PAT STRAUSS

7. "I CAN SEE THE RABBIT!"

Perceptions of the Imagined Identity of Foundation Study Students and Its Link to Academic Success

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore how foundation students in bridging programmes in polytechnics in New Zealand are positioned in the institutional context, how this positioning impacts on their learning, and how foundation learners' imagined identities help or hinder their educational progress. Students are able to imagine a connection with others who do not form part of their social network, and this connection "might have just as much impact on [their] current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of everyday life" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 670). These imagined communities can represent students' dreams for the future (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008). Although there is much in the data from this study that indicates that students who have an 'imagined connection' with specific vocational communities, for example, nursing and engineering, have more 'investment' in their learning and are more focused and motivated, such imagined identities are not unproblematic. There is the very real risk that students may have unrealistic aspirations and suffer both emotional and financial difficulties when they cannot realise their dreams. In addition, in order to make good on these connections students need to "act purposefully and reflectively on their world" (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013, p. 63), but unless other stakeholders in the academic community, notably management and target qualification lecturers, acknowledge "their legitimacy and status" (Davies as cited in Koehne, 2005, p. 105), purposeful action will be difficult. Unfortunately the data from this study indicates that these students are often viewed as the 'poor relative' of the institutions they attend, and are marginalised in terms of resources. How this impacts on their sense of self-worth and ultimately their academic progression is explored though the eyes of those who teach them.

BACKGROUND

Adult literacy and numeracy education is a government priority in New Zealand, and significant funding has been invested in initiatives to raise levels of literacy and numeracy. The aim is to "raise the skills of the current and future workforce to meet labour demand and social need" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6). In particular

K. Yasukawa & S. Black (Eds.), Beyond Economic Interests, 105–118.
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it has been emphasised that the number of young people moving successfully from school into tertiary education needs to be substantially increased. This study is situated in foundation bridging programmes, which Benseman and Russ define as those designed to give learners “the requisite academic skills that will enable them to enrol in other tertiary programmes to which they would not otherwise have been able to gain entry” (2003, p. 45). Bridging programmes are offered at most universities and polytechnics in New Zealand but there appears to be little consensus as to what these bridging programmes are. The term is used very loosely to refer to the provision of literacy, numeracy and vocational programmes for those who do not have the requisite school leaving qualifications to enrol on their desired courses of study.

These bridging (or foundation studies) programmes have multiplied over the last decade mainly as a result of the International Adult Literacy Survey (Benseman & Sutton, 2008). This survey reported that over 40 percent of the New Zealand population did not have the literacy (and numeracy) skills they required to operate efficiently in a modern workforce (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Canada, 2000). Although the validity of these findings has been widely criticised (Blum, Goldstein, & Guérin-Pace, 2001; Hamilton, 2001; Hamilton & Barton, 2000) it cannot be denied that these reports have led to the provision of much needed funding for adult literacy and numeracy programmes in New Zealand.

However this funding has come at a cost, the most important of which is perhaps the cognitive approach employed to define literacy. This approach dismisses any understanding of literacy as social practice (Bartlett, 2008; Hamilton, Hillier, & Tett, 2006; Lankshear & O’Connor, 1999; Searle, 1999; Street, 2003, 2005), and the ways in which students increase their literacy by becoming socialised into a Community of Practice (Black & Yasukawa, 2011). This study attempts to examine the effect such an approach has on the students the government is seeking to empower.

THE STUDY

Universities and polytechnics around New Zealand that offer foundation studies programmes were invited to participate in a study that sought to explore the perspectives of staff teaching on these programmes. Lecturers from four universities and seven polytechnics on both the North and South Islands of the country accepted the invitation and over 100 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were carried out with volunteers between February and December 2012. Staff were asked about their literacy and numeracy teaching practices, and were also questioned about their perceptions of their own, and their students’ positioning, within their respective institutions. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were returned to the interviewees to be checked.

At the end of 2012 New Zealand polytechnics and institutes of technology were informed that the government was cutting by a third the amount of funding

awarded for foundation level tertiary education, and was putting this money out for tender to private educational institutions (Tertiary Education Union, 2012). This is, of course, in line with trends around the world where governments move away from being "providers of education to being promoters" (Lauzon, 2013, p. 4). There was, and still is, great concern about the results of this action and it appeared an opportune moment to reflect on the views of 34 staff members at three large polytechnics.

Of the 34 staff interviewed five focused exclusively on teaching numeracy and/or maths, four taught discipline subjects such as biology, physics, sociology or health subjects, and the rest were predominantly involved in the area of academic literacy and study skills. However, all those interviewed believed that it was important that they embed literacy into their teaching.

It must be noted that at the time of the interviews the funding cuts had not been officially announced although they were widely anticipated.

FINDINGS

The key issues that emerged from the analysis of the interviews were:

- that there are a number of distinct groups, as far as ability and motivation is concerned, within the foundation studies cohort
- that academic preparedness and expertise, institutional expectations and commitments, financial concerns, family relationships and health issues all play an extremely important role in student engagement, and
- that to be effective, pathways into vocational programmes need to be clearly delineated.

Groups in Foundation Studies

It appears from the data that for these institutions at least, there are four distinct groups as far as motivation and ability is concerned:

- those who know what they want and have the ability and the motivation to reach their goals
- those who are strongly motivated and prepared to put in a great deal of hard work although they might struggle academically
- those who are still trying to decide what they want to do, and
- those who attend reluctantly and have little real engagement, at least initially.

Those who know what they want and have the ability and the motivation to reach their goals. A maths lecturer pointed out that her students represented a cohort that is not widely recognised – students who have experienced academic success but do not have the discipline credentials, often maths and/or science, to enrol in programmes of their choosing. These students, strongly motivated, and with a solid

academic background, obviously experience the fewest difficulties and are the ones most likely to be successful.

Those who are strongly motivated and prepared to put in a great deal of hard work although they might struggle academically. Quite often these students are successful despite the odds stacked against them. The key appears to be an identified goal that is clearly delineated. It was of students from a group of potential nurses that one lecturer noted:

> I always say to people they are like greyhounds and they've finally got in the box and they can see the rabbit. And I'm saying to them 'You're working full time, you've got to do this and this' and they are like 'No, I can see the rabbit, I can see the rabbit'. They don't hear anything and all they want is to get out of the gate and run for the rabbit because it's the first time they've had that opportunity. And I think that's what pulls them through.

Other lecturers noted that engineering and nursing students just work like dogs because they know what they are doing.

However, there is also a sizeable proportion of strongly motivated, hardworking students who do not achieve their goals. Much of the blame for this was laid at the door of those responsible for the marketing of the organisations. One of the tutors pointed out that nursing qualifications at his institute were presented as if enrolling in foundation studies guaranteed the students entry to a nursing qualification, and that this was far from the case. There were the same concerns about qualifications in medical imaging. These programmes are very popular, and foundation studies graduates are competing with people with science and medical degrees: "We groan when these lovely students put their all into this and we know they might not be able to get there". Very few foundation students are accepted on the course, and tutors were concerned that the work these students had done to be accepted for this pathway would not prepare them for alternative options such as nursing. In the same vein, a lecturer worried about students who ended up with qualifications which did not really help them pathway onto degree and diploma programmes "and no-one really cares."

Those who are still trying to decide what they want to do. One lecturer felt that more and more "there's a group where they might want to do something but they're not quite sure what it is and they struggle to focus". Another referred to them as lost souls who have little understanding of what their chosen careers involve. Some have drifted onto pathways because somebody said "You should be a nurse, well your auntie is a nurse" or "Your uncle has a garage". Some who enrolled on the police cohort did so because it sounded exciting – "so we had a classful of students who wanted to go into the police academy but actually when it came down to it they didn't". It is a concern that students appear to feel pressurised to commit to a career pathway before they have had time to make an informed decision. One lecturer noted

that the institution at which he worked only had a certain number of career pathways and students appeared to end up "locked into convincing themselves and feeling that they need to convince me that this is what they want, rather than it's OK not to be sure". As Higgins, Nairn and Slogoi (2010) point out, current discourses in education based on the premise that with sufficient effort students can achieve any goal they aspire to, including any identity, not only ignores "wider structural constraints that may exist within institutions, neighbourhoods and labour markets" but discourages "self-discovery and careful identity work in relation to career pathways" (p. 23).

Those who attend reluctantly and have little real engagement, at least, initially. A number of the younger students are in a foundation class because of parental pressure: "They don't want to be at school but that doesn't mean they want to be here. It's just somewhere else to be". Not only are these students not enthusiastic about attending but often they are poorly equipped academically to deal with the demands of their courses, and socially to deal with life in a big institution. There was mention of students spending their days in the cafeteria or drinking in the car parks. A Ministry of Education report also spoke of students enrolling in foundation programmes because "I didn't know what to do with my life, that's all/ I was too lazy to walk to school/ I had nothing better to do" (Haggland & Earle, 2012, p. 15).

However one factor that all these groups had in common was that retention was often a real concern, although poor attendance was far more pronounced in the last two groups. Thomas (2002) examines the issues around student retention in Higher Education. Although her study involved students in higher rather than bridging education, many of Thomas's points are equally salient for this cohort. According to Thomas, factors that play a crucial role in student retention (and of necessity, student success) include academic preparedness and expertise, institutional expectations and commitments, financial concerns and family support and commitments. For this cohort I have added health issues to this list of factors affecting student retention and success.

Factors Affecting the Retention and Success of Foundation Students

Institutional expectations and commitments. One of the factors identified by Thomas (2002) as playing a crucial role in student retention is the role of the institution itself. Thomas cites Rey and others' definition of institutional habitus as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (p. 431). She points out that if a student does not feel that he or she belongs in the organisation, that the tacit knowledge that they bring to their classes is not valued, and that their social and cultural practices are not seen as appropriate; they are more likely to withdraw. With this in mind, lecturers were asked how they felt foundation students were regarded by management and colleagues in other faculties of the institutions they attended.

Management. The lecturers agreed that institutional attitudes towards the students were very important. One noted how empowering it was for her students when they were acknowledged by senior management: “you’re an honest to goodness student – you’re not just doing foundation studies”. A few of the lecturers felt that their students were valued by management, or that management attitudes towards the students were improving, but the majority felt management was dismissive, indifferent or only interested in the financial aspects of the foundation studies programmes. They felt that management viewed their students as “dummies, slightly childlike entities, needing babysitting, a necessary evil demanded by the TEC, production units, commodities, cash cows, not a good return on investment”. A number of those interviewed pointed out that actions spoke louder than words and the fact that foundation studies did not feature prominently in the advertising material of the institute, that lecturers had to continually battle for resources and that they were invariably housed in the “bottom end of the real estate in rubbishy prefabs that are freezing cold” was a reflection of the value placed on both foundation lecturers and their students.

Lecturers argued that there was little real understanding or sympathy for the challenges their students faced: “there’s lots of rhetoric around preparing students but they don’t walk the talk”. Foundation staff pointed out that the attendance and success rate of their students was expected to be no lower than the rest of the polytechnic students, despite the fact that many of their programmes were open entry. They felt that this lack of understanding was demonstrated by the fact that teaching time in many programmes was being cut. Some were having their teaching hours cut by more than fifty per cent. This was a source of enormous frustration as the overwhelming feeling of interviewees was that one of their greatest challenges was the very limited amount of time they had with their students. Most courses are 16–17 weeks in length and it was argued that students need longer than this “to re-evaluate their relationships with learning and their relationships with text, and develop a relationship with the educators”.

One of the ways to cut face-to-face teaching time is by offering online programmes. At one polytechnic, foundation students who wished to enrol for nursing qualifications were required to do a large part of their study online. Management’s reasoning was that the nursing qualification itself required online study so this was a good opportunity for students to become accustomed to the environment. Staff who taught on the programme disputed the wisdom of the reasoning, pointing out that online study demanded that students be very independent and self-directed, a big ask for students at the pre-undergraduate level. It was, one noted, “like giving some of them a licence not to do anything at all apart from come to a two hour class once a week”. She pointed out that because they were not required to attend class “they procrastinate because they think they have so much time”. Their concerns are borne out by the literature. Dawson, Charman and Kilpatrick (2013) point out that online study is not suitable for students who are not academically well prepared or who come from families who are not familiar with the demands of higher education.

Power and Gould-Morven (2011) argue that students engaged in online studies often feel isolated and this leads to "unsustainably high rates of withdrawal and drop out" (p. 21). After the initial introduction of the online programme staff managed to negotiate more face-to-face teaching with the foundation students but there is still a fair amount of online tuition, a situation staff feel, is still far from ideal.

Faculties. The relationship with destination faculties, that is the faculties that offer programmes foundation students wished to pathway into, appears to be complex. There were a number of reports of healthy, productive relationships particularly with nursing, where discipline tutors valued students coming from foundation studies. The tutors found them better prepared to deal with the academic demands of their programmes than some school leavers. Unfortunately this does not appear to be the experience of most foundation lecturers. In a number of cases these destination faculties were described as "silos". One lecturer felt that foundation staff had a strong operational relationship with nursing because a large number of foundation studies students pathwayed into nursing but she felt that it was not a "strong" relationship. She found nursing staff dismissive of foundation lecturers and suspicious of their students.

Foundation staff were "fobbed off by their discipline colleagues, and their requests for greater and closer interaction were ignored. Foundation staff expressed a desire for a list "of what they (the disciplines) would like their ideal students to enter with", but reported that these requests fell on deaf ears. There was frustration that other faculties did not appear to acknowledge that they too had a role in helping these students become comfortable and successful in the wider institution. Foundation staff felt that they were blamed for any shortcomings in their students' academic preparation:

> It's everybody's responsibility to do whatever we can to facilitate students succeeding, and there's only so much that can be done at each step along the way. If you're always looking over your shoulder and blaming the people before you it doesn't get you anywhere.

Academic preparedness and expertise. Thomas (2002) argues that a good relationship between students and their lecturers is vital if students are to succeed in coping with the academic demands placed upon them, and in this regard, at least, many foundation students appear to be very fortunate. Interestingly she notes that in the United Kingdom (UK), former polytechnics have a very good record in recruiting and retaining underrepresented groups, but that this record is being challenged by the requirement that academics become more research active. Glogowska, Young and Lockyer (2007, p. 74) described the importance students attached to the "right word at the right time" from lecturers, noting that it often made the difference as to whether students abandoned their studies or not. In this study the commitment of those interviewed towards their students was very clear. Their attitude is neatly

summarised by a lecturer in health studies who said, “I see these second chance learners coming in, and for me personally my job satisfaction isn’t teaching human biology, it’s not rocket science. It’s seeing this person become what they can be”.

However, these strong relationships were not enough to overcome many of the obstacles students and staff encountered. As indicated above, lecturers felt that they did not have enough time to prepare students adequately for further studies. This created unwanted tension:

> So you have foundation studies where you want to cosset and promote and nurture but what is waiting for them if they don’t have the necessary academic skills is a lot of hurt … so as a tutor I must be constantly trying to push my students but this is against the spirit of shared dialogue. You feel like you are complicit in some kind of sausage machine process because foundation studies, to my mind, should be nurturing and supportive.

There was much talk of the “paranoia and fears” that led the students to require programmes like foundation studies in the first place. These past negative experiences of education often led to a lack of self-belief which robbed them of any sense of agency “so they ask ‘Can I do this? Am I allowed to do that?’ They require a lot of handholding and direction”. One lecturer argued that students were their own worst enemy, “their preconceived ideas that they can’t actually pass, they are failures in their own eyes”. Because of these fears, lecturers were well aware that if they moved at a speed that would allow them to cover the required content the students “panic and you lose them”.

There was also general consensus that pastoral care had an integral place in foundation studies, and there was widespread concern that funding cuts had curtailed a great deal of the services formerly available. This placed a greater burden on lecturers who felt they had to provide the needed support. As Hyland notes (2012, p. 216) there needs to be a focus on the affective domain of learning for students who “associate learning with anxiety, grief and failure”. There was also an awareness that in the short space of time available it was often difficult to wean students off their dependency. One Māori lecturer noted that:

> They see us as aunties and uncles and sometimes mothers. I don’t really like it but that is a result of the connections that we try to make. They do struggle with moving away from us and that’s not what I want.

Building confidence and resilience takes time and a great deal of effort. As one lecturer noted wryly, “the irony is that we wouldn’t be in existence if everything had worked perfectly in those early years”.

Family relationships. Childcare loomed as an issue both for students who were parents and older siblings. Particularly in Māori and Pacific communities, the concept of ‘family first’ was very strong. One lecturer noted that students from families in these communities get a great deal of “direction” from home regardless of their age

and "when they come here it's a bit difficult for them to try and place themselves above the needs and wants of their families". Often church-related activities impacted on Pacific students' attendance. Lecturers reported that there were a number of students who came from abusive homes where drugs, alcohol and violence were constant challenges. As indicated earlier, students who come from homes not familiar with the use of computers are at a distinct disadvantage but this disadvantage is not limited to technical expertise. James (2007, p. 2) notes that the "most widespread and persistent source of disadvantage" in accessing higher education is low socio-economic status but he warns against interpreting this narrowly as an economic issue, noting that it has far more to do with the "absence of Bourdieu's broader concept of social and cultural capital". Burke echoes this sentiment (2013, pp. 110–111) pointing out that some groups have the "cultural and material resources necessary to 'play the game' and demonstrate particular forms of achievement and 'success' that are recognised and legitimised in educational institutions". Few of the foundation studies students appear to be drawn from these groups.

Financial concerns. Money problems meant that students had to drop out of programmes to get jobs to support their families. Students often missed weeks of class because they simply could not afford the bus fare. There were other less obvious results of financial hardship. Those students who wished to enter the police academy could not afford to take their learner's licence or be taught how to swim, both pre-entry requirements. The worst case scenario was where students' financial problems were exacerbated by taking out student loans in order to enrol in foundation programmes to prepare themselves for entry to degrees "for which they are patently not ready or capable of going into … they may find themselves in a place where they have a large debt over their heads and still don't have a suitable qualification to make themselves attractive to an employer". This concern of the lecturers is echoed by Higgins et al. (2010) who warn that the costs are not simply financial. Poor choices might well have a negative impact on students' sense of identity.

Health issues. Students had both physical and mental health challenges. A number were involved in abusive relationships. Unplanned pregnancies often made it difficult for students to continue their studies, and lecturers noted that many of their students were often physically unwell. However mental illness, particularly depression, seemed to be an even more problematic issue: "They just don't want to get out of bed". One staff member summed it up simply, "life gets in the way for an awful lot of them".

Pathways need to be clearly delineated. If foundation students are to succeed, often against the odds, lecturers were adamant that pathways needed to be clearly delineated: "Pathways to destinations need to be firmer and clearer and we need tighter relationships with all the places our students will go". The close physical proximity of their desired destination faculty appeared to be a strong motivating

factor for students. This link was strengthened when foundation lectures were delivered in these destination faculties. A tutor preparing students for entry into a business qualification noted that when their classes were offered in the Business block the students "associate themselves with Business and the idea has become more serious. We notice there isn't so much chatter – it's more quiet and businesslike. It's as if they have taken on that persona themselves". Another lecturer applauded an initiative where students were invited to spend a day on the programmes they were aiming to attend. Very much part of this appears to be the ability to identify with their chosen career. One lecturer noted that the nursing student in her cohort did not appear to distinguish between being a foundation student and a nursing student: "They say 'I'm studying to be a nurse'".

In contrast, students on a course purporting to prepare them for the police force were not that fortunate. There was no clear cut pathway at this polytechnic to the police academy, no role models on the campus and students were advised, after they had completed their foundation studies courses, to enrol at another institution – "they'll be on their own when they leave here, there's no guidance for them after that – it's like good luck, boys and girls".

DISCUSSION

Much of what the lecturers say appears to support Pavlenko and Norton's (2007) view that student attitudes towards imagined communities might have as much of an impact on their current identities as their everyday educational experiences. The first two groups, those who know what they want and have the ability and the motivation to reach their goals and those who are strongly motivated and prepared to put in a great deal of hard work, embodied this strong identification, and were on the whole, more academically successful than their peers in the other two groups. However, what also emerged from the interviews is that the concept of success is one that merits further discussion. The lecturers interviewed have a very different view of success to government agencies and management of polytechnics.

The authors of the report *Lifting our Game* (Ako Aotearoa, 2012) do not share foundation lecturers' belief that what constitutes success is a nuanced and complex question. They state simply "the most basic indicator of educational success is completion rates" (p. 16). Lecturers argued that this attitude betrayed a very simplistic approach. For the majority of foundation studies students, their earlier educational experiences have not been happy. Many of them, it was noted, "have left school at 15 with an idea imprinted that they can't learn, or they are dumb, or they are never going to amount to much and that's very strong … and we've got to unlearn all that stuff before we can work together to build learning". Lecturers felt strongly that the criteria such as the one above were far too narrow and did not take into account the enormous obstacles many students needed to overcome, nor the relatively short period of time allocated for students to make academic gains. There was a strong sense that for many students simply attending class regularly was a

great achievement: “You can’t tell me that somebody who has been locked away or been damaging themselves, who can come everyday and work on assignments, you can’t say that is not success”.

It was, they pointed out, the process and not the product that was important:

> They have to learn to create a patch to sow the seeds of learning and in fact by the time they get to the end of their courses they are ready for the most part to tackle anything, and it doesn’t matter that they haven’t actually produced the essay. If they have produced a draft that shows they can write, and if they have produced a research trail that shows they can research, they can manage when it hits them in the next programme.

Another spoke of the young people in her class:

> I have kids who have left school, they’ve been sitting on the couch for a while, they’ve been on the hooch and decided that’s what they don’t want to do. Mum and dad have said ‘Right, enough!’ So they’ve slouched into class. And I have to get them out of that before they are teachable because they are not teachable like that. And for me a good result is that a young man can walk out of here, he can converse with any adult who comes into the classroom. He is respectful of others. He’s teachable – he’ll struggle with content but I know he’s got it and he’s going to be fierce in his struggle, he’s going to rise to it. Because we have open entry at levels two and three I am happy to have him in level three but because it’s too much to do in 17 weeks that goes to the TEC as a fail.

However there is little doubt that the opinion expressed in the Ako Aotearoa report will carry far more weight. An online report in July 2013 with the by-line “Tertiary providers are failing those who need it most” (Duff, 2012) quoted with obvious approval the chair’s opinion that “providers whose programmes are not meeting the needs of priority learners need to be challenged to improve their performance, and if they cannot, then they should not be offering those programmes”.

These simplistic notions of success have implications for all foundation studies students but for those who feel no real link to their chosen vocations, or those who have no idea of what they want to do with their lives, the implications are the most serious. It is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify how many of the students enrolled on foundation programmes across New Zealand fit into these last two categories but indications from their lecturers are that they form a sizeable cohort.

CONCLUSION

Lecturers were clear as to what they felt their students needed. Firstly they argued that there needed to be a greater acknowledgement of their identity as ‘honest to goodness’ students worthy of the respect of their institutions. This acknowledgement needed to take material form. In other words students (and staff) should not be fobbed off with the poorest facilities in the organisation and denied their fair share of

resources. In addition destination faculties should display greater willingness to co-operate with foundation lecturers to devise foundation programmes that would best prepare students for their chosen courses. Discipline lecturers should also take an active interest in foundation students and accept their identity as potential members of their discipline.

There needs to be a much better understanding of the challenges foundation students face and a recognition that to overcome these challenges requires a greater commitment by the institutions they attend. All foundation students are not the same, and some will need more time to adjust to the academic environment and find a field of study that appeals to them. There needs to be a willingness on the part of the institutions "to embrace and value diversity, and thus respond positively to the differing needs of student groups" (Thomas, 2002, p. 439). This might well mean an institution accepting that face-to-face teaching is essential for these students, and that they do not respond well to fewer teaching hours. A lecturer pointed out the lack of logic in a management attitude that expresses its dissatisfaction with current pass rates but cuts teaching hours – "how can we possibly do better in half the time?" Pastoral care needs to be acknowledged as an essential element in foundation students' socialisation into academic life.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to recognise that at present, while the intention of these foundation courses is laudable, the invitation they offer "is Janus-faced … it welcomes them and also marginalises them" (Seligmann & Gravett, 2010, p. 108). Hamilton (2012) speaks of the prevailing discourse that focuses on what is wrong with the learners rather than "being based on a relational understanding of unmet literacy needs" (p. 9). This is well illustrated in the *Lifting our Game* report (Ako Aotearoa, 2012) where the authors use the term priority learners to refer to "non-traditional, under-served and foundation learners" (p. 10). The authors claim that these students, who make up the biggest group of learners in New Zealand's tertiary system, "possess little cultural capital" (p. 15). It is disappointing, but not unexpected, that such an influential organisation chooses to negate completely the cultural capital these students bring to our educational institutions. Hamilton speaking of the UK *Skills for Life* says that this strategy targets particular groups of adults as a "priority", but that all these groups are "characterised by negative attributes" (2012, p. 175).

However, what is equally clear from the literature is that if we wish these learners to succeed we must respect who they are and what they bring to tertiary study. We need to demonstrate our understanding of the obstacles they face. No matter how strongly motivated and hard-working they are, they cannot achieve their goals without wider institutional, government and societal support. As Black and Yasukawa (2010) remind us, the skills the students acquire have little value unless they can be put to good use, and social processes are required to make this happen. For students to be successful academically there needs to be a match between their sense of identity and "their perception of the successful student…in their institutions" (Johnson & Watson, 2004, p. 474). We need to provide them not only with opportunities to

realise their imagined futures but also with time and space to decide what these futures should be. We need to back them when they are finding and chasing their rabbits.

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