

**Participatory Action Learning and Action Research for Self-sustaining Community Development: Engaging Pacific Islanders in Southeast Queensland**

Author

Green, Alison, Kearney, Judith

Published

2011

Journal Title

The Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement

Rights statement

© 2011 Engagement Australia. The attached file is reproduced here in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher. Please refer to the journal's website for access to the definitive, published version.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/41824>

Link to published version

<https://engagementaustralia.org.au/resources/ajuce-journal/>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

# **Participatory Action Learning and Action Research for Self-sustaining Community Development: Engaging Pacific Islanders in Southeast Queensland**

*Alison Green, Judith Kearney; Griffith University*

## **Abstract:**

This paper concerns how to design short-term community projects that maximise the sustainability of the developments they achieve. An Australian university–community initiative aimed at improving educational opportunities within a Samoan community in Southeast Queensland demonstrates how participatory action learning and action research processes were used to build community capacity to address self-identified community needs. These strategies enabled Samoan community members to develop and sustain their own projects and

equipped them to pass this ability on to other community members, creating long-term project continuity. Our experience suggests that, as participatory action learning and action research combines participants' resources, knowledges, networks and energies to maximise community benefits, it is an appropriate strategy for enabling marginalised groups to engage constructively with complex issues in their communities. Relationship building and trust development were intrinsic to this project's ongoing success. We suggest that participatory action learning and action research can usefully be adopted in a range of contexts for sustained community development.

## **Key Words**

Sustainable communities, participatory action learning and action research, educational outreach, low socioeconomic background, Pacific Islanders

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.*

*Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*

Chinese philosopher Laozi<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

These words of wisdom from an ancient Chinese philosopher are intrinsic to the notion of project sustainability and communicate the essence of the community development project this paper discusses. We explore an approach to sustainable community development through a university–community project that engaged members of a disadvantaged community in participatory action learning and action research (PALAR). This project, with the Samoan community in Logan City in Southeast Queensland, not only developed problem solving

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote by 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Chinese philosopher, cited to open Chapter 7 in Ortrun Zuber Skerritt (2011).

ability among community members ('teaching how to fish'), but also how to sustain the project's community development outcomes by passing this ability on to other community members ('feeding for a lifetime').

The short-term funding of collaborative university–community initiatives and the short-term accountability it entails mean that projects typically address discrete aspects of more complex issues where results can be reported in a relatively short time period (AUCEA, 2008; Centre for Knowledge Innovation Technology and Enterprise, 2010). Holistic approaches to complex issues that do not produce readily observable results in the short term are left unaddressed (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). In practice, then, sustainability of the desired outcomes is not really part of the project picture.

However we consider that sustainable positive outcomes can be achieved even in short-term projects. Our case study illustrates how the

methodology of a short-term university–community development project with this Samoan community in Southeast Queensland incorporated a cascade effect for learning, in order to ‘feed for a lifetime’. The project sought to develop the ability of a core group to identify their own vision for a worthwhile purpose, to achieve their vision together, and to pass on these abilities to other community members to improve educational opportunities for all, whatever their age or experience.

To this end the project used PALAR to build the capacity of the local Samoan community to respond to the issues their community faced. This approach, which has proved to be effective for responding to complex social issues among other marginalised groups (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011), involves participants taking ownership of the project as they engage in a cyclical process of learning through action and critical reflection, to achieve common goals that contribute to community development.

This paper therefore presents a straightforward, low-cost framework for genuine community capacity building, with community members initiating and sustaining further activities during and after the short-term project.

The paper begins by considering education as a vehicle for sustainable development. It then overviews the disadvantage experienced in the Logan area and outlines the particular challenges facing Pacific Islanders. This is followed by an explanation of PALAR and rationale for its use. We then discuss the Logan Samoan community case study, particularly the process used in this university partnership project. We evaluate the project’s effectiveness, before concluding the paper with appraisal of factors that help to sustain momentum after completion of the initial project.

## Background

Since election in 2007, the Australian Labor Government has emphasised social inclusion in policy and practice. The Social Inclusion Board that it established in 2008 provides advice on achieving better outcomes for disadvantaged Australians, and other policies and initiatives support this aim. The government's social inclusion statement acknowledges that "Education is fundamental to achieving a fairer and stronger Australia and for many provides a pathway out of disadvantage" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009 p.9).

Participation in education, particularly higher education, is widely recognised as a key to social inclusion. Vinson's (2007) report on the distribution of disadvantage in Australia connected major indicators of social disadvantage such as crime rates, homelessness, unemployment and low job skills with limited educational attainment. Education's critical role is evident in statistics indicating that people who have not completed high school are considerably less likely to be in the workforce

than those who have (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). However, despite targeted initiatives over a number of years, students from low socio-economic backgrounds (low SES) remain significantly under-represented in higher education, remaining at approximately 15 per cent between 1989 and 2007 while the low SES comprised 25 per cent of the population (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

Gale et al. (2010) provided case studies of successful collaborative interventions that engage community members in low SES communities through primary and secondary education. They have also presented a useful model for designing and evaluating these programs. Other work also promotes this collaborative approach. For example, a New Zealand review of strategies to engage Pacific Island (PI) parents in education explained why the "co-construction of shared knowledges" (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006 p.1) is the most effective approach. Similarly, Scull and Cuthill (2010) argued for the need to work through and with communities in their report on collaborative outreach work with PI

immigrant communities. PI cultures and values also support this approach. Applying Hofstede's (1980, 2001) variables, PI cultures are clearly collectivist, valuing what is good for the community over individual goals and achievements.

Logan city, the context for this community development program, is a cumulatively disadvantaged outer metropolitan area adjoining Brisbane's southern suburbs. Vinson's (2007) report indicated that Queensland's second and third most disadvantaged postcodes were in the Logan area, where social exclusion indicators include high crime rates, high unemployment, low income levels, and greater incidence of ill-health, as well as low participation in higher education. Vinson's findings were reinforced recently by the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs who identified Logan as one of 10 Australian locations with high levels of entrenched disadvantage and long-term unemployment (Macklin, 2011). Logan city has a diverse population comprising over 170 different ethnic communities (Ethnic

Communities Council of Logan, 2009). Its migrant population is considerably higher than the national average and it takes a high number of humanitarian refugees. Moreover, rapid population growth is projected, with an additional 250,000 people expected to occupy low cost housing over the next 10-20 years (Queensland Government, 2009). These circumstances suggest that communities in Logan would benefit greatly from initiatives aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty through improved educational outcomes that sustain community development.

### **Challenges Facing Pacific Islanders in Logan City**

Against this backdrop of general disadvantage, Logan has a significant and rapidly growing, predominantly Samoan, PI community. Exact numbers are not known because data collected according to country of birth does not accurately identify Pacific Islanders born in Pacific Islands, New Zealand (a significant migration pathway) or Australia.

However, Samoan is the most frequently spoken non-English language in Logan City (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) and Pacific Islanders comprise 60 per cent of the student population at some schools (Kearney, Dobrenov-Major, & Birch, 2005).

Education is clearly one route to help address the complex challenges facing this migrant community. However, there are many challenges along this route. Literacy is a particularly significant area of need (Kearney, Fletcher, & Dobrenov-Major, 2008). Many Samoan-heritage students lack fluency in both Samoan and English. Samoan first language parents generally do not encourage their children to speak Samoan because these children are growing up in an English-speaking country. Many Samoan-heritage students therefore have only receptive ability in their parents' native language, which is an impediment to their language skills since first language proficiency greatly assists second language development (Dobrenov-Major, Kearney, Birch, & Cowley,

2004). Parents' limited English also contributes to Samoan children's generally low level of English proficiency.

Another educational concern is non-alignment between children's worlds at home and at school (Kearney, et al., 2008), worlds in which norms, expectations and values differ significantly. Analysis according to Hofstede's (1980, 2001) variables suggests PI cultures are collectivist, with allegiance to larger groups such as extended family or church, which contrasts with the more individualised behaviour in mainstream Australian society. Analysis also suggests PI cultures are hierarchical. Not only is this in contrast with the generally more egalitarian nature of Australian society, it also has consequences for children's experience of the education system. The tendency of elders to issue instructions rather than encourage discussion and debate limits not only children's language development but also their propensity to participate in classroom discussion and to ask questions where necessary. Children therefore find it a challenge to adapt to the

Australian school context where they are encouraged to question, analyse and discuss.

Unfamiliarity with the importance of parental involvement in their children's education also affects Samoan-heritage children. Samoan parents tend to lack knowledge of the Australian education system. Most were schooled in Samoa and thus have neither experience of the Australian school system nor the English language capacity to discuss requirements with teachers. These parents want their children to succeed at school. However, because they view teachers as 'experts' and do not understand their own role as supporters outside the classroom parents usually do not take an active role in their children's education.

Church is central to the lives of most in Australia's Samoan communities, but in some ways at the expense of education. An estimated 95 per cent of Samoan migrants in Logan city have church affiliations; attending more than 40 different Samoan churches in the area (Alofipo, personal communication). Church has an important role in

building community and identity. Church life provides spiritual support, plays a key role in transmitting cultural knowledge and values, and is the focus for community activities. Samoan ministers are highly respected community members who exert considerable influence over their congregations (Hendrikse, 1995), performing the role played by the *matai* (village chiefs) in traditional Samoan society. Yet second generation Samoans report that their parent's tendency to give priority to Church activities over schooling adversely affects their school attendance and ability to complete homework. Cultural obligations to give gifts and make financial contributions to the church are also given priority over school expenses, making it difficult for students to join school trips and engage in extra-curricular activities (Kearney, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the cumulative effect of these factors that work against their educational success means that few Samoan-heritage children progress to higher education. However, two particular circumstances impede these issues being addressed. The first concerns



lack of data on the problem. While studies have identified significant educational underperformance among PI students, neither the full extent nor the nature of this underperformance is known since local schools do not keep records of the number of students with PI background. Similarly, educational attainment is not disaggregated to this level for the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, which assesses the literacy and numeracy levels of all Australian students.

Second is the residency status of many PI families in Australia, which makes them ineligible for the government support available to many other migrant communities in Australia. Many of these families moved to Australia after a period of residence in New Zealand, through the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement that legally allows citizens of Australia and New Zealand to live and work in each other's country. Because the move is not immigration *per se*, it does not directly involve acquisition of citizenship and the rights and entitlements that citizenship

provides migrants to enhance smooth settlement into Australian society. It means that Australian or New Zealand-born Samoan children do not qualify for support through English-as-a-second-language programs which are available for children of immigrant parents. In addition, progress to higher education is hampered by ineligibility for HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme)<sup>2</sup> financial support.

When it comes to identifying how to address the complex challenges related to advancing education in the Logan Samoan community, again intervening factors need to be considered. PI communities, like some other collectivities (Smith, 1999), are generally suspicious of both researchers and research (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001). This response has been attributed to intrusive research activity where researchers have used traditional Western

---

<sup>2</sup> Through HECS, the federal government provides loans to students to pay their university course fees, with requirement that students repay their loan when their income reaches a certain level.

research paradigms to conduct research *about* Pacific Islanders while retaining full control of the research process. These researchers have not provided feedback to participants, who conclude that the research activity has been of no benefit to their people. This situation underscores the need for sensitivity and relationship building, using collaborative approaches where university researchers conduct research *with* PI people in response to issues identified by the PI community. This is why participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) was the methodology chosen for the university–community project we discuss in this paper.

### **Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)**

There are several conceptualisations of action learning and action research; however they share certain key features. We use the term PALAR, which highlights the direct participation of learners and researchers in community problem solving. Participants identify their

own problems and form their own solutions, learning from concrete experience and critical reflection on that experience, as they work towards the common good (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

Action research is more systematic and rigorous than action learning. At its heart is a cycle that alternates action and critical reflection in such a way that action and research enhance each other (Dick, 2001). Thus, action research is a cyclical process of progressive problem solving with a dual focus on change (action) and understanding (research). It typically consists of three cycles (Piggot-Irvine, 2002):

- Cycle 1: examining the existing situation
- Cycle 2: implementing change
- Cycle 3: evaluating the implementation of change

Each cycle consists of planning, acting, observing and reflecting phases, which progressively add to understanding of the problem and how to address it collectively. Thus action research aims to generate practical

improvements, to be innovative, create positive change, and augment practitioners' understanding (Piggot-Irvine, 2010).

The project this paper outlines used PALAR as it has proved an effective process for dealing with complex social issues related to community change and development among the poor and oppressed (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). It is a context-based, improvement-focused, democratic process that is responsive to emerging needs. It involves participants taking ownership of the project as they create change and promote community development. It also enables people with very different orientations, education, cultural understanding and life experiences to value and respect each other and to learn from and with each other.

In comparison with other action learning methodologies, PALAR takes greater account of socially marginalised groups: the excluded, the voiceless, and those disempowered or exploited by influential people who use dominant systems to narrowly serve their own interests rather

than for the common good. Thus PALAR has an empowering, capacity-building effect. Learners at any level acquire knowledge through their own active research by following a problem solving process similar to that undertaken by specialist researchers. By passing on their newly developed abilities to other community members learners works towards achieving the 'feed for a lifetime' impact that is critical for sustainable project results.

### **The Griffith University Partnership Project with the Logan Samoan Community**

As noted above, research in Logan has identified significant literacy needs among PI school students who tend to be disproportionately represented in populations of underperforming students. It has also explored the non-alignment between children's worlds at home and at school, which contributes to student underperformance (Kearney, et al., 2008).

Griffith University is the only university with a campus in Logan city. Prior to the partnership project we discuss here, Griffith University had developed relationships with Samoan community members through a *Bilingual Children's Book Project*, and *Mata i Luga* ("Look upwards, aim higher") where Year 10 PI students were mentored by PI tertiary students and University staff. Responding to approaches from a Samoan community member with a background in education, the PI community established a school-based Pacific Island Homework Centre run with the support of Griffith Education academics and pre-service teachers.

These activities, which targeted the school component of education, provided benefits for the students involved. However, they did not actively support adult members of the Samoan community to develop their capacity for community contribution and development through initiating and sustaining their own projects in response to self-identified needs. It was recognised that while Samoan community members had many strengths, additional skills and increased levels of

confidence would enhance their ability to understand and respond to the challenges they face. It was decided that a carefully considered, culturally sensitive PALAR program could best be conducted outside the formal education system's institutionalised structure, whilst encouraging interested community members to consider possibilities for more formal higher education possibilities.

In late 2009 a \$19,000 grant was obtained from the University's Community Partnership fund for a community development program focused on promoting educational opportunities in collaboration with a local Samoan community group, the Voice of Samoan People (VOSP). The program was conducted between March and October 2010. Samoan community members (including Chiefs and Church pastors), teachers and young people were invited to participate. University staff members, including Education academics and Student Equity staff, school principals and teachers were also involved.

The project aimed to enhance the Samoan community's capacity to address community issues. Understanding that participants from the community would not be familiar with PALAR, the university researchers provided explicit instruction and mentoring in the participatory action learning and action research processes. A series of workshops facilitated by an action learning expert helped participants to work collectively to identify community needs, set goals, envisage a process for change, develop and implement an action plan and evaluate outcomes. Participants were encouraged to keep reflective diaries throughout the process to record observations, ideas, details of their learning and plans for action that could result. The university staff provided mentoring and support. They guided participants in streaming project activities into the three action learning cycles: examining the existing situation; implementing change; and evaluating progress.

### **Examination of the existing situation**

Participants developed project activities in response to key concerns identified through their focal question developed at the inaugural meeting: *For you personally, what are the felt needs of the Samoan Community to improve the educational opportunities for all?* The Nominal Group technique (McDonald, Bammer, & Deane, 2009), a structured group decision-making process that encourages all participants to contribute equally, was used to identify these four areas of concern:

- Parental involvement in their children's education;
- Communication between all stakeholder groups;
- Identity and belonging issues; and
- Cultural understanding.

Project sub-groups were established to plan and implement activities for each area. First, members of each sub-group identified their vision for what they would like to achieve and presented it in pictorial form to the whole group. Next, sub-group participants

conducted analysis among themselves through discussion of stakeholders and use of the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) approach. Then participants identified scope and goals and developed an action plan for their project. Each group also engaged in information gathering through informal interviews, surveys and data collection to identify the existing situation. These research activities were part of the first cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, and enabled sub-groups to plan and implement change in an informed and inclusive way.

### **Implementing change**

As key issues overlapped between the subgroups, here we discuss project activities under three themes: 'youth'; 'parental involvement'; and 'culture'. We also consider a fourth theme, 'leadership', which emerged during the project.

### *Youth*

Following a needs analysis a workshop was conducted with PI students from local secondary schools. Participating students identified communication issues they faced with their teachers. Participants also engaged in creative activities expressing themselves through music as a means of re-engagement and creating agency. These musical activities were recorded and a video produced. A second music workshop facilitated by successful female Samoan-American artists was attended by young people from non-mainstream educational institutions. It focused on unlocking talent and aspiration-raising via positive role models.

### *Parental involvement*

One subgroup focused on a local primary school where about half the students were Pacific Islanders. This group was involved in maximising the effectiveness of a newly appointed Pacific Island School Liaison

Officer by setting up discussions with the Principal and facilitating a staff workshop to establish priorities at the school. A culturally appropriate PI parents' meeting where information was conveyed in both Samoan and English attracted 60 attendees, a considerable improvement on the two attendees at the previous meeting. Project members established an after-school Study Centre and supported the Liaison Officer to increase Samoan parental involvement in other school events.

A second group worked with local church congregations to run parents' workshops that addressed issues challenging them as parents. These included child development and parent/child communication. These workshops followed a survey of Samoan teenagers which indicated that many felt caught between two cultures and lacked opportunities to communicate their point of view confidently to either their elders or their teachers.

### *Culture*

This group focused on providing young people of Samoan heritage with an accurate understanding of traditional Samoan culture. After identifying that limited appropriate information was available on the Internet, this group developed a website (<http://sites.google.com/site/samoanvoice/>) featuring information on aspects of Samoan culture such as religion, use of oral history, and the role of the family. Samoan community members developed the content while university staff and students contributed technical expertise.

### *Leadership development*

Optional leadership development through mentoring using the GULL (Global University for Lifelong Learning) process ([www.gullonline.org](http://www.gullonline.org)) was implemented to provide project members with additional support. Action learning was intrinsic to this process, by encouraging participants to continuously reflect on appropriate action to address issues they had

identified within their community. Project members who participated in this opportunity subsequently took leadership roles in planning further activities.

### **Evaluation of the project**

We obtained evidence about the conduct and results of the project from participant feedback and observation of the project's consequences.

#### *Positive Outcomes*

Success is evident at both micro and macro levels. At micro level, participants provided positive feedback on activities such as youth and parenting workshops:

*We need to ... decrease the number of crimes committed by the young Samoans ... By having the support of the parents and the community, we can all work together ... We have started conducting seminars for Samoan parents ... to encourage the*

*community to come together.... [to] support our young people.*

[Samoan project member]

At the school where the cultural understanding workshop was conducted, increased parental involvement and greater Samoan cultural understanding on the part of school staff also provide evidence of success:

*There has been ... a breaking down of barriers between teachers and the Samoan community. The teachers can see that parents are more engaged than before and so are willing to gain more cultural knowledge. Teachers ... consult with me. They have shifted from imposing a punishment to understanding the behaviour. ... I better understand the needs of parents and ... have helped them to understand their responsibilities and to communicate better with the school. [Samoan project member; School PI Liaison Officer]*

At the macro level, participants displayed great enthusiasm for the project and reported a sense of personal empowerment. The project



generated considerable interest beyond the original participants, with participant numbers increasing and project ideas multiplying as the project progressed. Samoan community members increasingly took ownership of the project by initiating and sustaining activities and engaging in leadership roles. Some Samoan community members described the experience as life transforming:

*Action learning is the way forward for the community. It liberates people ... At the outset participants might have relatively low self-esteem ... as they journey ... they ... strengthen their self image and self worth. ... Action learning offers the prospect of liberty from poverty because it facilitates a change in mindset. [Samoan community leader]*

Another positive indicator was that several Samoan participants decided to undertake university studies as a direct result of their project involvement and interaction with university staff. The project's concluding celebration was attended by approximately 100 people,

mostly Samoan community members. As a direct result of the positive outcomes reported at this event, the university made additional funding available to maintain project momentum.

One key to the project's success were 'project champions', respected community members who worked enthusiastically in the project while encouraging other key community members to become involved. This led to the participation of influential church pastors who were critical to the project's success due to their high status in the Samoan community and the influence they exert over their congregations (Hendrikse, 1995). A further success factor was the balance of perspectives and wide skill base of the project teams. Each had a mix of university, school and community representatives, which gave project participants a greater appreciation of diversity and created useful networking opportunities:

*Each of us has learnt about the 'power of people' to bring about change. My university colleagues and I have resources that are*

*necessary but not sufficient to bring about improved educational opportunities for the Pacific Island community. VOSP are in a similar situation. However, when we combine these resources we have a recipe for change: knowledge, networks, energy and beliefs.*

[University Academic]

### *Challenges*

Challenges related to conducting the project rather than to negative outcomes. It was difficult for participants to find the time to engage in project activities while juggling busy work/family schedules, and to accommodate differing cultural practices. Monthly whole group meetings were usually held at the end of the day when most participants were tired after work, and meeting times frequently clashed with church meetings. Sub-group meetings to progress activities between the monthly meetings were difficult to organise because diversity within project teams meant that members worked and lived in different

locations and had differing preferences about where and when to meet. Shiftwork commitments affected some community members' project participation.

For the university participants, lack of cultural awareness meant at times their behaviour was culturally inappropriate. For example, they mispronounced Samoan names, overlooked the importance of prayer at public meetings, and were unaware of cultural protocols related to food (ordering ham and salad sandwiches for a church group whose members did not eat pork because of religious beliefs). Western meeting processes involving strict time allocation for each agenda items ran counter to more relaxed Samoan attitudes to time. Samoan partnership members pointed out these cultural *faux pas* in good humour. The relationship of trust between community participants and university staff resulted in continuous mutual learning, a rich learning experience for Australian team members.

### **Continued action for sustaining project outcomes**

A key indicator of the project's success is that the university–community partnership that initiated this program continues to gain momentum. This is also a strong signal of the sustainability of the program's outcomes. At the time of writing (May 2011), the parents' workshops and work at the selected primary school are ongoing. Plans are in place to collect data from schools on the numbers, attainment levels and post-school progression of PI students to establish an evidence base for future initiatives aimed at raising educational attainment. Membership of the project team now includes representation from Local and State government departments and community service organisations such as Mission Australia. Members of Pacific communities beyond the Samoan group are now involved. In addition, the University has appointed a Pacific Liaison Officer to work collaboratively with the Pacific community to raise aspirations and educational attainment. A

Memorandum of Understanding between the University and the Voice of Samoan People is also being finalised.

Further projects are in the planning stages. Proposals include:

- A leadership development program for church pastors based on the GULL process;
- A youth leadership program to be run through the churches;
- Developing pathways to university study for Pacific Islanders currently working in teacher aide and school liaison roles;
- A program encouraging parental involvement in developing pre-schoolers' oral language ability, designed specifically to fit the needs of Samoan parents; and
- Further music/creative projects in secondary schools.

The positive results from their collaborative efforts have taught project participants and others in their PI community that PALAR can be learned and put into practice – and importantly passed on to others – to address

complex problems and, through education, contribute to community development for longer term benefit. Project members are inspired by what they have achieved and have found their political voice. Some intend to lobby Federal government to urge changes to the present regulations to allow Pacific Islanders to qualify for HECS-HELP loans for PI university students. Child Safety Services (CSS) staff from Queensland Department of Communities have sought help for at-risk families within the community. In response, members of the project team prepared a report explaining Samoan cultural beliefs and practices which was positively received:

*... an excellent resource [that] will be used as a learning tool for all staff ... It has ... highlighted ... the value of seeking expert ... assistance when dealing with clients from different cultures and backgrounds and [deciding] how best to plan and facilitate our interventions with them. [Senior Practitioner, Child Safety Service Centre]*

## **Conclusion**

Several factors have contributed to sustaining this university–community partnership and its efforts for sustained community development through education beyond the project’s life. PALAR, the chosen methodology, provided a framework for learning and problem solving within the community, beyond the hallowed corridors of higher education institutions that are inaccessible to many PI community members. This framework promoted the development of group efficacy and leadership. It ensured that the community voice and common interest were paramount throughout the process. It also enabled participants to pass on their learning and enthusiasm to other community members to sustain project results through a cascade effect. A focus on relationship building and trust development fostered through regular face-to-face meetings was also important.

This project has reinforced our view that where communities face complex situations from multiple sources of disadvantage,

solutions are more effective and sustainable when created *with* and *by* those involved. A major factor in the project's success was that it started at the grassroots level by encouraging community members to articulate their needs and continued to encourage this approach throughout the project's life.

Project participants engaged in genuine collaboration based on relationship development and trust, in a partnership not driven by one group more than another. The goal was educational benefit for the PI community as a whole, without competition and narrow pursuit of self interest. University and school staff contributed resources and knowledge that were necessary but not sufficient to bring about improved educational opportunities for the Samoan people. Community members brought their own knowledges and resources. Each group had strengths but these were not sufficient on their own to create change. The combination of participants' differing resources, knowledges, networks and energies fuelled by their shared goal to benefit the

Samoan community was intrinsic to the project's success. A valuable program outcome was improved mutual understanding beyond and within the community and the development of friendships and collegiality among people on quite different life journeys. This has led to a shift in the dominant beliefs, assumptions and values.

We consider that use of PALAR learning processes maximised the impact of this intervention and increased the likelihood that its outcomes would be sustainable. We therefore propose that this approach is worthy of wider investigation and adoption, for use with other disadvantaged cultural groups. It is empowering for all involved, low cost and leads to a high return on investment.

While the project's impact is difficult to align with short-term target-driven funding, we consider that it provides an effective framework for working with communities at a deeper level than is usually possible. The use of PALAR in this university-community program demonstrates the utility of this approach for achieving

sustainable results through fostering and facilitating community education. It exemplifies the spirit, the philosophy and the wisdom of sustainable community development, teaching 'how to fish' in order to 'feed for a lifetime'.

## References

- Anae, M., Coxon, E., Mara, D., Wendt-Samu, T., & Finau, C. (2001). *Pasifika education research guidelines*, Retrieved from New Zealand Ministry of Education website [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika\\_education/5915](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/5915)
- AUCEA (2008). *Australian universities community engagement alliance position paper, 2008-2010: Universities and community engagement*, Retrieved from [http://aucea.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/universities CE 2008 2010.pdf](http://aucea.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/universities_CE_2008_2010.pdf)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). *2006 Census QuickStats: Logan city*, Retrieved from [www.censusdata.abs.gov.au](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au)
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report*, Retrieved from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website <http://www.deewr.gov.au/highereducation/review/pages/reviewofaustralianhighereducationreport.aspx>
- Centre for Knowledge Innovation Technology and Enterprise (2010). *University approaches to engagement with excluded communities: Working Paper 2 "University learning with excluded communities" project* Retrieved from <http://www.impact-hei.ac.uk/Portals/8/wp%202%203%20region%20survey.pdf>
- Commonwealth of Australia (2009). *A stronger fairer Australia*, Retrieved from <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Resources/Documents/ReportAStrongerFairerAustralia.pdf>
- Dick, B. (2001). Action research: Action and research. In S. Sankaran, B. Dick, R. Passfield & P. Swepson (Eds.), *Effective change management using action learning and action research: Concepts, frameworks, processes, applications* (pp. 21-27). Lismore, Australia: Southern Cross University Press.
- Dobrenov-Major, M., Kearney, J., Birch, G., & Cowley, T. (2004). *Bridging the gap between home and school: The Samoan bilingual cultural maintenance program*. Paper presented at the Educating:

- Weaving Research into Practice Conference, Surfers Paradise, Australia.
- Ethnic Communities Council of Logan (2009). *Strategic Plan*, Retrieved from <http://www.eccl.org.au/strategic-plan/background.html>
- Gale, T., Tranter, D., Bills, D., Hattam, R., & Comber, B. (2010). *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students*, Retrieved from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Publications/Pages/InterventionsEarlyInSchool.aspx>
- Gidley, J., Hampson, G., Wheeler, L., & Bereded-Samuel, E. (2010). Social inclusion - context, theory and practice. *The Australasian Journal of University-Community Engagement*, 5(1), 6-36. Retrieved from <http://www.aucea.org.au/publications/journals/>
- Gorinski, R., & Fraser, C. (2006). *Literature review on the effective engagement of Pasifika parents and communities in education*, Retrieved from New Zealand Ministry of Education website [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika\\_education/5907](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/5907)
- Hendrikse, E. (1995). *Migration and culture: The role of Samoan churches in contemporary Aotearoa-New Zealand*. (Masters thesis). Retrieved from University of Canterbury website <http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/2267>
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kearney, J. (2011). *Adaptation difficulties and positive solutions for second-generation Samoans in Australia: Urgent need for change*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Kearney, J., Dobrenov-Major, M., & Birch, G. (2005). *Local responses to the needs of Samoan Students: Implications for pre-service education programs*. Paper presented at the 33rd Annual Conference Australian Teacher Education Association, Gold Coast, Australia.
- Kearney, J., Fletcher, M., & Dobrenov-Major, M. (2008). *Improving literacy outcomes for Samoan-Australian students in Logan city*, Report prepared for the Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations Literacy and Numeracy

- Innovative Projects Initiative, Retrieved from <http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/10072/24362/1/53332.pdf>
- Macklin, J. (2011). *Media release: New approaches to address disadvantage in targeted communities* Retrieved June 14, 2011, from [http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2011/pages/b06\\_10052011.aspx](http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2011/pages/b06_10052011.aspx)
- McDonald, D., Bammer, G., & Deane, P. (2009). *Research integration using dialogue methods*. Retrieved from [http://epress.anu.edu.au/dialogue\\_methods/html/frames.php](http://epress.anu.edu.au/dialogue_methods/html/frames.php)
- Piggot-Irvine, E. (2002). *Rhetoric and practice in action research*. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association. University of Exeter, UK. Retrieved from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002471.htm>
- Queensland Government (2009). *South East Queensland regional plan 2009 - 2031*, Retrieved from <http://www.dip.qld.gov.au/resources/plan/SEQ/regional-plan-2009/seq-regional-plan-2009.pdf>
- Scull, S., & Cuthill, M. (2010). Engaged outreach: Using community engagement to facilitate access to higher education for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 29(1), 59-74.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous people*. Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press.
- Vinson, T. (2007). *Dropping off the Edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*: Catholic Social Services Australia and Jesuit Social Services.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2011). *Action leadership: Towards a participatory paradigm*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.