended programs were in the primary industries, such as horticulture, aquaculture, forestry, and marine studies. Of high importance were programs that equipped people for employment in the mussel farm and harbor development, such as construction and engineering. Thinking laterally about how the proposed developments would boost growth in the Ōpōtiki district, people also thought that programs in small business management, communication skills, administration, and accounting would be useful. Over time, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology will respond to these suggestions by expanding the programs offered in Ōpōtiki.

Summary of findings.

The feedback received from all participant groups was overwhelmingly positive. The only negative feedback received was about the lack of Internet availability, and a couple of complaints about noise and lack of heating in some classrooms. Positive comments were received from students about the impact of their studies on them and their families, their relationships with each other and with tutors and their hopes for future study or employment. Tutors observed the positive impact study was having on their students' lives and families, with noticeable gains on confidence and self-presentation. Community stakeholders were pleased to see so many students reengaging in education, and emphasized the importance of programs that would lead to employment.

Discussion

The information gathered from completion statistics, students, tutors, and community stakeholders demonstrates that the programs offered in Ōpōtiki have proved highly successful for both students and the community. Completion rates were consistently high across all programs and exceeded the institution's benchmarks.

In contrast to other research findings (e.g., Bambrick, 2002; Thomas et al., 2014), our study found that students were not being disadvantaged by studying in a remote center. Their educational experience was different, but they were receiving a similar quality of education as students studying on the institution's urban campuses (Bambrick, 2002; Owens et al., 2009). Improving access by bringing programs

to their community did not negatively impact academic standards (Whiteford et al., 2013). While students in Ōpōtiki did not have access to the same kinds of resources as students studying on the institution's larger campuses, with less access to library and Internet, they reported having access to what they needed to be successful in their studies, and their educational outcomes, nevertheless, were well above the institutional average qualification completion rate of 67% (http://archive.tec.govt.nz/). This success is likely to be due to a number of factors, such as smaller class size and enthusiastic, well-qualified staff; availability of high-quality support and mentoring; and the partnerships established with local Māori organizations (Bambrick, 2002; May, 2009). In addition, some of the programmes were free or low cost, allowing students to remain in their communities while studying (Jamieson, 2000), with good prospects of future employment in their own community.

In addition, all groups interviewed viewed the programs as successful beyond the completion of qualifications. Students, tutors, and community participants reported that the study had a positive impact on students, their extended families, and community. It is likely that the peer mentoring provided by some of the older students had positive effects on both the mentors and mentees as noted by other writers (Karcher, 2009). Studying provided students with "soft skills," such as self-confidence and self-esteem, personal presentation, and motivation to make changes in their lives. These outcomes are similar to those reported by McMurchy-Pilkington (2009) in her study of Māori adult learners; she found that in addition to academic outcomes, participants increased their confidence and learned important social, employment, and life skills.

Students and tutors alike reported a family-like feel within their classrooms, one of the factors other writers have considered important (Hoffman et al., 2013; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009). The importance of Māori student success in a district with a high Māori population cannot be underestimated, especially in a district where qualification levels and average incomes are low, and unemployment is relatively high. A report on Māori economic development in the Bay of Plenty (Hudson & Diamond, 2014) noted the importance of education and pathways into local employment for regional growth.

Based on the feedback from community leaders and stakeholders, and from the students, we believe there are several things that were crucial to the success of programs in Ōpōtiki:

- Offering programs with clear links to employment and economic development aspirations;

- Fostering partnership relationships of trust with local indigenous and community organizations;

- Providing programs that assisted young people to transition from high school into tertiary education, and from their initial programs into further study; and

- Focusing on re-engaging disaffected youth who had not previously experienced success in education.

Linking programs to employment and economic development.

The Ōpotiki community has a collective vision of future prosperity through economic development on several fronts, mostly focused on primary production (aquaculture, horticulture, and agriculture), but also on ancillary development that community leaders believe will lead to growth in local businesses and tourism. An important factor that has contributed to the success of programs offered in Ōpōtiki has been choosing to offer programs that provide benefit to the town's economic development plans: programs that equip people for work on fishing boats, mussel farm and horticulture, harbour development and construction, as well as business, hospitality, and tourism. Matching programs to identified needs ensured both community interest in the programs and support from employers. The students we spoke to, even those who were still at high school, could clearly see links between their studies and future employment prospects; both students and community stakeholders reported that the programs currently being offered in Ōpōtiki were suitable for the community. Aquaculture and maritime programs were considered useful in preparing students for future work on the mussel farm or in the mussel processing factory. Horticulture courses were considered highly relevant for the growing kiwifruit industry in the Eastern Bay of Plenty in particular. The alignment of programs to economic development and employment outcomes, both present and future, ensured a good fit with Bay of Connections (2014a, 2014b) strategies. Students in the horticulture programs were all employed prior to and during their study, and have continued employment in this industry after completing their qualifications; some have also enrolled in further study. The table on the previous page reports outcomes for students graduating from the Beauty and Maritime programs.

It is interesting to note that graduate outcomes for these programs follow different patterns. Students in the Beauty programs were all female, and the outcomes suggest that many used these programs as a first step to further study or employment. Those not in employment or study were at home looking after children. In the Maritime program, which was mostly male students, more were able to find employment

Table 2. Outcomes for graduates of Beauty programs (L3 and L4) and the Maritime program

	Beauty programs	Maritime program
Enrolled in further study	36%	3%
Working in the industry in which they completed qualifications	14%	36%
Working in other employment	21%	36%
Looking for work	13%	
Not in employment or study	11%	25%

either in the industry or elsewhere. Fewer Maritime students went on to further study.

Through his industry contacts, the Maritime program tutor was able to link students directly into employment opportunities, which is likely the reason so many of these graduates quickly found jobs. The importance of connections with workplaces has been noted by other writers (Fredman, 2013; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). These students had all visited workplaces during their study, including days spent on fishing vessels, which allowed them to understand the relevance of their learning to employment, something that is considered important (Billett, 2004; Cooper et al., 2010; Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Making the links very clear during their study is likely to have helped students transition into employment (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016).

Partnership relationships.

Our findings demonstrated the importance for tertiary education providers of establishing and continuously fostering strong relationships with community stakeholders. Stakeholders appreciated that senior staff visited the town on numerous occasions and attended key community events. They listened to community aspirations, and decisions about which programs to offer were based on the requests of community stakeholders.

It was also vital that tutors fostered good relationships with their students, and with wider families and community people. Many of the tutors travelled to Ōpōtiki each week to teach, but still managed to build rapport and gain acceptance within the community. Students and community stakeholders made very positive comments about tutors and their willingness to build relationships. Partnership relationships with Māori community organizations and the local high school were crucial to the success of the programs, demonstrating again the value of such relationships (Cortese, 2003; Hohepa et al., 2004; Tarena, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). Also important were the relationships developed with families (Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013) and with local schools (Bidois, 2013; May, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014).

Students' reports of how much they enjoyed the engagement with others in the classroom and the relationships they had with their tutors clearly demonstrated the value of providing face-to-face educational opportunities; it is unlikely that online programs would have had the same success. Indeed, the evaluation also found that at present, technology infrastructure in Ōpōtiki is inadequate to fully support online programs. The importance for students, particularly Māori students, of having a place away from their home life, in a family-like setting that affirmed their culture and where they built relationships with their tutors and each other was essential, as other writers have attested (Leslie & Ehrhardt, 2013; Mayeda et al., 2014; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009).

Transition pathways.

The aquaculture program was taught at the local high school as a "Trades Academy"[4] program, with a view to providing students a pathway into further tertiary study that would prepare them for working either on the mussel farm or in the mussel processing factory. Staff at the school thought that offering programs that allowed senior students to begin tertiary study while remaining at school may have influenced some students to remain in school instead of dropping out. However, evaluating programs over a single year meant it was not possible to know for sure how many students remained in school because of this opportunity; further research will be needed over a number of years in order to identify any possible trend toward improved school retention, as has been noted by other researchers (Education Review Office, 2015). Our interviews with school students recorded the enjoyment these students gained from their studies, and their appreciation at being treated like adult students while still at school. Researchers in other countries have also found that it is important for students to be treated like adults and given choices about their learning (McGregor et al., 2015; Ross & Gray, 2005; te Riele, 2000).

Other writers have similarly recognised the importance of transition programs, particularly for Māori students (e.g., Hudson & Diamond, 2014; Johnstone & Rutgers, 2013). The

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[4]Trades academies are partnerships between secondary schools and tertiary education providers offering trades-based, practical programs intended to meet the needs of secondary students at risk of not staying or succeeding in education (Education Review Office, 2015).

transition programs taught in Ōpōtiki also met the recommendations of other researchers through ensuring they targeted priority learners, linked well to future employment prospects, and were designed in partnership with schools and community organizations (Education Review Office, 2015; Priority Learners Educational Attainment Working Group, 2012).

As well as transitioning students from school into tertiary study, the programs offered in Ōpōtiki provided a useful stepping stone into further study for some students. Similar to what other researchers have found (Bambrick, 2002; May, 2009; McMurchy-Pilkington, 2009), many students reported they were not in a position to move away for their studies, mostly because of family commitments. However, some reported that they were now intending to undertake further study, even though it meant moving away. Achieving success and gaining self-confidence assists with transition into further study (Jefferies, 1998; May, 2009).

Re-engaging "second chance" learners.

In a town where many young people leave school with no qualifications and have little expectation of finding employment locally, programs that encouraged them to re-engage with education were considered important by community stakeholders and by the students themselves. This finding confirms the value of "second chance" education reported by other writers internationally (e.g., Ross & Gray, 2005; te Riele, 2000). Several of the programs we evaluated had mostly "second chance" learners enrolled, and it can be seen from the outcomes that these students experienced success. Several reported that the school environment had not suited them well (McGregor et al., 2015; Ross & Gray, 2005). The Maritime and Fishing Technology program attracted mostly male students, many of whom had not previously experienced success in study. They wanted to learn vocational job-related skills that would lead to employment (McGregor et al., 2015; Sanguinetti et al., 2005). Beauty programs were seen as useful in enticing women back into education, as well as improving self-confidence and personal presentation. School students considered at risk of leaving school who completed the aquaculture program thrived in an environment where they were treated like adults and given choices about their study (McGregor et al., 2015; Sanguinetti et al., 2005; te Riele,

2000). Students' reports suggested that tutors were engaging them through creating trusting and supportive relationships (McGregor et al., 2015; Sanguinetti et al., 2005; te Riele, 2000). Having successfully completed their programs, many of these "second chance" students reported increased confidence about seeking employment, starting up their own businesses, or carrying on with further study.

The programs offered met the aspirations set out in both the Tertiary Intentions Strategy and the Māori Economic Development Strategy (Bay of Connections, 2014a, 2014b) of re-engaging youth in education. Factors that contributed to success in re-engaging those who had not previously experienced success in education were the choosing of programs clearly aligned to community goals, the partnership approach taken by the institution, and the relationship-building of tutors who worked hard to create a learning environment that was culturally appropriate for their students (Hohepa et al., 2004; Priority Learners Educational Attainment Working Group, 2012).

Additional programs suggested for the future need to build on previous offerings and help prepare people for employment in the mussel farm, mussel processing factory, ancillary industries such as construction, engineering, and service industries such as tourism and hospitality. The current and planned developments in horticulture, forestry, and agriculture will contribute to increased demand for skilled workers, managers, and business owners. Programs offered in Ōpōtiki both now and in the future should be anticipating this expected growth by offering people opportunities to gain skills for the future.

Challenges.

Offering programs in a rural centre away from the institution's main campuses presented challenges for the institution and for tutors. One of the biggest challenges was the lack of Internet availability in Ōpōtiki, and therefore lack of access to online resources. Tutors were reliant on rooms and resources supplied by community stakeholder organizations that were not always fit for the purpose, and did not always have access to the support they needed. However, support for students was strong and provided locally. Although students did not have the same access to resources as on-campus students, tutors were resourceful and found ways to ensure that they gained the experience

they needed for employment. For example, field trips and simulated work environments meant that students were not disadvantaged in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation demonstrated the success of providing tertiary education programs in a rural part of the Eastern Bay of Plenty, where the majority of students were Māori. Our study found that students were not being disadvantaged by studying in a remote center. The success of these programs was attributed to ensuring that the programs offered linked to local economic development and employment opportunities, and that these links were explicit. Fostering relationships with local indigenous and community organizations and responding to their needs and aspirations also ensured that programs were relevant, and that support was available for students. Programs that assisted young people to transition from high school into tertiary education and re-engaged disaffected youth who had not previously experienced success in education also met important community needs.

A note of caution, and one mentioned by several stakeholders, is that Ōpōtiki is a fairly small community, with around 8,436 people living in the region, and approximately half of these in Ōpōtiki itself. There is a danger of "flooding the market" with too many courses and programs. Because of this, it is important that Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology collaborates with key community stakeholders when planning future program offerings and also works with other tertiary education providers to avoid duplications.

That said, it is likely that the education and training needs of the Ōpōtiki region will expand in the future, alongside planned development in primary industries and the harbour development. Our institution now has a good reputation in Ōpōtiki amongst key stakeholders and industry organizations. Because of these relationships, the organization is well placed to continue to offer high-quality programs to meet the expressed and future needs of the region.

We believe that the findings of this evaluation are transferable to other situations, and highly recommend that other educators wishing to provide programs in rural communities:

- Establish relationships and/or partnerships with community organizations to make sure programs are suitable for that community;

- Ensure that programs offered are linked to local employment opportunities;

- Provide study pathways that enable young people to study while remaining in their own communities;

- Meet the needs of "second chance" learners; and

- Provide a suitable environment that meets the cultural needs of indigenous students.

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