

President:

Maoris & Polynesians at the University

Over the last few months, I have been involved in a Committee set up by the University to investigate the low numbers of Maoris and Polynesians at this University, and the low numbers graduating. There are a number of root causes to the problem - these are historical and racial.

The first point is that no-one knows how many Maoris and Polynesians are at this University, or what their success rate is, as no-one has ever bothered to keep statistics. It is therefore difficult to make any pronouncements that can be supported with data. The Committee has looked at areas where work has been done in the past and found that the Professional schools - Law, Architecture and Medicine - do allow preferential entry, or make attempts to give assistance to Maori and Polynesian students entering their courses.

The Medical School has a 'quota' of three places set aside and this has worked relatively successfully. For the first time, a recruitment drive occurred following a failure to obtain any Maori students at all. This resulted in more students applying than could be taken, for the first time.

The purpose of such preferential entry is affirmative action to redress imbalances created earlier on in the primary and secondary education systems. It cannot, in the long term, solve the problems started lower down which stem from racism, institutions, and the personal. The benefits of these schemes to the individuals and the respective communities have been great. However the goals are limited and only short-term.

The racial biases of our education system must be corrected if the problems created by our history and governments are to be solved. In fact the University is the wrong place to start and the main effort should be directed at the pre-school and primary school levels. The main result of the 1974 Education Development Conference should have been the philosophical and attitude change required to do this, but such is the inertia of the Education bureaucracy that any changes have been minor and isolated.

We now have an opportunity to try and bring about some change within the University. In the short-term, the problem of increasing the actual number of Maori and Polynesian students enrolling and graduating must be attacked. The University is currently limiting enrolments using academic criteria. This will naturally affect Maoris and Polynesians adversely. Therefore the University must actively recruit new students specifically to get more Maoris and Polynesians here rather than the basically homogeneous white middle class intake it gets now. In doing

this it must dispel the negative effect of the publicity about limitations of enrolments and tell schools and students what it hopes to achieve. To this end a program of sending 'talking parties' out to schools maraes and community centres to encourage Maoris and Polynesians, particularly older people, to come to University, which was run by the Centre for Continuing Education in 1972, should be revived.

The University must also make efforts to increase the pass rate of Maori and Polynesians students already at the University. The current pass rate is much the same as for the rest of the students. In the past, particularly for Maori students from rural areas, there has been a disorienting culture shock involved in coming to University. This is less serious now that the numbers of Maori students has increased. The bulk of Maori and Polynesian students now come to University from an urban background. The University must cater for these students' needs, in the short term by finding out what special assistance they may require, and in the long term by finding out whether courses are relevant to the needs of the community.

I believe that the long term goals of changing the whole purpose of the education we receive to suit community rather than commercial needs, are the most important. The University must re-assess its values, responsibilities in this field. For the policy decisions already taken to have any meaning at all, they cannot be handed down from above, but must involve all the people they are going to affect. Therefore this Committee must widen its brief to take in the solution of these long term problems. This can only be done with full participation in the Committee of Maori and Polynesian students acting to determine their own future development and education. I personally do not feel qualified to speak on their behalf. The Committee has called for submissions from the Maori and Polynesian campus groups. No deadline has been set but the next meeting to consider information is next month. I would be happy to hear from any Maori or Polynesian student or group wishing to be involved in this Committee, and will assist in the preparation and discussion of any ideas that may come up.

The Committee is also likely to set up some sort of mini-Education Development Conference to examine the wider issues next year. This should be supported and AUSA should be prepared to put a considerable amount of effort into seeing that the best possible results come out of such an exercise.

Michael Walker