

## **Melanesian students: negotiating their identities to succeed in higher education**

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While working with AusAID sponsored students in a Queensland university, Melanesian students, as a distinct cohort, appeared to struggle the most with their academic program. Their ability to meet the academic expectations of the university appeared to be constrained, not by ability, but by their inability to cope with the competing academic, cultural and social demands. This research sought to explore the role of Melanesian students' cultural identity in their academic experiences.

This research adopted a student centred approach conducted within an interpretative paradigm. Melanesian students, defined as those permanently domiciled in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, enrolled in coursework programs were requested to voluntarily participate. Thirteen students were interviewed over a period of four weeks in November 2004. The students reported a strong sense of that it meant to be Melanesian. Their experiences although difficult, had to date been generally positive. However most were disappointed with their academic performance. Although this study opportunity was valued by themselves and their families, the students' experienced identity conflict, which compromised their academic outcomes. As with many mature aged students in full time study, they had to negotiate competing demands as a parent, spouse, student, and in the case of the Melanesians, a member of a clan. The role of cultural identity in academic performance is therefore viewed within the frame of the individual's ability to draw on their identity resources to negotiate and manage the "identity conflict" within their present given location.