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**The relationship between lotu and ako for Pacific  
University Students in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Improving the educational achievement of Pacific peoples is an on-going development issue in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This thesis explored the relationship between *lotu* (spirituality/faith/church) and *ako* (formal education) amongst Pacific university students. *Lotu* is defined within the context of the Christian tradition. The value of *lotu* is used interchangeably throughout this thesis with spirituality, faith, and church. *Ako* as defined within the context of this study is a Tongan term signifying education or the formal process of learning. The primary objective of this study is to identify the mechanisms by which *lotu* influences academic achievement of Pacific university students. A blend of qualitative ethnography and the *Talanoa* approach provided the conceptual framework. Two focus groups and eight individual interviews of Pacific students and graduates were conducted. The findings suggest a positive relationship between *lotu* and educational achievement for Pacific university students. The participants described their spirituality as a personal relationship with Christ which was reflected in their active practicing of: prayer; reading, studying and meditating on the Word of God; and attending church fellowship. Spirituality for the respondents was also emulated in their relationships, with God, with their *kainga* and with other people. These relationships were key motivations for their desire to succeed in their academic pursuits. Linked to the significance of these relationships was the participants' definition of academic achievement which was beyond the mere attainment of a qualification but also about their ability to reciprocally give back to their *kainga* and increase their community's wellbeing. In the midst of the inevitable trials and tribulations of the respondents' social and academic journeys, their spirituality gave them hope, wisdom (*poto*) and courage to persevere in order to complete their studies. The findings suggest a need for continued support of Pacific students using the pastoral care model, as well as better collaborative approaches to policy making among tertiary institutions, key educational policy agencies and the Pasifika community.

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