

# The Starpath News

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## Welcome to the first Starpath News



Starpath staff, from left to right: Rebecca Black, Irena Madjar, Elizabeth McKinley, Adreanne Ormond, Elizabeth Clarke, Seini Jensen, Marianna Deynzer, Sue Sutherland, Rolf Turner, Johnson Yuan and Yoshiko Kawasaki.

Welcome to the first issue of the Starpath News. This newsletter will be published twice a year to keep schools and our community informed about what is happening within the project. For those who don't know much about us, The Starpath Project is a team of researchers based at The University of Auckland.

The team is working with secondary schools and institutions to transform educational outcomes for New Zealand students who are currently under-achieving at secondary school, and hence are under-represented in tertiary education. This newsletter highlights some of the important news and developments in the Starpath Project. We hope you find this issue useful and interesting.

Editor

## Young researcher gives fresh perspective on Pacific students

Seini Jensen is working on Starpath's NCEA Course Choices Study



Seini Jensen.

Growing up in Mount Maunganui, Starpath researcher Seini Jensen was one of a small handful of Tongans in her school, and one of the few kids whose mum had a Masters degree. And this is something she is extremely proud of. Seini grew up in a family that celebrated both her Tongan heritage and the value of education. Seini's mother was one of the first Tongan women to hold a Masters Degree, and Seini naturally aspired to do the same.

But, as she grew older, Seini was struck by statistics that always seemed to place Pacific students near the bottom when it came to success in education.

"A large number of the Pacific students I have interviewed during my research have aspirations to attend university. However, the subjects they are taking at school are not necessarily going to get

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*"A pioneering research project focused on transforming educational outcomes for New Zealand students who are currently under-achieving at secondary school and hence are under-represented in tertiary education."*

## Making the Difference



Tēnā koutou katoa,  
Talofa lava,  
Fakaalofa lahi atu,  
Kia orana, Malo e  
lelei, Greetings.

In 1939 the then  
Minister of Education,  
Peter Fraser said the  
following, "...every

person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted and to the fullest extent of his powers". Some 80 years after that statement we have made significant progress but have still not achieved Fraser's dream. If, however, New Zealand wishes to become a prosperous and just society as we move into the 21st century we need to get closer to it.

Starpath was established as a Partnership for Excellence in 2005 between the NZ Government and The University of Auckland with financial support and contributions from the ASB Community Trust, the Todd Foundation and a range of individual sponsors. Starpath relies heavily on its partner institutions within tertiary and secondary and we acknowledge the cooperation and contribution they provide to the project. Starpath's goals are clear. To identify the reasons why such a large number of our children and young people do not succeed in the education system and do something about it. That particularly applies to Māori and Pasifika young people. In the past much has been said about why these young people do not achieve. It gets hammered in the media. Also by some politicians. Much of the comment is ill-founded. So, it is about time that we gather some data to identify what the actual problems are and how to address them.

Much has so far been achieved during the life of the Project. These achievements include a number of areas where Starpath can assist schools, address matters around data collection, reporting mechanisms, the course choices made by students, the ways in which ethnicity is related to differential patterns of student achievement, and identifying where to go from here in terms of effective teaching and guidance.

All of that said, what we need to achieve are better opportunities for all of our young people. It is not easy, especially in cities such as Auckland where diversity is so great and the demands on teachers and schools means a struggle at times to meet those challenges. It must be a joint effort – a recognition that if we are to succeed in this most important challenge it will require all we have to offer. What we do have to offer is the knowledge, skill, experience and commitment of many sectors of our society and all must play a part. That is the strength of Starpath.

Dr John Langley  
Chair, Starpath Board

## Massey High School benefits from Starpath partnership

A Starpath partnership offers benefits that flow both ways according to Bruce Ritchie, Principal of Massey High School. He says it is great having researchers in the school but also valuable for The University of Auckland to be working in a current secondary school environment. "Schools are full of people with good ideas but access to good research through Starpath where practice can be adapted and evaluated means the school can improve and build capacity around research findings."

One early shift which occurred as a result of the Starpath partnership forming in 2004 saw a change in the way the school managed students' records of learning. "We had a data base unique to Massey which had been set up to manage data rather than to look at the students' individual achievement," Bruce says. Changing systems and knowing how to use data to the best advantage has been at the heart of the academic counselling programme in the school, which is currently being evaluated by Starpath. Having a teacher on board with enhanced skills in data use is a further bonus according to Bruce. He credits Massey's Student Academic Manager Sam Smith, who has worked with the Starpath team and is now back in the school, with increasing Massey's capacity to work with evidence based research. "As well as a structured professional development opportunity, having Sam work both in a university and a school is a great model for secondary teaching."

Other benefits of the partnership with Massey include a scoping exercise identifying 80 special programmes beyond normal teaching in the school. Bruce describes how areas of concern have



Massey High School Principal Bruce Ritchie.

also been identified by Starpath. "There is a trend of under-represented groups at tertiary choosing 'soft options' in NCEA – here Starpath was instrumental in getting the school to look closely at student choice on our data base, revealing which students were at risk of not gaining credits".

Every New Zealand school should gain from having research happening inside it, according to Bruce. Such partnerships however can only flourish "when there is leadership to formulate support with release time worked in, so that eventually the research becomes embedded as core practice."

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them there. When I look at the statistics about Pacific students being under-represented in tertiary education I feel like I should use my skills to understand and improve the situation," Seini says.

"For me, because my parents both had university degrees, it wasn't a big leap to think that I could do the same. It was always expected by my teachers, family and friends that I would go to university."

Seini, now 31, holds a Bachelor of Laws degree and a Master of Arts degree in social anthropology. She has just started her PhD thesis looking at the experience of Pasifika students and their parents in making NCEA subject choices.

This complements her work on a major Starpath research project titled the NCEA Course Choices Study. This project seeks to understand why and how Māori, Pacific and other high school students choose specific NCEA subjects, levels and standards, or have such choices made for them. How these decisions are made is important because making the right subject choices is critical to whether a student will go on to university and how well he or she will be prepared for university study in a particular field. The second aim of the project is to develop interventions to help students make informed NCEA choices.

Seini and her colleagues have conducted more than 100 interviews with parents, teachers and students in three Auckland schools, and the project has recently been extended to include a school in Northland. While the study includes all ethnicities, Seini's focus, through her PhD, is on the experience of Pacific students.

"Part of my research is trying to understand why Pacific people are being taken away from subjects that typically lead to university. One observation I've made so far is that schools are different to when I was a high school student, because the NCEA is a system with so much choice. This choice can create difficulties for students, teachers and schools. While many of the kids I talk to are bright and full of aspiration, their subject choices don't necessarily match their aspirations. I am trying to understand what has influenced them to make or accept decisions about their study choices at high school."

Seini says while her work is challenging, it has hidden rewards.

"One Tongan student I interviewed was amazed at where I had got to. She hadn't met a Tongan woman before who was a researcher and it really inspired her. It's rewarding to think I might be a role model to young Pacific students in the same way my mother was a role model for me."

# Starpath extends to Northland



Starpath researchers Adreanne Ormond (second from left) and Sue Sutherland (centre) with students from Tikipunga High School in Whangarei. Photo courtesy of Whangarei Leader.

Tikipunga High School in Whangarei has become the first school outside of Auckland to join Starpath as a partner school.

This will allow Starpath researchers to extend the scope of its research projects to the Northland region. Northland is of interest to Starpath as it has significant numbers of Māori students and low-decile school students, who are currently under-represented in tertiary education. Northland students also face additional challenges compared with their urban counterparts including smaller schools, less access to educational resources, and most have to leave home to attend a tertiary institute.

The research in Tikipunga High School will involve following the educational journey of students as they progress from Year 9 to 13. The researchers will focus particularly on achievement and retention. This will contribute to Starpath's goal of identifying the barriers where under-achieving students diverge from the path to tertiary education. The results will help the Starpath Project develop strategies for schools and

students to overcome these barriers.

"Starpath is excited to be working with Tikipunga High School. Moving to Northland gives Starpath an opportunity to focus on a more rural and significantly Māori community. In particular we wish to work with Tikipunga to investigate ways to increase the number of their students to degree level study," says Associate Professor Elizabeth McKinley, Director of Starpath.

Peter Garelja of Tikipunga High School is delighted the school has been selected to work with Starpath. "We are very ambitious for our students and have been pleased with the significant upward shifts in NCEA results we are achieving. Involvement in this project will enable us to further enhance our skills in the use of data and allow the school to develop a sustainable approach towards enabling each student to realise his or her learning potential."

The extension of the Starpath Project into Northland has been assisted by an ASB Community Trust grant.

## Current Projects

### NCEA Course Choices

Interviewing students, parents/caregivers and teachers to find out who makes NCEA course choices, how and why?

### The Road Less Travelled

Following the transition from school to university for students currently under-represented in university education.

### High School Evaluation Project

Advising and monitoring student achievement and choices at one major Auckland secondary school.

### Standards Availability Project

Surveying secondary schools on Level 3 NCEA standards with a view to modelling University Entrance success rates.

### Other Quantitative Projects

Other projects are analysing academic achievement at Starpath's partner schools, using different criteria for university entrance, and investigating whether grade point average scores and school deciles can predict success.

# Māori offer inspiration for Alaska Native communities

What lessons can Alaskan Natives take from Māori communities in New Zealand?

This is the question Malia Villegas is unravelling as part of a Fulbright Scholarship, looking specifically at education policy and indigenous people.

Malia is a doctoral student from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an Alaska Native. She is one of only ten Americans chosen to study in New Zealand under the Fulbright programme.

Malia hopes that coming to New Zealand will help her to understand why Māori as an indigenous people are relatively successful academically, and how this may help develop education programmes for her people in Alaska.

Malia is being hosted by The Starpath Project and is five months through a journey into understanding Māori culture, wisdom and educational success.

"Māori have achieved 500 PhDs in 15 years, which is quite astonishing. We in Alaska are very keen to learn more about how that happens," she says.

One of the lessons Malia has identified is how

Māori in New Zealand have developed supportive education programmes, which also maintain language and culture.

She says programmes like Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (or the National Institute of Research Excellence for Māori Development and Advancement at The University of Auckland) are inspirational because they support Māori to achieve academically in ways that benefit the Māori community.

"In Alaska, we are trying to build an indigenous knowledge studies programme. As well as increasing the numbers of indigenous doctoral students, we are trying to understand how we can support them, and how their knowledge can be used in their own communities. I hope through building international relationships such as with Māori people, we can move closer towards this," she says.

Malia says she has been overwhelmed by the generosity and support she has received in New Zealand during her research.

"The people from the Māori community I have met so far have made a deep impression on me. I had an amazing experience when I visited a Marae



Fulbright Scholar and Alaska Native Malia Villegas is studying Māori education programmes in New Zealand.

recently. I find the culture beautiful and the people so hospitable," she says.

Malia will return to Seattle in Washington at the end of this year to write her dissertation on Māori education programmes in New Zealand.

# Bridging the gap

Just as well Marianna Deynzer's brother talked her out of hairdressing. This young emerging researcher has plenty to contribute especially when it comes to Pacific issues. Marianna who is half Tongan joined the Starpath team two years ago and is currently completing her masters on the transition from school to university for Pacific students.

Starpath's work is an area close to Marianna's heart. When she completed her own schooling, first in Northland and later Auckland she noticed that she was often the only Pacific student in her chemistry, statistics and economics classes. This pattern was repeated when Marianna looked around her university lectures in commerce and the arts. "I felt concerned that I was in a minority", she says. Later when studying at postgraduate level in Development Studies, which focuses on overseas developmental issues, people kept saying to her... "why do you want to go overseas to do that kind of

work when New Zealand's got so many problems?"

So it's not surprising that Marianna was encouraged to present at the national BRCSS conference 'Building Pacific Research Capacity and Scholarship Fono 2008' (University of Auckland) where she could reflect her real passion. Her paper describes the journeys of a group of Pacific students. "Many people assume the transition process only begins once students start university but in the Starpath project I am involved in, we identified this as a gap and decided to address our participants through a longitudinal perspective. My students are tracked from the end of year 13 in October 2007 to the end of their first semester at university in July 2008" describes Marianna.

The results for the project are ongoing, as are the valuable insights Marianna has gained of her young participants' transitions. All through understanding the need to realise her own potential.



Marianna Deynzer.

## Starpath shines at US conference

Researcher Seini Jensen shares her experience representing Starpath at a major US conference for qualitative scholars.



Starpath attended a major conference at the University of Illinois.

At the top of any research student's reading list is Denzin and Lincoln's "Handbook of qualitative research methods".

For me, the Handbook is one of those foundational texts and kind of like a security blanket I don't want to let go of. Library fines and all. So when I was offered the chance to present at (Denzin's) Fourth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, I jumped at it. Held at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, United States, the Congress gave me the opportunity to listen to established scholars straight from the pages of the Handbook. Alongside Starpath director Elizabeth McKinley and qualitative coordinator Irena Madjar, I presented my paper "Interpreting culturally inclusive qualitative research" as part of a panel presentation by Starpath. We had an interested audience who appreciated hearing different papers from the one research project. As well as presenting, I found it valuable to hear other doctoral students, grappling with similar issues in their research as me, just in different contexts. Attending the conference helped

me to think beyond the borders of New Zealand and into the "international community of qualitative research scholars". I think I can also let go of that handbook...the new edition is out! .

- Seini Jensen



Irena Madjar and Seini Jensen at the University of Illinois.

## Starpath on the web

The Starpath Project website is the first port-of-call for any schools and teachers wanting to find out more about us.

The site has recently undergone a makeover to make it more user-friendly and useful to our partners, stakeholders and the community.

The website includes information on the full spectrum of research projects we are conducting, and summarises the emerging results from research completed so far.

All of our staff members are profiled and our latest news and upcoming events are updated regularly.

We are especially interested in the views of teachers and welcome any feedback on the website. Visit [www.auckland.ac.nz/starpath](http://www.auckland.ac.nz/starpath).