Early Reflections on a Collaborative Research Project About the Safety of Rainbow Ākonga on Te Pūkenga Campuses

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Practice Paper

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the experiences of a research team designing and beginning to implement a research project exploring how safe and inclusive the various campuses of Te Pūkenga are for Rainbow ākonga (students). As Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest tertiary education provider, Te Pūkenga is bound and shaped by current anti-discrimination social policies. Under the 1993 Human Rights Act, discrimination based on gender was banned in Aotearoa. Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013, and since 2021 people have been able to change their birth sex on official documents. In 2021, the Government also banned conversion therapy. However, despite these policies and as numerous national studies have documented, educational institutions remain hostile spaces for Rainbow ākonga. We aim to investigate ākonga and kaimahi (staff) experiences of inclusivity and discrimination across Te Pūkenga campuses. A research design was established, and we are in the process of collecting data. Because we have just begun the fieldwork at the time of this writing, we cannot discuss our findings to date. Instead, this article uses the feminist method of storytelling to explore the formation of a collaborative multi-site research team, the necessity of consulting with a Rainbow youth organisation when designing the survey, the research team’s duty of care to participants, the ethics process involved in conducting a multi-site organisational study and managing ‘teething problems’ when the online survey went live. This paper thus reports on our experiences of overcoming hurdles associated with a multi-site research project at a time of transition into one organisation, Te Pūkenga.

KEYWORDS

Rainbow students, inclusivity in education, tertiary education, student safety

INTRODUCTION

One in every 20 adults in Aotearoa identifies as a member of the Rainbow community (Stats NZ, 2021). Despite their being a significant proportion of the population and legally protected, hate crimes are still committed against Rainbow people. Rainbow people report significantly higher rates of violence and bullying than heterosexual and cis-gendered people (Ministry of Justice, n.d.; Veale et al., 2019). Rainbow people are identified as a population three times more likely to experience mental health issues than the non-Rainbow population (Poupard, 2021), and are more likely to face mental distress and discrimination (Flett et al., 2020). Young Rainbow people experience less supportive family and community environments and are significantly overrepresented in relation to negative health and mental health outcomes relative to their non-Rainbow peers – particularly Māori, Pacific and/or disabled Rainbow youth (Roy et al., 2021).

Currently, there appears to be an increase in anti-queer hate crimes, which may be seen in the arson of a queer support centre in Tauranga, homophobic epithets spray-painted on a queer venue on the West Coast, and attacks on drag queens who deliver stories to children in many of our nation’s North Island libraries (Johnston & Quill, 2022). It is little wonder that members of the Rainbow community hide their identities (Dennison & Kitchen, 2015), feel unsafe in public spaces (Veale, 2019) and struggle to obtain a sense of belonging in their communities, including educational communities where colonial and cis-heteronormative norms can prevail (Sterling & Tan, 2021). Despite having protective legal measures in place, Rainbow students still experience hostility in many educational settings.
Educational institutions have been identified by the Rainbow community and Aotearoa New Zealand research as failing to provide adequate education and practice on diversity and inclusivity (Sterling & Tan, 2021). Under the 1993 Human Rights Amendment Act, all educational institutions must provide an environment that is safe for all ākonga, including Rainbow students (Smith, 2012).

Numerous studies have been conducted on queer ākonga experiences in Aotearoa’s high schools (e.g., McAllum, 2017; Quinlivan, 1996; Sexton, 2015; 2017; Smith, 2006; 2012; Gunn & Smith, 2015; Smith et al. 2016). However, studies conducted in tertiary educational settings and those focusing on gender diversity in all levels of education are more rare, albeit with some notable exceptions. For instance, Carpenter and Lee (2010) conducted a study on sexual diversity with a cohort of ākonga and kaikauwhau (lecturers) in teacher education programmes in one national tertiary institution. A total of 83% of staff participants reported that their campus was not a safe space for queer students. Over half of the queer student participants felt unable to be themselves on campus. Staff and student participants described environments in which heteronormativity was pervasive, there was little mention of sexual diversity in the curriculum, and very few queer people were open about their sexuality.

Two more recent studies provide a contemporary picture of campus life for tertiary Rainbow ākonga. As part of her Master of Professional Practice research, Trueman (2020) interviewed eight sexual- and gender-diverse ākonga from several of Aotearoa’s tertiary educational institutions. These participants reported that heteronormativity and cisnormativity were entrenched, as evidenced by the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms, the absence of gender/sexual diversity in the curriculum, and discriminatory forms and policies. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of heteronormativity and cisnormativity meant that the participants felt unable to be themselves, which resulted in various negative psychological impacts. These findings echo Fraser et al.’s (2022b), where significant structural barriers hamper access to support. As within tertiary environments, mental health systems require Rainbow people to negotiate their presence and needs within contexts that presume identities that exclude them, via embedded cisgender normative practices and assumptions.

Powell and Gremillion (2018) conducted individual interviews with seven self-identifying gender-diverse participants from a range of tertiary educational settings. Although the participants had not experienced physical violence, they reported being subjected to cisnormativity and hostile administration processes, as well as numerous microaggressions. This research project is important, as it is the only contemporary national study we were able to locate that focuses solely on gender-diverse ākonga.

Some existing national studies on tertiary Rainbow inclusivity focus on an intervention. For instance, in one university, transgender ambassadors talked with health students about some of the issues transgender people experience in our national health system (Hayward & Treharne, 2021). Although the students reported learning a lot of new information and the ambassadors enjoyed the experience, we argue that it should not be up to good-willed volunteers to educate health students about the state of health care for transgender people.

It should be noted that although Rainbow youth are statistically more likely to experience bullying, crime and poor mental health compared to their heterosexual and cisnormative counterparts, they are not victims (Smith, 2006). Instead, Rainbow youth are at the forefront of activism, organising such things as pride events and protests against societal laws, institutions and people that discriminate against and oppress them (see, e.g., Nairn et al., 2022; NYU-CIC, 2022). Many also volunteer in Rainbow community organisations (e.g., InsideOUT and Rainbow Youth) and challenge heteronormative and cisnormative educational environments (Quinlivan, 2002a; 2002b; Sligo et al., 2022). This activism was visible most recently when primarily Rainbow young people organised rallies against anti-trans extremist Posie Parker (aka Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull), which ultimately led to her fleeing from Aotearoa (Radio New Zealand, 2023).

**STORYTELLING**

Within feminist research there is a long history of storytelling and sharing personal accounts, methods that challenge more traditional research approaches from which, historically, women have been excluded. Storytelling
forefronts women’s accounts, challenging more conventional presentations of research data and findings (de Nooijer & Sol Cueva, 2022). In feminist storytelling the personae of researchers are included, and it is a reflexive process that includes vulnerability. Feminist storytelling has a long history within qualitative research approaches (Klages et al., 2019), and is a tool widely used by Rainbow populations, whose experiences have been excluded not only from research, but also from standard historical accounts more generally (Boatwright, 2019; Burford et al., 2015; Valentine, 2008).

Given that we have just begun the process of data collection for our research study exploring how safe and inclusive the campuses of the various business divisions of Te Pūkenga are for Rainbow ākonga, we cannot report on our findings at the time of this writing. Consequently, we provide a personal narrative account of the formation of our research team, the process of survey design, the necessity of the duty of care for participants, the process of securing ethics and problems that emerged in the data collection. Although mistakes in research are relatively common, often they are sanitised from research reporting. In contrast, some researchers have used errors or hurdles in research processes as opportunities to be reflexive, welcoming these moments as learning opportunities (e.g., Fraser et al., 2022a; Nairn et al., 2005). In this paper we discuss errors in our ethics and data collection processes to reassure emerging researchers, in particular, that such mistakes are relatively common and cannot always be anticipated. In this way, the paper brings together themes from existing research on storytelling as feminist method and on challenging research situations as opportunities for reflexivity.

TERMINOLOGY

Before we begin, however, we need to provide a small glossary of terminology that will be used in the paper. Firstly, the term ‘Rainbow’ is an umbrella term used to describe people with diverse genders, sexualities and sex characteristics (InsideOUT, n.d.). It is also used by those who do not feel comfortable with terms such as queer or the acronym LGBTQIA+. It should be noted that there are many other terms for the plethora of sexualities and genders that people enact in society, which can be accessed here (https://insideout.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Making-Schools-Safer.pdf). Young people are more likely to take up the plethora of new terms for diverse sexualities and genders that have emerged in recent years.

The term ‘heteronormativity’ was originally coined by queer theorist Michael Warner (1991) and refers to the societal assumption that heterosexuality is the ‘normal’ or default sexuality. This assumption underpins many social practices and, until relatively recently, laws preventing same-sex marriage and adoption. ‘Cisnormativity’ refers to the assumption that people’s gender follows from their sex assigned at birth, which excludes people who are transgender (Horton, 2023). Like heteronormativity, cisnormativity is embedded in our social fabric as well as in many of our educational institutions, as evidenced by school cultures that permit abuse and fail to include any information on transgender people in the curriculum. Transgender students also experience micro-aggressions, such as teachers/lecturers failing to recognise their preferred gender.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AND TE PŪKENGA

Te Pūkenga (n.d.) is the largest national tertiary education provider in Aotearoa and, given its recent formation, it is an optimal time to conduct a study on the experiences of Rainbow ākonga across its various business divisions, which were formerly known as Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs). It should be noted that the nine Independent Training Organisations (ITOs) were also encompassed under the umbrella of Te Pūkenga; however, given that many ITOs do not have a formal physical campus, it was decided to concentrate our study solely on ITPs. Nevertheless, given that Open Polytechnic delivers online learning only, then we excluded this business division from the study. Consequently, a research study with the overarching aim of exploring how safe and inclusive these various 15 business divisions of Te Pūkenga are for Rainbow ākonga was begun in the later stages of 2022.

The formation of Te Pūkenga has the potential to grow research associations across business divisions, and thus, invitations for research collaborators were sent to various research offices. A research team consisting of seven
members (from five business divisions) with an interest in research with Rainbow ākonga was subsequently formed. The team consists of three members of the Rainbow community and four allies. Despite the lead researcher’s efforts to attract a diversity of sexualities, genders and ethnicities to the research team, team members are all Pākehā, primarily cisgendered women with two non-binary members, while all are somewhat removed from youth culture.

Many studies undertaken on Rainbow sexualities and genders in Aotearoa have focused solely on Rainbow ākonga (e.g., McAllum, 2017; Trueman, 2020). However, given the role they play in creating campus environments, it was decided that kaimahi as well as heterosexual and cisgendered ākonga perceptions are also needed (see Nairn & Smith, 2004, for a similar study). Considering, for example, that homophobic and transphobic humour and abuse contribute to establishing normative gender and sexual identities, studying heterosexual and cisnormative ākonga understandings is important (McCann et al., 2010). Moreover, specific questions on the survey asked participants if their classes (as kaimahi or ākonga) included meaningful discussion of diverse Rainbow sexualities and genders. Arguably, if we conducted research without grouping Rainbow and non-Rainbow kaimahi under one umbrella, then this would result in skewed responses to these questions. The research hopes to identify what is working well currently to create safe and inclusive environments for Rainbow ākonga, and where improvement may be needed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSULTATION

The research team designed two surveys, including one for cisnormative and heterosexual ākonga and all kaimahi (regardless of sexuality and gender). Given this survey is aimed at collecting data to contextualise Rainbow experiences, only closed Likert-scale (five-option) items are included on Survey One. Likert scales are useful because they gather more data than simple yes/no responses and invite responses based on intensity of feelings (Barua, 2013). A second, more detailed survey was designed specifically for rainbow sexuality and/or gender-diverse ākonga. This survey includes many of the same Likert items as the first survey, but these were shifted to include first-person qualifiers. Open-field questions are also included to gain more in-depth data, given the research focus.

Given the lack of ethnic diversity on the research team, both surveys were discussed with takatāpui and Pacific members of InsideOUT. InsideOUT is a Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington-based Rainbow charity, which provides resources, support and advocacy for Rainbow youth, as well as training for educators on safe and inclusive practice. The volunteers from InsideOUT raised issues regarding one statement on the kaimahi and heterosexual/cisgendered survey, which was “Rainbow students should not be welcomed on our campus.” They interrogated the purpose of this question, which was to gather information on those who had anti-Rainbow prejudice, explaining that those kaimahi and heterosexual/cisgendered ākonga who strongly agreed or agreed with this option would be unlikely to complete the survey. On reflection, the lead researcher agreed this question was unsuitable as all kaimahi have a legal (under the Human Rights Act, 1993) and a moral duty (given the negative experiences reported by many Rainbow students) to welcome all ākonga regardless of sexuality or gender.

The team at InsideOUT also alerted the researchers to the multitude of terms for diverse Rainbow sexualities and genders, some of which the research team members who initially drafted the surveys had been unaware of. These terms include ‘demi-boi/demi-girl’, ‘Mx’ (non-binary) and ‘bigender’, for example. Moreover, initially the terms ‘takatāpui’ and ‘fa’afafine’ were the only ones used in the survey questions to refer to Māori and Pacific Rainbow peoples. However, consultation with takatāpui and with Pacific members of InsideOUT introduced the research team to additional relevant Māori terms (e.g., ‘irawhiti’, ‘tāhine’, ‘whakawahine’, and ‘whakatāne’) and the acronym MVPFAFF+, which is representative of some (not all) Pacific identities, including mahu (Hawai‘i and Tahiti), maka sa lewa lewa (Fiji), palopa (Papua New Guinea), fa’afafine (Sāmoa), akava’ine (Rarotonga), fakaleiti (Tonga) and fakaffine (Niue).

The young people also alerted the research team to the fact that we had left off any questions regarding disability, noting the dual impact that heteronormativity and ableism may have on students who face both forms of oppression. Although the research team had identified dual forms of oppression based on ethnicity and sexual/gender diversity, we had not considered the dual oppression that Rainbow ākonga may experience if they have a disability. Consequently, a question was added based on this feedback, asking whether participants had a disability...
(‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘unsure’ and ‘prefer not to state’ response options). Those who ticked the ‘yes’ response are directed to a further question: “Have you experienced any prejudice or discrimination in your polytechnic because of your gender, sexuality and disability?”, with the same response options. After the consultation process was undertaken, the two surveys were checked and finalised by the research team.

**DUTY OF CARE AND ETHICS PROCEDURES**

Given that rainbow youth have been traditionally overrepresented in statistics for poor mental health; homelessness; experiences of being ostracised by families/whānau, school and communities; and substance abuse, the research team is aware of the heightened need for a duty of care for participants (Fenaughty et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2022b; King-Finau et al., 2022). At the same time, we are aware that reporting such statistics may inadvertently frame Rainbow identities as sad and depressing conditions (e.g., see seminal queer education theorist, Britzman, 1995). It is not being Rainbow that leads to overrepresentation in such negative statistics, but rather heteronormativity and cisnormativity that cause Rainbow peoples’ stress (Smith, 2015).

As researchers, members of the Rainbow community, parents of Rainbow gender-diverse children and supportive allies, the research team members embrace a duty of care to ensure that if participating in the survey brings up any discomfort, ākonga are directed to appropriate support resources. After all, it is a central tenet of education and qualitative research to care (Head, 2020). The research team is aware that participating in research has the potential to bring up issues for some Rainbow ākonga. Thus, on the survey form, links to Rainbow groups at each separate business division are included, as is a general list of other national Rainbow support organisations.

Most tertiary educational organisations undertaking research have ethics review boards (in the USA) or committees (in Aotearoa), which require researchers to apply for consent to undertake research (Head, 2020). While these committees can, at times, be restrictive and overly bureaucratic, their aim of course is to help to ensure that research is ethically sound, and effective ethics committee processes balance consultative approaches with compliance requirements (Gremillion et al., 2016). Our experience with ethics was appropriately balanced. Reviewers recommended that the research team split the first survey to render a separate one for kaimahi and another for heterosexual and cisgendered ākonga. It was also suggested that we remove the neutral response in the Likert scale, as it would not provide weighty data, and add an N/A to Likert items. The research team decided not to split the first survey, as this survey was specifically designed to provide data to contextualise the responses of Rainbow ākonga. Moreover, if we were to add a third survey, we contend that it would have been more useful to split the kaimahi into Rainbow and non-Rainbow, as there is a long history of Rainbow educators in Aotearoa and elsewhere navigating heteronormative and cis-normative campuses (Carpenter & Lee, 2015; Lee, 2020). It was also decided to keep a neutral point on the Likert scale response option, as this is standard practice and would provide a more thorough account of participants’ emotional responses to the survey items; however, an N/A category was included as per ethics review feedback.

Multi-site studies are relatively common but tend to introduce more logistical complexities than single-site research projects, especially when multiple ethics and site approvals are needed (Barnett et al., 2016). Although the 16 business divisions of Te Pūkenga have been brought together into one overarching organisation, each has a different process for gaining permission to undertake research with their kaimahi and ākonga. In some instances, Chief Executive Officers or those with high-level research positions have granted permission to distribute the survey on the basis that it had been approved by the first ethics committee, while other business divisions required the full application to be approved by their institutional ethics committees. To date, it has taken ten months to obtain approval to distribute the survey in 15 business divisions.

In their multi-site research focusing on the health of children and adolescents amongst detainees in Nauru detention centres, Samir et al. (2021) reported that the lengthy process of gaining state government and ethics approval meant numerous months of valuable research time was lost. They recommended that multi-site researchers consult with ethics committees early, ensure they use the correct forms, and expect lengthy delays. Samir et al. (2021) also proposed that Australia create one “nationally agreed framework whereby ethics and
governance committees across jurisdictions communicate with each other, use the same electronic platform and present a unified process whilst protecting the welfare, rights, dignity and safety of research participants” (p. 16). The research team suggests that ethics processes across business divisions of Te Pūkenga should be more unified and streamlined and, ideally, have an online platform for application submissions. We are aware of, and encouraged by, initial attempts made by a working group of kaimahi (from across business divisions) to explore issues related to ethics across Te Pūkenga, and to establish an organisation-wide ethics application form (currently under development).

**MISTAKES AND ISSUES**

Each member of the research team checked over the survey prior to its distribution, with one member checking the flow of the online survey. Unfortunately, however, when the survey went live at one business division, the response options for two separate questions on Survey One (targeting heterosexual and cisgendered ākonga as well as all kaimahi) were inadvertently merged. Therefore, we learned that the quality-control measures we put in place were insufficient. We know, however, that such mistakes are common in research, as are errors in research reporting (see, e.g., Biemer, 2009; Ezeala et al., 2013; Nairn et al., 2005). Some feminist and qualitative researchers use these errors as an opportunity for reflection and learning, and to inform further research (Fraser et al., 2022a; Nairn et al., 2005).

As the survey was live, we decided not to correct this error immediately, as we would lose initial data. Fortunately, the design of the merged questions allowed for responses within the faulty survey that met its data-gathering requirements, despite the error. The survey was fixed prior to the next dissemination, with the first cohort of participants’ responses manually entered in accordance with the response option categories for the two questions. It is necessary to discuss such errors alongside completed research reports, as they impact on the data collected and are also a part of the role of being a researcher (Fraser et al., 2022a).

There was also an error on the consent form attached to the top of the online survey. The main body of the application to the first ethics committee stated that all kaimahi are eligible to participate, but wording on the survey itself restricted kaimahi participants to classroom teachers. This wording was a mistake, which inadvertently served to exclude kaimahi in support services roles, who play a vital part in advocating for, and helping rainbow ākonga. It should also be noted that one of the research team is employed in an ākonga support role. This issue was bought to the attention of a member of the research team who, after consulting with the first researcher, informed support ākonga they could participate. As noted below, this issue was remedied after the cessation of data collection at the first business division.

When working in a research team, conflict is inevitable as members vary in terms of background, personality, research expertise and interpersonal skills (Foncubierta-Rodriguez et al., 2021). There are also institutional constraints to navigate, such as (sometimes cumbersome and time-consuming) administrative processes required by ethics committees. When it came to resolving the issue of inadvertently including the word ‘teaching’ on the information sheet, tension arose amongst members. Initially, some considered embracing the restriction to teaching kaimahi due to the burden involved in re-litigating ethics approval, but it was quickly decided that our intended kaimahi participation criterion needed to stand. When considering next how the relevant error could be fixed, one team member wondered whether, considering the contradiction in the approved ethics paperwork on this matter, an informal consultation with the chair of the original committee granting approval might allow a simple corrective edit. Another team member stated that a more formal process must be undertaken. Particularly given that this is a nationwide study, and that the incorrect wording had been circulated already and picked up amongst participants, it was ultimately decided (on consultation with managers in one business division) that a memo would be sent to the original ethics committee, which in turn granted formal permission to implement a correction going forward. Because this study is one of a few, at the time of this writing, that are underway across multiple business divisions of Te Pūkenga, our team’s final decision about process could serve as a model for ethics paperwork errors in the future.

It is noted that the errors discussed above may have been identified earlier if the research team had conducted a pilot study. One of the main functions of a pilot study is to gain insights into whether a survey instrument is fit for
purpose or where a research project may fail (van Teijlingen & Vanora, 2002). Although our survey is fit for purpose, if we had conducted a pilot with a small sample of kaimahi in various roles, then we may have identified errors earlier, which would have led to more robust data and saved the time involved in separating the merged data into their appropriate response categories.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

At the time of revising this article (July 2023), our surveys have been distributed at 14 business division of Te Pūkenga and, to date, 184 rainbow ākonga plus 228 kaimahi and heterosexual/cisnormative ākonga have completed the surveys. We have secured ethics approval to distribute the surveys in 15 business divisions. Ideally, given that the macro structure of Te Pūkenga is currently being cemented, then micro-level processes that impact heavily on researchers, such as the need to gather approval from 15 ethics committees, may soon be streamlined. This would be ideal given the time involved in these applications.

In working collaboratively to distribute the surveys, the research team is enhancing the research-process knowledge of the emerging researchers on the team. Our research team is comprised of emerging and more experienced researchers, which enhances the advantages of team-based research work, such as the ability to draw on the strengths of each member’s personality, background experiences and areas of research expertise (Mcclunie-Trust et al., 2022). Ideally, while the research knowledge of the emergent researchers on our team grows, our experienced researchers will simultaneously benefit from those employed in Rainbow group facilitation and ākonga support.

As the research team members are either members of the Rainbow community, have children who are members of the Rainbow community, or are supportive allies, we have a vested interest in ensuring Rainbow ākonga are safe and included at Te Pūkenga. To this end, the data collection will identify what is currently working well for Rainbow ākonga, and indicate areas/environments in need of improvement. When it comes to the safety and inclusion of Rainbow ākonga, Te Pūkenga business divisions are likely to vary in their institutional policies, provisions and campus climates. The ultimate aim of our project is to support Te Pūkenga’s Rainbow ākonga to be welcomed and affirmed. We hope that our own research process and mutual growth can serve as something of a model for how to work through and implement best practices.

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