

Title: Indigenising Research via *Talanoa*: Vā in Higher Education

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Suggested Running Head: Indigenising Research via Talanoa

Abstract:

In the tradition of approaches that call for decolonising research, this study demonstrates how *talanoa*, an Indigenous research methodology, exceeds the scope of Collaborative Auto-Ethnography (CAE) by embedding cultural authenticity, relationality, and reciprocity within the research process. By framing *talanoa*, the authors examined the sociocultural phenomenon and practice of 'nurturing *vā*', as a core concept of Pacific Indigenous research. Hence, this study can help to inform academic research and advance scholarly knowledge beyond CAE's framework.

Introduction

As a collective of Pacific scholars, including Māori, we acknowledge the First Nations peoples of Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Enari et al., 2025). In the spirit of reconciliation, we stand in solidarity with the First Nations people of Australia and acknowledge that sovereignty over these lands were never ceded. These lands are and always will be Aboriginal land.

We are a collective of Pacific scholars, including Māori, with family lineages and ancestral roots that hail from different countries located within the Oceania region; namely Aotearoa New Zealand, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Samoa, and Tonga. Within this group, some of us have migrated from around the Oceania region to settle in Australia with our families, and some were born and raised in Australia. It is not uncommon for Pacific peoples, including Māori, to make references to our *fonua* (land), a residual pride in the initial discovery of the Pacific, and to embrace the maintenance of our native languages and cultures (Vaiotei, 2014). Acknowledging *fonua* (land), languages and cultural knowledge are important aspects of working towards understanding Pacific ways of being, knowing, doing, and belonging (Thaman, 1995; Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014). In context, Australia is located within the Oceania region along with Pacific Island countries and territories from Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Australia's Pacific population comprises 23 Pacific ancestries, including Māori peoples who are the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand (Gerace, 2023; Ravulo, 2015). With a growing Pacific population in Australia, many are flourishing in their cultural, spiritual and family relationships, as well as in employment and businesses (Enari & Taula, 2022; Faleolo, 2019). Australia is our home away from our Pacific ancestral lands; however, we remain connected in the Pacific diaspora.

Historically, Pacific peoples' voices and perspectives have either been silenced or excluded in research, and the implications often result in missed opportunities which could

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have helped to address a gap in research knowledge and/or produce sustainable solutions and recommendations to the challenges that Pacific communities have encountered (Enari, 2025). Over the last couple of decades, as the limits of traditional research approaches are realised, researchers are paying more attention to Indigenous Pacific ways of being, knowing, doing and belonging; an important project for Indigenous peoples across the world who are seeking to decolonise research and centre our worldviews within academia (Smith, 2012). As such, by framing *talanoa* (a culturally appropriate means by which Pacific peoples share their experiences), we explored how we have experienced and/or created culturally safe spaces through our teaching, research, scholarship and leadership in higher education, with a focus on the sociocultural phenomenon and practice known as ‘nurturing vā’. From a Polynesian worldview, vā can be understood as a relational concept that shapes how people interpret both connections and separations between entities in the world (Fa’avae et al., 2022). These relationships are dynamic and interdependent, encompassing interactions between people and communities, the living and the non-living, the physical and the spiritual, and even in-person and online spaces. The underlying purpose of vā is to seek forms of balance, order, and harmony within these relationships (Ka’ili, 2017; Māhina, 2017; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017).

By bringing together *talanoa* and Collaborative Auto-Ethnography (CAE), this study contributes a methodological innovation that not only enriches Pacific scholarship but also offers anthropology a framework for conducting culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and relationally accountable research. Our collective *talanoa* highlights the significance of relationality and reciprocity, reaffirming the practice of “nurturing vā” as a sociocultural phenomenon central to Pacific life and a critical analytic concept for anthropology.

Like many Indigenous peoples around the globe, we can relate to the notion of ‘walking in two worlds’ (Halverson, 2020; Paton, 2012). On the one hand, we have an obligation to carry out the key responsibilities of our academic and professional roles in higher education (Faingaa-Manu Sione et al., 2023); and on the other, we have an inherent responsibility to

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uphold cultural safety that is inextricably connected to land, place, kinship and the communities to which we each belong to.

The term and concept of vā

To understand the context of this study, it is essential to begin by defining and describing the term and concept of vā (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Matapo & Enari, 2021). From a Tongan perspective, the term vā is defined as *“the distance between, the distance apart”* (Churchward, 1959, p. 528); and as an *“attitude, feeling, relationship towards each other”* (Churchward, 1959, p. 528). In addition, Thaman (2008) expands on the definitions above by describing the following:

“Vā requires constant protection, and this is reflected in the notion of tauhi vaha`a (to look after or protect the spaces between two or more persons or groups who are related to each other in some way). Protecting vā is seen as desirable for maintaining harmonious relations and minimising conflicts among those involved. Vā becomes a way of dissolving boundaries between the insider/outsider, subject/object, and coloniser/colonised.” (p. 465)

More recently, Ka’ili (2017) described *tauhi vā* as “an older cosmology that promotes the indigenous marking of time-space through rhythmicity, symmetry, synchrony, and harmony” (p, 5). *Tauhi vā* is considered as an important way of marking indigeneity within social relations as it is an ancient system of thinking and behaving that uses symmetry to reconcile socio-spatial conflicts and create harmonious and beautiful socio-spatial relations (Ka’ili, 2005; Ka’ili, 2017).

However, the term and the concept of vā is not unique to the Tongan language and culture. Vā is also known in Samoa, Rotuma, and Tahiti while in Aotearoa and Hawai’i it is

known as *wā* (Ka'ili, 2005). From a Samoan perspective, Wendt (as cited in Va'ai 1999) described the following:

“Vā is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All... This is crucial in communal cultures that value group unity more than individualism, that perceive the individual person, or creature, or things in terms of group, in terms of vā, relationships.” (p. 402)

In addition, Gerace et al. (2023) identified *teu ma tausī le vā* as a Samoan concept/tenet/practice that refers to the ways in which Pacific peoples nurture, cherish and care for our physical spiritual, cultural, social and psychosocial spaces within our human relationships. The alignment between Tonga's *tauhi vā* and Samoa's *teu ma tausī le vā* is an example of the similarities that we have in nurturing socio-spatial relationships within and across cultures in the Pacific region.

Over the past couple of decades, the conceptualisation and development of the 'tā-vā theory of Moana anthropology' and more recently, 'a general 'tā-vā theory of reality' has emerged, led by Tongan academics Professor Hufanga 'Okusi Māhina and Professor Tevita Ka'ili. The tā-vā theory of reality was conceptualised based on the ontological and epistemological organization of time (tā) and space (vā) (Māhina, 2008; Ka'ili, 2017). Ontologically, Māhina (2017) suggested that tā and vā are the common medium of reality, that is, nature, mind, and society. Epistemologically, he identified that time and space are arranged differently within and across cultures (see Māhina, 2017). Evidence of the 'tā-vā theory' applied in education research includes the work of Kalavite (2017) where it was one of the theoretical frameworks and a Pacific lens that was used to interpret Tongan students' intercultural learning experiences at two levels of reality: the students' individual and social/global realities. Kalavite's (2017) findings demonstrated that when Tongan students and

their supporters are at the same *tā-vā kāinga* (time-space relationships), then there is a mutual understanding among the group that can support students' education.

Similarly, this study underscores the foundational significance of relationality and reciprocity in Indigenous Pacific research. This is seen in different contexts through our individual and collective Pacific lens; thus, emphasising the importance of understanding the concept of 'lived realities'. In *Nurturing vā as Pasifika scholars across Australia*, Professor Jioji Ravulo highlights the duality of the knower and learner, navigating the challenges of Western academic institutions through *vā* - a sacred shared space. Associate Professor Eseta Tualaulelei emphasises the collective nature of Pacific scholarship, where the focus is not "I" but "we" and this is essential in building, encouraging, supporting and guiding through *Enduring Pacific wisdom*, only familiar to Pacific scholars; Dr. Sarah Ohi in *Nurturing vā in Educational Research* shares the notion of Hafe kasi (half-caste), bridging cultural worlds to create a sense of belonging and identity in educational research. Dr. Levi Fox, a Māori Scholar storyteller, further draws attention to the importance of sharing space through *wānanga*, advocating for research grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and ethical obligations to the community in *Sharing space through wānanga: Thinking, being and doing*. Dr. Inez Fainga'a-Manu Sione stresses the significance of *Working holistically and intergenerationally into the future*, which is the key to navigating *vā* as a community researcher with Village Connect, a Pacific Community Hub in Logan, Queensland, Australia, which has a large Pasifika diaspora. Dr. Heena Akbar emphasises *Nurturing vā in clinical practice*, where Indigenous scholarship and ways of knowing, being and doing reshape medical education better to serve Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Pasifika communities.

Furthermore, PhD Candidate and Research Fellow Rita Seumanutafa-Palala challenges the notion of space in Pasifika-focused projects, advocating for reciprocity and meaningful engagement: *Is the vā here in the room with us?* while Dr. Ruth Faleolo delves into creating spaces that nurture Pacific heroes and strengthening *the trans-Tasman vā*,

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between Moanaroa pracademics. Similarly, Bronwyn Williams, a PhD Candidate and an equity practitioner, shares her journey of empowering young people to pursue tertiary education through her narrative: *Sailing the Waters of Knowledge at an Australian University.* In *Nurturing vā to uphold cultural safety*, Dr. Maryanne Pale emphasises the significance of inclusive practice where Pacific scholars' identities, knowledge, beliefs, and values are recognised in higher education in *Nurturing vā to uphold cultural safety*. In his contribution, *You Will Not Exploit Us Anymore!*, Associate Professor Dion Enari brings forth the reality of not being a research subject, an experience many of us are familiar with, but he shifts the narrative to privileging Pacific academic voices and decolonising higher education.

Our collective *talanoa* presented in this article contributes to a more equitable and culturally responsive educational environment, creating inclusive, culturally safe spaces that honour our unique identities and ways of being, knowing, doing and belonging in higher education and through Indigenous research practices. Therefore, the *vā* has a wide scope which transcends the physical to include the spiritual, and which relates the past, the present and future (*tā-vā* theory of Moana anthropology). The *vā* can be considered as a pan-Pacific concept that can be viewed holistically which signifies a relational space that is sacred, known and felt, even in the absence of words. Hence, the sociocultural phenomenon and practice of 'nurturing *vā*' is what we as a collective of Pacific scholars, including Māori, can relate to and therefore deem as a core concept of Pacific Indigenous research and a critical analytic concept for anthropology.

Talanoa: Beyond Collaborative Autoethnography

Talanoa is viewed as a Pan-Pacific term and concept as it is used in the Fijian, Samoan, Tokelauan and Tongan languages and cultures, and it translates to talk, discuss, converse and to tell stories (Vaiolleti, 2006; Tuinamuana & Yoo, 2020). *Talanoa* goes beyond building relational and spiritual inter-exchange of story dialogues that are deeply rooted in

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talanoa epistemology and Pacific worldviews (Vaiotele, 2012). Tecun et al. (2018), further situates *talanoa* as an Indigenous concept of relationally mindful critical oratory that requires a mediation between relations of *mana* (potency), *tapu* (sacred/restrictions), and *noa* (equilibrium). In the context of academic research, Vaiotele (2003) proposed *talanoa* as a research methodology that is better aligned to Pacific worldviews so that there is a methodology that would authentically capture the experience or phenomenon being researched. As such, *talanoa* is viewed as a culturally appropriate means through which Pacific peoples can describe their own experiences in research (Vaiotele, 2014).

Some would liken *talanoa* to CAE; however, they differ in important ways. CAE is rooted in the tradition of examining sociocultural phenomena through collective autobiographical narratives and it is informed by Western epistemology and ontology (Chang et al., 2012). *Talanoa*, however, embodies Indigenous Pacific epistemologies and ontologies, emphasising relationality (*vā*), reciprocity, spirituality, and cultural authenticity in ways that CAE, as a Western research method, does not inherently prioritise. *Talanoa* can also be viewed as another form of storytelling similar to that with 'yarning' as practiced by First Nations Indigenous Australians. Moodie (2018) described storytelling as a way to build empathy and reach people whose consideration of different perspectives and experiences may have been limited by erasive curricula or mainstream media. While CAE encourages collaboration among researchers to share and analyse their lived experiences, creating synergy among multiple voices; *talanoa* emphasises the sacred relational spaces (*vā*) that connect the narratives of the collective. In this sense, *talanoa* extends the collective focus of CAE by embedding cultural protocols and lived practices, honouring the interconnectedness of Pacific peoples. These features enrich the research process, ensuring it aligns with Pacific values, ethics, and ways of being.

Centring Pacific epistemology in *talanoa* challenges the dominant research methods to adapt to Indigenous paradigms including different concepts of space and time, past and

present, and the understanding that local knowledge systems are perpetually negotiated as living cultures that are continually evolving (Tecun et al., 2018). *Talanoa* privileges Pacific knowledge systems, identity and perspectives which are important in the context of *vā* and positions researcher, participants, and research topics with connections that exist by genealogy or through relationships (Akbar et al., 2022). According to Ravulo (2025), “*talanoa* can be seen as a tool to decolonise perspectives and practices. While it can be paralleled alongside Western research methodologies, it can stand on its own within Western spaces to prod and provoke institutional change” (p. 176). This is evident via the *talanoa* that is presented in this study.

Moreover, ‘trust’ within the practice of *talanoa* creates a capacity for the sharing of feelings, inner stories, and experiences that speak to our hearts and minds (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). *Talanoa* has also been described as a philosophy involving an open dialogue where people can speak from their hearts, and where empathy plays an integral role to the effectiveness and authenticity of *talanoa* (Vaiotei, 2014). Research literature highlights that *talanoa* is spoken face-to-face as a co-constructed method of research which encourages authenticity, transparency and cultural appropriateness in the research process (see Akbar et al., 2022; Matapo & Enari, 2021; Ravulo, 2025; Tuinamuana & Yoo, 2020; Thomsen & Brown-Acton, 2021).

However, with the advancement of technology, *talanoa* is also described as a ‘Moana-centred orality and cultural practice’ which has evolved into *e-talanoa* where researchers and participants connected on an online platform to engage in *talanoa* (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Faleolo, 2021; Fa’avae et al., 2022). Furthermore, prior studies have employed *talanoa* in the form of written language and we accept it as an additional dimension that supports the validation of experiences of Pacific peoples across the diaspora (e.g., Enari et al., 2024). Enari et al. (2025) presented ‘*talanoa* in the written form’ to share the lived experiences of Pacific scholars in the diaspora to help reclaim sovereignty over their/our Pacific stories; to

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help decolonise Indigenous Pacific education; and to centre and privilege our Pacific knowledge systems whilst standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples of today. This study builds on Enari et al.'s (2025) application of '*talanoa* in the written form' and the prior works of Pacific academics who have implemented *talanoa* in academia and research.

Furthermore, *talanoa* integrates spirituality and ancestral connections as integral components of knowledge production. By grounding the research in Pacific traditions, *talanoa* ensures that storytelling is not only a method but also a means of sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems, which CAE does not explicitly address. As such, *talanoa* enables researchers to authentically engage with Pacific communities, reflecting a depth of relationality that goes beyond CAE's scope.

Talanoa was framed in this study within the notion of advocating for and upholding cultural safety for Pacific peoples. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that *talanoa* in all forms, is an integral part of the Pacific diaspora as it helps to transmit and preserve Pacific traditions, languages and cultures, and experiences from a strengths-based perspective. *Talanoa* reflects a shared and sustainable approach to creating a collective, collegial, and collaborative environment; and it helps to promote a sense of belonging and inclusion (Ravulo, 2025).

It was important for us to frame *talanoa beyond the scope of CAE* in this study to help privilege Pacific cultural knowledge and meanings of our personal experiences in relation to the sociocultural phenomenon of 'nurturing *vā*'. CAE derives from the autoethnographic tradition of recognising that researchers' autobiographical lived experiences are valid and true perspectives that relate to larger sociocultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). According to Ellis et al., (2011: 3), "when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity". In CAE, there is added strength that stems from a collective of multiple voices that aims to examine a sociocultural phenomenon which often creates a unique synergy that auto-ethnographers cannot attain in

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isolation (Chang et al., 2012). However, while CAE emphasises collaborative storytelling, it often lacks the cultural specificity and depth required for Indigenous research contexts. *Talanoa* addresses this gap by embedding cultural protocols into the research process.

CAE's framework, though collaborative, lacks the embeddedness of cultural and spiritual practices critical to Indigenous methodologies. *Talanoa* enriches CAE by grounding research in the lived realities of Pacific peoples, fostering deeper engagement through relational accountability and collective wisdom which are shared in the narratives of the co-authors. The individual *talanoa* presented in this study illustrate how *talanoa* operates as a cultural research method that surpasses CAE. Examples from our *talanoa* are as follows:

- In *Nurturing vā in Educational Research*, Dr. Sarah Ohi reflects on how *vā* fosters reciprocal and spiritual connections in research relationships. The narrative highlights the integration of Tongan cultural values, such as *tauhi vā*, to create a harmonious research environment that honours relational obligations.
- *Sharing space through wānanga* illustrates how *talanoa* embeds cultural safety and ethical obligations in research processes. Dr. Levi Fox emphasizes the concept of *āhurutanga* (warmth and comfort), which extends beyond CAE's collaborative approach by prioritizing culturally grounded practices that ensure ethical engagement with Indigenous communities.
- Dr. Inez Fainga'a-Manu Sione stresses the significance of working holistically and intergenerationally into the future which showcases the ability *talanoa* has to incorporate intergenerational wisdom and leadership into research. Unlike CAE, which focuses primarily on collaborative analysis, *talanoa* emphasizes the inclusion of elders, community leaders, and youth, ensuring the cultural depth and sustainability of research outcomes.
- In *Nurturing the trans-Tasman vā*, Dr. Ruth Faleolo critiques non-Pacific researchers' approaches to Pacific studies and demonstrates how *talanoa* empowers Pacific

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scholars to reclaim and retell their narratives. This reclaiming of space fosters a relational and cultural authenticity absent in CAE.

For Pacific authors, *talanoa* offers a method that aligns with their lived realities, ensuring that research is not only collaborative but also culturally authentic and relationally grounded. For instance, *talanoa* safeguards against the homogenisation of voices by preserving the uniqueness of individual and collective narratives. This distinction is evident in narratives like *You Will Not Exploit Us Anymore!* where Associate Professor Dion Enari critiques the exploitation of Pacific peoples in research and repositions *talanoa* as a means of privileging Indigenous voices.

Indigenising research

Our study is framed by longstanding calls from Indigenous Pacific scholars, including Māori, to decolonise research. In her seminal work first published in 1999 called *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an Indigenous Māori scholar from Aotearoa New Zealand, challenged Western regimes of knowledge and their colonising perspectives. Acknowledging the troubled history of research and indigenous peoples, Smith saw decolonisation as a way to claim a space where all involved in the activity of research could recover their authentic humanity. She argued for the legitimacy and validity of Māori knowledge in its own right, and the need for researchers to ‘talk back to’ or ‘talk up to’ those in power to ensure that Indigenous knowledge is recognised and continues to flourish. Indigenous scholars pursued the same goals from Tongan (Thaman, 2003), Samoan (Efi, 2003), Hawaiian (Meyer, 1998), Fijian (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) and many other Pacific perspectives. These scholars recognised that Indigenous Pacific knowledges had long sustained our communities and the challenges we faced in the past. There was no reason why these knowledges could not be applied to contemporary challenges as well. Moreover, the pursuit for legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge is not merely a philosophical

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challenge to the academy; it is also a political one involving the opportunities made available to access higher educational spaces, the cultural safety afforded within physical working spaces, and other social and systemic barriers that lead to culturally hostile environments for reproducing Indigenous knowledges (Smith & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 2021). In this sense, decolonisation does not mean complete rejection of Western knowledge, or of research. Instead, decolonisation is about centring Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and ensuring that research benefits the spiritual, political, economic and academic projects of Indigenous peoples.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method (Creswell, 2014) and *talanoa* was engaged as a methodology. The following steps outlines the procedure that was implemented for this study:

- 1) Pacific scholars, including Māori, were invited via purposive sampling to contribute a *talanoa* piece in response to Nabobo-Baba's (2004: 18) excerpt which states: *"Pacific peoples have been the focus of much research and writing that have not highlighted or captured our abilities to connect, relate to one another and benefit from our relationships. This is an aspect of Pacific cultures that has been silenced in a major way by both research and research writers. This needs privileging, as these are processes that can empower our people"*. As such, this step brought together us as 11 Pacific scholars, including Māori, from the diaspora for this study. We acknowledge that prior to this study, we had a collective desire to contribute to the growing body of research literature that centres Pacific Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in Higher Education and academic research. By employing *talanoa* as a methodology, we shared our personal experiences as Pacific scholars, including Maori, within the socio-cultural context of Higher

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Education. We recognise that Higher Education is often influenced and/or led by Western social structures, norms, values and practices. As such, we have centred Pacific Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in this study. In doing so, it reframes anthropology's methodological repertoire through a decolonial lens that privileges Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and challenges Western-centric paradigms. Hence, this study reorients the discipline towards accountability to the communities it studies.

- 2) As part of each *talanoa* piece in response to Nabobo-Baba's (2004) excerpt above, all were encouraged to examine the sociocultural phenomenon of 'nurturing *vā*' in relation to their experiences as Pacific scholars, including Māori, in higher education. The implications of sharing individual accounts of *talanoa*, recognises the richness in the cultural and linguistic diversity within this cohort, which was pertinent to this study. This process encouraged reflexive professional practice and it enabled us to capture and present authentic *talanoa* such as: i) how *talanoa* empowers Pacific scholars to reclaim and retell their narratives; ii) how *talanoa* emphasises the inclusion of elders, church leaders and youth ensuring that a cultural depth and sustainability of research outcomes.
- 3) Opportunities were offered to all Pacific scholars, including Māori, to amend their *talanoa* during the writing process of this study. In Fa'avae et al., (2022), they highlighted that "...coming together to generate this article helped us comprehend collaborative and ongoing *talanoa* using digital tools and platforms..." (p.395). Similarly, this study facilitated the iterative writing process of *talanoa* via online tools and platforms such as emails, Google Docs and Zoom. This process provided all authors with access in real time and across different time zones. In turn, the collective, relational and collaborative nature of this study (*vā* - relational and

temporal) and the iterative writing process had removed the hierarchical/power differentials between authors.

- 4) A decolonising lens was then applied to examine and critically discuss the collective *talanoa*. This step focused on relationality and reciprocity within Pacific (including Māori) Indigenous research.
- 5) Next, all were provided with an opportunity to read and/or contribute to the development and completion of the article for this study. This process ensured that a collaborative approach was implemented within this study.
- 6) The propositions that had derived from this study were agreed upon by all Pacific scholars, including Māori, and it formed the outcomes of this study. This step was important as it emphasised collectivism and collaboration.

Our collective *talanoa* are presented in the following section.

Findings

In this section, 11 Pacific scholars, including Māori, have shared their *talanoa* in response to Nabobo-Baba's (2004) excerpt above. All were encouraged to examine the sociocultural phenomenon of 'nurturing *vā*' in relation to their experiences as Pacific scholars, including Māori, in higher education. Our collective *talanoa* is as follows:

1. *Nurturing vā as Pasifika scholars across Australia*

Professor Jioji Ravulo, The University of Sydney

Working across academia in Australia as a Pasifika person is a sliding scale, ranging from being greatly challenging to greatly rewarding. I believe it is in between these two extremes that the *vā* can be found and provide hope.

Within the greatly challenging part of the journey is the lack of cultural safety that occurs in Western and White academic institutions. It is not the perceived norm to see Pasifika

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people in these spaces. There are times you question your own capability as being competent enough to keep up with the scholarly context of your roles and responsibilities. This can be due to not having a reference point of seeing other Pacific people in these positions. So, at times, you are unsure whether you are doing it 'right'.

On the other side though, the rewarding part of being in these spaces is to proudly represent and showcase Pacific perspectives, practices, views and values across your teaching and research. This is where Pacific-indigenous ways of knowing and doing, being and becoming can be meaningfully integrated as a rich and valuable source of strength to create sustainable solutions for Pacific and non-Pacific communities.

And in the middle sits the *vā*, the sacred space that brings the two together. If we, as Pacific people in the academy in Australia continue to create scope to understand our challenges and successes, we can promote opportunities for many others to come into these academic spaces. By understanding systemic and structural issues in education, paired with a holistic approach to creating community found in Pacific approaches, we create a middle ground for Pasifika achievement to occur. Where the notion and concept of *vā* is nurtured in a helpful and collective way.

This gives me hope to continue this shared journey, together.

2. *The vā: Enduring Pacific wisdom*

Associate Professor Eseta Tualaulelei, University of Southern Queensland

There is no 'I' in Pacific.

Yes, there is! There are two.

Yes, and two 'I's make a 'we'.

There is an invisible web that spans the Pacific Ocean. The web has many centres in Pacific Islands, connecting the motherlands to each other and to Pacific diasporas in New Zealand, Australia, the US and beyond. I am part of this web because of the anciently woven

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threads of my ancestors, and it instils in me a sense of *vā*, a relational knowing and way of being (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2006; Efi, 2003; Fa'avae et al., 2022; Ka'ili, 2005).

On a recent research trip to Hawai'i, I met with a Pacific thought leader who I had never met before, Professor Manulani Aluli Meyer. I had read her work many years ago so I knew her ideas, but not her. Yet we did not meet as strangers. Our Pacific *vā* meant that time and space were immaterial. We shared *ha* (breath) in a *hongī* greeting, talked about research, education and life over a meal and we exchanged gifts before parting with another *hongī*. It was like visiting an aunty, as if I had known her longer than the several hours we spent together.

This is the power of the Pacific notion of *vā*. It gives us the courage to approach others in our communities for guidance, the knowledge of how to do so appropriately and the trust that they will treat us with care. Understanding *vā* gives us a sense of familiarity with other Pacific scholars when much in academia can feel unfamiliar and alien. When the neoliberal university pushes upon us academic identities that are quantified – rankings, outputs, funding, hierarchies of performativity – the *vā* reminds us of what is important (it's not the numbers). For the *vā* is enduring Pacific wisdom that was used long before us and will be used long after we are gone.

3. *Nurturing vā in Educational Research*

Dr. Sarah Ohi, Senior Lecturer, Deakin University

Hafe kasi (half-caste) is a label I received as an Australian born, half-Tongan, half-Australian child. My feet were entrenched in two distinct worlds, each with their own traditions, cultural mores and nuances. Ostracised and bullied during the weekdays by a society with views predicated on the White Australia Policy but accepted and embraced on the weekends by a tight-knit minority community, destined to become the first Tongan church in Melbourne, where *hafe kasi* was a title of affection. I felt safe and a strong sense of belonging there, where

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the *vā* was prioritised and deeply ingrained into the church traditions and practices. There are spiritual aspects to the *vā*. The first recorded *vā* between God and Adam is an illustration to us all of a narrative involving *vā* mama'o (becoming more distanced) and later, *vā* ofi (drawing the relationship closer). The late Queen Salote of Tonga identified four golden pillars – *Faa'i Kavei Koula* – that underpin the reciprocal relationship between the nobility and the people of the *fonua* (land) (Tongan Working Group, 2012). The four core values are *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *lototō* (humility), *tauhi vā* (maintaining good relations with others) and, *mamahi'i me'a* (loyalty or fidelity) (Koloto, 2021, p.46). These values are inextricably bound to Tongan culture and Christianity, and consequently are characteristics often espoused by Tongans worldwide, including myself.

So far, my research journey and experience of formally working with other Pasifika people in Australia has been in the higher education sector. This has involved collaborating in education research with another Pasifika academic, supervising the research of Pasifika international students undertaking higher education degrees to design, undertake and report on research aimed at improving education in Pacific Island nations, and the informal mentoring of Pasifika students, and serving on PhD colloquium panels for Pasifika students. In my experience, the *vā*, along with the other three values, have been pertinent to the development, success and effectiveness of all of these research relationships. In these research contexts, the *vā*, has been the key enabler to the accelerated development of collegial bonds, leading to effective work and research practices.

I believe the *Faa'i Kavei Koula* core values, particularly the *vā*, are valuable and worth nurturing in our areas of expertise and in our work together. *Vā* unites us as Pasifika researchers and ideally, our continued work with Pasifika people will encourage them to value and pass the *vā* on to the next generation.

4. *Sharing space through wānanga: Thinking, being, and doing*

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Dr. Levi Fox, Lecturer, Griffith University

Completing a doctoral study in the Australian University context, as a Māori exploring the worldviews of our people living in Australia, required a cyclic process of thinking, being, and doing to reposition myself within the broader scholarship as an Indigenous storyteller. Sharing stories is a unique methodology which conveys knowledge, but it also allows us to connect with Indigenous epistemology in a meaningful way (Lee-Morgan, 2019). For Māori, the *vā*, is likened to the concept of *Wānanga*, which is the shared space between researchers, participants, Elders, and others who seek to do research about us and with us. Similarly, the *vā* is a continuous process of thinking, being, and doing where ethical obligations to community must be upheld. In doing so, we connect with our worldviews and hold space in a process which is guided by *Āhurutanga* (Pohatu, 2008). *Āhurutanga* is a reference to warmth and comfort, and further encapsulates the importance of creating a safe and ethical research environment.

The concept of *Āhurutanga* and *Wānanga* are particularly important in higher degree research because cultural safety is an ethical obligation for us as researchers. My own research proposal came under heavy scrutiny by a panel of White Australian scholars, who determined that my storytelling methodology was insufficient for a doctorate. I was at odds with the research proposal review outcome because there was no Indigenous voice at the table to represent my worldview and therefore the essence of *Wānanga* and *Āhurutanga* was not upheld resulting in culturally unsafe practices. However, Pohatu and Warmenhoven (2007, p. 120) suggested that “through *Wānanga*, we are able to reflect and be reminded of our place in the universe”. This sentiment alone emphasizes our positioning within the world as Indigenous storytellers. The storytelling methodology would eventually become my study’s greatest strength because it showcased the true power of our ancestral voice and epistemologies. Retelling our stories through *Wānanga* and the *vā*, are critical for sharing, holding and occupying space with others. This is how we do research in the Pacific.

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5. *Working holistically and intergenerationally into the future*

Dr. Inez Fainga'a-Manu Sione, Community Research Fellow, Griffith University

In Australia, amongst a population of 26 million people, there are only 3.6% of Pacific peoples undertaking postgraduate studies in comparison to 10.3% of the Australian population (ABS census data, 2021). What this suggests is that there will most likely be more non-Pacific peoples conducting research on our Pacific communities in the Australian diaspora, then our own. Therefore Nabobo-Baba's statement of the importance of highlighting and capturing our abilities to "connect, relate to one another and benefit reciprocally from relationships" (2004) is an important one. Pale (2024) builds upon this statement with a call to action, to "better understand the cultural complexities that underpins Pacific students and their interactions with educational processes" (p. 515). What does it mean to truly connect, relate to one another and benefit from reciprocal relationships through nurturing vā from a Pacific context? The capacity to engage in a holistic manner that is inclusive of spirituality and founded upon an intergenerational platform for learning that draws upon our Indigenous knowledge holders such as our elders, faith and community leaders, as well as young people and children, is paramount.

Working holistically, intergenerationally and hierarchically, have been core factors when conducting research alongside Pacific communities in my current role as Community Research Fellow at Village Connect (a Pacific community hub) and Griffith University. Unlike Western systems that are established upon democracy, individualism and secularism, the Pacific cultural context is hierarchical, spiritual and collective (Fainga'a-Manu Sione, 2024; Fainga'a-Manu Sione, 2023). The impact of this holistic way of working was most evident in a recent program called Unlimited which was developed by a network of 39 Pacific churches across Queensland who have been working together for over 12 years. The faith leaders were keen to encourage their families to pursue higher education, however the program they

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developed covered topics such as faith, culture, citizenship, healthy relationships and pathways to the future. It is the first program of its kind that was developed by Pacific faith leaders and hosted by a university. As a result, 255 Pacific peoples attended the day on campus with topics that were delivered by our community/Indigenous knowledge holders alongside our Pacific doctors and this was captured via an audio-visual account (see Fainga'a-Manu Sione, 2024). These community and faith leaders hold capital within the community due to their long-term sacrificial service. They have spent a lifetime building the *vā* with their people.

Subsequently, there have been a significant number of both Pacific faith leaders, young people and parents seeking support to enrol into tertiary courses. If we are to see the recommendations of the Accord truly reach our communities, we must engage our Pacific peoples in a manner that privileges their ways of being, knowing and doing as experts of their own knowledge systems alongside our Pacific scholars.

6. *Nurturing vā in clinical practice*

Dr. Heena Akbar, Senior Lecturer, The University of Queensland

Recently, I had the privilege of facilitating yarning circles with Indigenous cultural mentors and medical students in the Faculty of Medicine with the University of Queensland. This has been an essential exercise in sharing our experiences and sharing and constructing meaning around cultural safety in clinical practice.

Teaching Indigenous health to first and second-year MD students is a unique cultural experience. I take great care in engaging community cultural mentors through Indigenous pedagogy to provide a relational context for our students. As with yarning, *talanoa* is a familiar concept used in the Pacific context that frames our knowing. This framing stems from my experience as a Fijian Pasifika academic, where the value of *vā* and *talanoa* is embedded in our collective identity and the notion of being (Akbar et al., 2022; Akbar et al., 2023; Muscat

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et al., 2023). The Pasifika epistemology in higher education is centred around doing, where creating reciprocal relationships is essential in forming a learning space that includes family and community, incorporates spirituality, acknowledges our ancestors, and embeds cultural protocols in navigating these values in higher education.

It is crucial for me to establish a safe and inclusive learning environment for myself and my students. I believe that teaching the concept of *vā* is essential for health professionals working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and our Pasifika communities. To ensure a culturally safe space, I prioritise respect, relationality, and reciprocity in my teaching, as highlighted by Akbar et al. (2023). These values are fundamental in the medical education and training that I am involved in, as emphasised by Dewes et al. (2022) and Muscat et al. (2023).

By integrating these values into my teaching and higher education, I aim to help redefine Pacific values, and decolonise and reshape Pacific Indigenous pedagogy in medical education. As a senior academic and medical educator, I am committed to ensuring that my students are well-equipped to embed cultural safety in their clinical practice as future medical practitioners.

7. *Is the vā here in the room with us?*

Rita Seumanutafa-Palala, Research Fellow, Oceania Institute, University of Melbourne

The *tausiga* (nurturing, caring) of *vā* can be challenging, frustrating and at times, a lonely journey. As I reflect on my experiences as a Samoan community advisor, advocate, educator, creative and academic in Naarm, Melbourne, I have often wondered if the *vā* – as I lived, breathed and understood it – could only be present during those projects where I worked alongside Pasifika team members. Whether it was a community-led theatre production, crisis responses during the Melbourne lockdowns, or a 3-year gallery development project, one

could not deny the *mana* that came from these collaborative efforts, and the presence of *vā* in these projects.

On the other end of the scale, I have also participated in projects that were hosted and led by research and cultural institutions, as well as government departments and agencies in the period 2013-2023. It is in these projects that I have been challenged with the task of advising and educating project teams who wanted to understand and work with the Pacific communities of Victoria. It is also during these moments that I have often asked myself the following questions: How do I engage, share and *tausi* (nurture, care) the *vā* when I am the only one here who understands it? How do I help others understand the *vā*? A more important question here being: Do I even *want* them to understand the *vā*?

The *vā* demands reciprocity, lived experience and an embedded understanding of meaningful engagement. Whilst I have always been open to sharing and advising on culturally appropriate approaches to my non-Pasefika peers, it is generally received as simply ‘the Pacific way of doing things’ but the *vā* is so much more than that. It is our collective way of being, our way of life, our means of engagement, the force that guides our relationships with one another (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2007; Lilomaiaava-Doktor, 2009;). For others, it is a (tokenistic) research approach, a sign of cultural appreciation and inclusion for the sake of appealing to Pasefika audiences. Therefore, the *vā* must be protected (Thaman, 2008) and sustained, to be utilised by those who truly understand and engage with/in it.

It is in my reflection of these past experiences that highlight – for me – that the presence of *vā* is highly visible and powerful when Pasefika-focused projects are designed and implemented by Pasefika teams. The absence of this results in surface-level engagement and a performative and clumsy practice of Pasefika approaches.

8. *Nurturing the trans-Tasman vā between Moanaroa pracademics*

Dr. Ruth Faleolo, Research Fellow, La Trobe University

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My academic, and particularly my community-based research experiences have helped to mould me into a better pracademic (practitioner and academic); a person who is more vocal because she is fully aware of the reasons beneath university politics and educational systems that often try to keep our Pacific peoples out of the 'game'. It is time to bring our principles of being, doing and knowing into academia and choose to live by these principles through our professional practices. It is time to change the script, rewrite the rules and even create our own game; one where everyone gets to be heard, helped, honed, and held accountable, for the betterment of our shared processes. A space that is honest and heroes the core essence of what it means to be an academic working and walking alongside others.

Within the fields of Anthropology and Development Studies, my experiences with Pacific research – particularly focused on understanding concepts that were relevant to our Tongan women in my study of their understandings of *fakalakalaka* (to improve, to excel, to thrive) and the holistic nature of this term – is that attempts to indigenise the methods, methodologies and knowledge presented were not encouraged. For example, a supervisor, who was a non-Tongan 'expert' in the field of Tongan women studies countered my attempts to identify that being Tongan was a strength, by saying 'being a Tongan woman *does not* make you a better researcher in this study of Tongan women'. I was respectful and did not debate it, but the conversation has left me critiquing the agenda of non-Pacific researchers studying my people ever since. In fact, as time went by, I was more convinced that I was the rightful person to be re-telling my mother, grandmother, aunts and sisters' stories. If not me, others who are not too familiar with our meaning making and cultural ways would misinterpret us from a Western (or another non-Pacific) framework (Faleolo, 2023).

Creating beautiful academic vā requires focused and purposed actions from us. It is evidence that with shared purpose we can create better processes to work in, as well as advocate effectively for improved understandings of Pacific peoples in Australia (Fainga'a-

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Manu Sione et al., 2024). I believe that together, our shared efforts as Pacific educators and researchers, as *Moanaroa* pracademics, across diaspora contexts like Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand will help to promote an awareness of Pacific peoples' meaning making and understandings. In turn, when our people are better understood and fully supported to thrive in these places, they will be empowered to creatively and constructively contribute to the success of those communities in which they live and work. Fainga'a-Manu Sione et al. (2024) states that by promoting a new understanding of the academic spaces we are in – we are to clear spaces for others, making way for the next generation to do better than us. Similarly, it is my hope that our shared *talanoa* will help to nurture the *vā* between us, particularly strengthening the trans-Tasman *vā*, between *Moanaroa* pracademics. Malo and blessings, Lute.

9. *Sailing the waters of knowledge in an Australian university*

Bronwyn Williams (PhD Candidate), Senior Project Officer Future Student Engagement, Western Sydney University

I am a PhD candidate in Education at Western Sydney University and I hail from Niue and the Cook Islands. Born and raised in New Zealand, I travelled to Australia in search of a different purpose, one that was both audacious and rewarding. My academic journey is deeply intertwined with my roles as both a learner and an equity practitioner. As Putt et al. (2025) emphasise, continual reflexivity about positionality and how our heritages and worldviews shape what we see and prioritise, is critical in Pacific research. Over the past two decades, my commitment to empowering young people to pursue higher education has driven my research focus towards understanding the experiences of Pacific students at an Australian university.

Nabobo-Baba's (2004) assertion about the silenced narratives within Pacific cultures resonates with me. Indeed, the richness of Pacific peoples' abilities to connect, relate, and

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thrive within their communities often remains overshadowed within academic discourse. More recent scholarship demonstrates how Pacific researchers are weaving back relational knowledges into educational inquiry, pushing against the dominance of Western epistemologies (Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2025). Through my work, I seek to expand on these narratives by highlighting the nuanced challenges and triumphs faced by Pacific students navigating Australia's tertiary education system. The concept of 'nurturing vā,' (Ka'ili, 2005) has been significant in helping me better navigate my responsibilities as a researcher, and this orientation aligns with Vaioleti's (2006) framing of *talanoa* as a methodology that privileges Pacific ways of communication emphasising relational ethics, reciprocity and respect. The conversations I have engaged in with young Pacific people in my work and research has highlighted the real and genuine need to nurture vā-centred approaches that honour the interconnectedness of our Pacific communities. In doing so I ensure that I am providing space where students feel seen, valued and supported in their pursuit of academic excellence.

The evolving landscape Pacific scholarship in Australia must continue to grow if we are to reshape narratives and challenge the existing paradigms our young people face. Through collaboration, solidarity, and a commitment to centring Pacific perspectives, we can not only bridge the gaps in research literature but also empower our communities to thrive within academia and beyond. As I navigate my doctoral journey and continue my work as an equity practitioner, I remain resolute and hopeful that the contributions will strengthen the voices of Pacific students and advocate for inclusive educational practices that honour their inherent values, dignity and potential.

10. Nurturing vā to uphold cultural safety

Dr. Maryanne Pale, Senior Lecturer, Victoria University

Nabobo's (2004) reference to our abilities to connect, relate to one another and benefit from reciprocal relationships are underlying factors that inform the sociocultural phenomenon

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and practice of 'nurturing vā' and are key to upholding cultural safety for Pacific peoples, particularly in academic research. When there is a conscious effort made by researchers to explore the vā and what that means in the Pacific context, then there is an authentic connection that is being sought after to engage with Pacific peoples and their knowledge systems, values and beliefs. For example, by nurturing vā, Pacific epistemologies and ontological perspectives could be embedded into the research design and Pacific traditional knowledges could be applied where it is required. These steps would better inform researchers of culturally appropriate approaches, cultural sensitivity, and relevant cultural protocols. As such, this would deepen researchers' interpretation and/or understanding of the research data as it would derive from Pacific informed perspectives.

Conversely, in the absence of acknowledging the vā, there could be increased risks of deficit theorising, and/or the misinterpretation of data and/or conversations, and/or the silencing of Pacific perspectives, particularly if the research process and outcomes were determined through a non-Pacific lens by non-Pacific scholars. When this occurs, then the cultural safety of Pacific peoples in the context of academic research will be negatively impacted. Through observation and personal experience, I have encountered this issue on more than one occasion.

As Pacific scholars, it is our responsibility to challenge the status quo and to continue to advocate for cognitive justice in higher education. Nurturing vā should be a priority in building academic and professional relationships within and beyond Pacific Indigenous research. When nurturing vā is authentic and carried out well, then the academic research process will become deeply ethical, meaningful, and useful for all researchers, including Pacific peoples. Similarly, as Thaman (2008) described, where the nurturing of the vā is practised well, elements of relationality and reciprocity will be evident and only then, the boundaries between the insider/outsider, subject/object, and coloniser/colonised can be dissolved.

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11. You Will Not Exploit Us Anymore!

Associate Professor Dion Enari, Unitec

As Pacific people in Australia, we will no longer be your research subjects, researched on and researched about for the validation of your preconceived notions to extend your non-Pacific career (Enari et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2023). No, you will not. With the growing number of Pacific scholars in Australia, we are more than capable of carrying out our own research projects, from start to finish, from formulation to implementation, with, for and by our communities (Enari et al., 2024). Only Pacific people are genealogically connected to Pacific wisdom and knowledge systems (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Matapo & Enari, 2021). It is OUR inheritance and our gift left to us by our ancestors.

As stewards and guardians of our ancestral wisdom, it is only at our discretion and approval upon how, when and where it should be shared. It is also our responsibility to ensure our narratives in Australia are controlled by us, and that we end these negative, incorrect, and false stereotypes that have been imposed on us (Enari & Taula, 2022). By mainstream media and non-Pacific scholars, drummed up as a tool to silence and control us (Enari et al., 2024; Enari & Taula, 2022). As Pacific communities continue to grow in Australia, those of us who have the blood ties to our island nations and have positions in academia will continue to use our standpoint to make sure the same transgressions that happen to us, will not happen to the next generation (Enari et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2023). We are now and will forever be, for Pacific by Pacific research, standing in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their fight for independence. Alofa atu.

Discussion

In this study, our collective *talanoa* yielded important Pacific cultural insights and nuances into the sociocultural phenomenon and practice of nurturing vā. This study builds on

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Enari et al.'s (2025) application of '*talanoa* in the written form' and we acknowledge that *talanoa* in all forms, are an integral part of the Pacific diaspora as it helps to transmit and preserve Pacific ways of being, knowing, doing and belonging from a strengths-based perspective. We also draw on the *tā-vā* theory of reality and decolonising research to highlight the 'lived realities' that we have each experienced, and advocate for indigenising research.

Our collective *talanoa* confirmed that some organisations still privilege Western knowledge systems, values and beliefs, over Indigenous knowledge systems, values and beliefs. For example, Faleolo noted being aware of university politics and education systems that often try to keep the Indigenous peoples 'out of the game'. This example highlights the marginalisation of Māori and Pacific staff and students in higher education, and by extension Pacific communities. Where the *vā* is absent, Pacific academics will reach cross-institutionally and even internationally for a sense of belonging in the academy. As such, there are systemic and structural issues in higher education that are overlooked, and mostly in favour of non-Pacific scholars. A continuation of such issues runs the risk of surface-level, performative and clumsy engagement with Pacific communities, as Seumanutafa-Palala pointed out. Employing *talanoa* in academic and research practices would help to break the patterns of silencing and exclusion of Indigenous voices and perspectives and create a *vā* that would benefit both Pacific scholars and the organisations they work in. Evidence from this study further identifies the benefits of 'cultural interface' such as providing opportunities for Pacific staff, students and communities to be able to proudly represent and showcase Pacific perspectives, practices, and values across our teaching and research as noted by Ravulo.

As Pacific scholars, we concur with Brayboy's (2005) sentiments that 'the concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens'. Academic institutions will benefit from engaging with Pacific Indigenous perspectives which can be meaningfully integrated into academic and professional practices as a rich, and valuable source of strength to create sustainable solutions for Pacific and non-Pacific

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communities as shared by Akbar and Fainga'a-Manu Sione. We have seen the successes in Pacific-led programs, research and initiatives across universities in New Zealand and those that are emerging in states in Australia such as New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

Talanoa is an effective and powerful tool that can reflect our positionality through our inherent connections to our Pacific cultures, languages and identities. According to the *tā-vā* theory of reality, all things stand in eternal relations of exchange giving rise to order or conflict (Māhina, 2017). Employing *talanoa* in academia would help all involved to engage in relational ways that nurture the *vā* to not only resist imposed positioning but also to help develop cultural competencies; foster reciprocal relationships; and develop culturally safe workplaces in higher education. Otherwise, as Pale highlights, in the absence of acknowledging the *vā*, there could be increased risks of deficit theorising, and/or the misinterpretation of data and/or conversations, and/or the silencing of Pacific perspectives, which could negatively impact the cultural safety of Pacific peoples.

Our collective *talanoa* has also revealed how Pacific scholars counter the individualism and competition often promoted in higher education. In reflecting on her career in education and academic, Konai Helu Thaman (2019) wrote that “many of our universities together with those who work in them, are struggling to survive in a corporatist, managerial and hooked-on-technology environment” (p. 13). Our findings suggest that Pacific scholars, including Māori, push back on these threats to our ways of working by continuing to value collectivism and collaboration. Evidence from this study includes recognising the *vā* as a key enabler to the accelerated development of collegial bonds and effective work practices. Several of us highlighted the cultural capital and interconnectedness of our communities and the importance of our community elders in our personal and professional lives. As Williams described, cultivating a *vā*-centred approach within academia honours this interconnectedness of communities and generations, and it reflects the responsibility indigenous Pacific scholars feel towards up-and-coming researchers from our communities. Fox recognised that the *vā* or the

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wānanga is the shared space between researchers, participants, Elders, and others who seek to do research about us and with us, and Williams wrote of the need to enhance environments where Pacific students would feel seen, heard, valued, and supported in their pursuit of academic excellence. Collectivism and cooperation are foundational to Pacific ways of being, knowing, doing and belonging, and these will continue to be valued by Pacific scholars in research and academic practices as well. Hence, acknowledging a common medium of reality can be viewed as essential to indigenising research in relation to the *tā-vā* theory of reality (Māhina, 2017).

The use of an indigenous methodology in this study has amplified our collective Pacific voice and provided a genuine representation of Pacific experiences in higher education. *Talanoa* embodies Indigenous Pacific epistemologies and ontologies, emphasising relationality (*vā*), reciprocity, spirituality, and cultural authenticity in ways that Western research methods such as CAE do not inherently prioritise as shared by Ohi and Tualaulelei. Our collective reflections for this study highlight the value of *vā* and *talanoa* embedded in our collective identity. Further, they indicate our resistance to being defined professionally in ways that clash with our cultural understandings. As Meyer (1998) wrote, “Keys for liberation are found in identity. Identity is linked to culture. Culture defines epistemology. This is tied, also, to being critical of current systems that would ignore, suppress, and disregard such basic rights” (p. 28). Our cultural knowing is part of who we are, and the systems we currently work within often deny fundamental parts of our cultural identity and as noted by Enari, there is a need to use our standpoint to ensure that the same transgressions that happened to us, will not happen to the next generation. Therefore, *talanoa* can address the systemic issues surrounding indigenous experiences in settler colonial states, support the resistance of imposed positionality, and exemplify the collective Indigenous voices and experiences beyond the scope of some Western research methods/approaches.

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Overall, as Pacific scholars, including Māori, we recognise that with a shared purpose and a collective stance, we can enhance processes to create safe spaces to work in and advocate effectively for improved understandings of Pacific peoples in Australia. Therein lies the potential for profound transformation and mutual growth, akin to the reciprocal relationships that Pacific peoples can benefit from as noted by Nabobo-Baba (2004). In addition, by exploring the *tā-vā* theory of reality this would further situate Pacific Indigenous education research in what Māhina (2017) has deemed epistemologically as “organized in the Moana in plural, cultural, collective, holistic, and circular ways, as opposed to their arrangement in singular, techno-teleological, individualistic, analytical, and linear modes in the West” (p. 108).

As Pacific scholars, including Māori, we support the notion for Pacific Indigenous education research to move beyond race theorising to engage with the types of knowledge, strategies our students need, the rigour and validity of our academic endeavours, and the design of institutions which support the diversity and cultural safety of Indigenous Pacific scholars, including Māori, professional staff, students and communities. In addition, we highlight the need for systemic and structural change in light of upholding social justice and cognitive justice through the inclusion of all Indigenous forms of thought and knowledge. Moodie (2018) contends that for Indigenous people and communities who have experienced exploitative research, supporting our own scholars to navigate the complex demands of the Western academy and assert our own knowledges into systems used to justify the colonial project is a complex and ongoing process.

Furthermore, we are cognisant of the fact that academic research in Australia is governed by the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). In the document, there are 8 principles that have been identified as the hallmarks of responsible research conduct: 1) honesty, 2) rigour; 3) transparency; 4) fairness; 5) respect; 6) recognition; 7) accountability; 8) promotion. However,

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there are no guidelines and/or protocols for conducting research with scholars, professional staff, students and communities of Pacific ancestry in Australia whereas in Aotearoa New Zealand, such documents exist, for example, *The National Ethical Standards* which includes a chapter that is devoted to 'Research and Pacific Peoples' (National Ethics Committee, 2022). Therefore, it is pertinent that academic institutions and government agencies consider working towards the development of research guidelines and protocols to help safeguard Pacific peoples, including Māori, from being exploited within academic research.

Hence, a few propositions have emerged from this study which can support academic and professional practices in higher education. They are as follows:

- 1) To recognise that it is essential to include Pacific, including Māori, knowledge systems, methodologies, epistemologies and approaches within relevant academic research, teaching, scholarship, programs and genuine engagement with Pacific and Māori, peoples.
- 2) To provide opportunities for Pacific scholars, including Māori, and professional staff to lead, develop, facilitate and evaluate cultural awareness and cultural competency programs within higher education and other relevant organisations in support of cultural safety.
- 3) For government agencies and academic institutions to provide opportunities for Pacific scholars, including Māori, to lead and develop a state and/or a national guiding document that centres on research guidelines and protocols for conducting academic research with Pacific peoples in Australia.

For Indigenous peoples who have experienced challenges and obstacles within higher education, particularly around cultural safety; we acknowledge and understand that healing is a sensitive process which can take place over a prolonged period. Therefore, we stand in solidarity with all Indigenous peoples and their academic and professional endeavours, as we continue to navigate our collective journey.

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Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of *talanoa* as a Pacific Indigenous methodology that reconfigures the foundations of anthropological inquiry. While CAE provides important tools for dialogic engagement, *talanoa* extends far beyond it by embedding cultural authenticity, relationality, and spirituality within the research process. In doing so, it reframes anthropology's methodological repertoire through a decolonial lens that privileges Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, challenges Western-centric paradigms, and reorients the discipline towards accountability to the communities it studies.

By bringing together *talanoa* and CAE, this study contributes a methodological innovation that not only enriches Pacific scholarship but also offers anthropology a framework for conducting culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and relationally accountable research. Our collective *talanoa* highlights the significance of relationality and reciprocity, reaffirming the practice of “nurturing vā” as a sociocultural phenomenon central to Pacific life and a critical analytic concept for anthropology. This demonstrates how anthropology can expand its theoretical scope by engaging Pacific concepts on their own terms, rather than subsuming them into Western categories.

Ultimately, the findings underscore how *talanoa* can serve anthropology by advancing social and cognitive justice within research, ensuring that scholarly work benefits the spiritual, political, economic, and academic projects of Indigenous peoples. Future research should continue to explore the anthropological implications of *talanoa*, examining how it can transform academic and professional practices while sustaining Pacific voices at the centre of Pacific research and related rhetoric.

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