



Ruth Lute Faleolo

# FAKALAKALAKA

Tongan Women Navigating  
Higher Education

Pacific Islander Studies

Collection Editors

**MOEATA KEIL**

**PATRICK THOMSEN**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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*Fakalakalaka: Tongan Women Navigating Higher Education* is dedicated with deepest love and gratitude to my parents, the late Reverend 'Ahoia 'Ilaiū (1944–2025 RIL) and Reverend Falakika Lose (née -Halangahu) 'Ilaiū, whose faith, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to education shaped our family's journeys across Tonga, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia.

*The excellence, service, and spiritual teachings you embody continue to guide my work.*

I also dedicate this work to my husband, Leaula Thom Gregory Faleolo, and to our children – 'Israel, Sh'Kinah, Angels (RIL), Nehemiah (RIL), Lydia, and Naomi – whose steadfast prayers, 'ofa/alofa, collective support, and personal commitment to educational excellence sustain me.

*You inspire me, and your love remains a deep source of strength.*

# Abstract

*Fakalalakalaka: Tongan Women Navigating Higher Education* centres the lived experiences of Tongan women in Aotearoa New Zealand as they pursue higher education across complex intersections of faith, family, culture, and institutional demands. Guided by the Indigenous concept of *fakalalakalaka*, the book redefines educational progress as relational, collective, and life-sustaining rather than individual achievement alone. Through *talanoa* as method and ethic, women's narratives emerge as theory, revealing how they negotiate structural barriers while upholding cultural and spiritual commitments. This work offers a strengths based, Pacific feminist framing that reimagines higher education in ways that honour relationality, wellbeing, and collective futures.

## Keywords

*Fakalalakalaka*; Tongan women in higher education; Aotearoa New Zealand Pacific diaspora; Indigenous knowledge; *Talanoa Vā* methodology; Pacific feminism; decolonising education; cultural identity; faith and education; collective academic achievement.

# Acknowledgements

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding”.

Psalm 111:10 (ESV)

*Ke langilangi'ia pē 'a e 'Eiki!*

I acknowledge with deep respect the fifteen Tongan women whose courage, wisdom, and lived experiences shape this work. Their stories, insights, and cultural knowledge are carried forward in these pages, offering guidance and inspiration to the next generation of Tongan women and to all those from collective cultures seeking pathways to navigate Higher Education with confidence, dignity, and truth. Their voices remain the heartbeat of this book, and their contributions will continue to light the way for others.

## **Fakamālō lahi atu!**

I acknowledge that this book captures and records the living and learning of Tongan women and their families on the unceded lands of *Tangata Whenua*. I honour Māori as the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand and acknowledge their enduring relationships to whenua, language, and culture. As *Tau'iwi*, we are deeply grateful for the care, generosity, and opportunities afforded to us as we have settled on, migrated to, and lived upon these lands. *I am proudly Aotearoa-born.*



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# Introduction

## **Why *fakalalakalaka*, why these women, why this book**

This book begins with a simple but demanding question: *What does meaningful educational progress look like for Tongan women when learning is lived across faith, family, culture, and institutional boundaries?*

For Tongan women in this book, education is never an individual undertaking. It is relational, negotiated, and carried within *vā* – the living spaces between people, obligations, histories, and futures. Degrees are pursued alongside caregiving, church leadership, paid work, and the everyday labour of sustaining family and community life. Achievement is celebrated not only for personal advancement, but for the doors it opens for others.

This book centres on Tongan women who navigated higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand and asked, again and again, whether their study counted as progress in a deeply Tongan sense. Their answer hinged not on grades alone, but on whether learning strengthened the whole person and the collective – an idea that is explored in depth in the chapter that follows. The concept that emerged most powerfully from their *talanoa* was *fakalalakalaka*.

## ***Fakalalakalaka* as concept and compass**

In contemporary Tongan usage, *fakalalakalaka* is often translated as “development,” “progress,” or “advancement.” Yet for the women in this study, the term carried far more weight than a linear upward movement. *Fakalalakalaka* was spoken about as *woven work* – progress that is purposeful, relational, and accountable. Educational advancement, they insisted, matters only when it is recognised by the women themselves as life-sustaining rather than fragmenting. Progress that fractures family ties, exhausts the body, or diminishes spiritual grounding cannot be recognised as genuine advancement.

This book therefore treats *fakalalakalaka* not as metaphor alone, but as an Indigenous conceptual framework for interpreting educational journeys. It offers a way of understanding higher education that resists narrow outcome measures and instead asks: *Who is lifted, who is strained, and what is sustained when women pursue learning?*

## **The women and the study<sup>1</sup>**

The women whose voices shape this book participated in long-standing *talanoa* about their educational pathways, aspirations, and challenges. Many were the first women in their families to enter tertiary education. All were deeply embedded in networks of family, church, and community responsibility. They were daughters, partners, mothers, aunties, wage earners, students, and leaders – often occupying several roles at once.

This study does not claim to represent all Tongan women, nor to offer an exhaustive account of Pacific participation in higher

education. Its purpose is different. It seeks depth rather than breadth: to listen closely to women whose lived experience reveals how education is navigated when Western academic systems intersect with Tongan values, obligations, and ways of knowing.

The scope of the study was intentionally bounded to allow participant voices to remain central. Rather than extracting stories as illustrative examples, their words are presented as theorising in their own right – narrating not only what happened, but how meaning was made.

## **Tonga, migration, and education in Aotearoa New Zealand**

For readers unfamiliar with the Pacific region, these narratives sit within a broader socio-historical relationship between Tonga and Aotearoa New Zealand. Migration from Tonga to New Zealand increased significantly during the latter half of the twentieth century, shaped by labour demands, church networks, and regional mobility. While Pacific peoples have long contributed to New Zealand's economic, spiritual, and cultural life, they have also faced persistent marginalisation within education systems not designed for them.

Pacific learners have frequently been positioned through deficit narratives that obscure structural inequities and overlook collective cultural logics. Tongan women encounter these dynamics at the intersection of race, gender, migration, class, and faith – often navigating institutions that neither recognise nor accommodate the relational worlds from which they come. Understanding this

context is essential. Without it, the women's educational achievements risk being read as isolated individual successes rather than as sustained acts of navigation within constraining systems. The stories that follow speak not only to personal perseverance, but to the ongoing work of carving meaning and possibility from uneven terrain.

## **Pacific storytelling, *talanoa*, and voice**

This book privileges Pacific storytelling as method and ethic. Knowledge here is generated through *talanoa* – open, relational conversation grounded in trust, reciprocity, and care. *Talanoa* recognises that insight emerges in relationship and that speaking, listening, and accountability are inseparable within relational *vā* (sacred sociocultural spaces). Women's voices are therefore not treated as supplementary to analysis. They are the analysis. Their words carry critique, pedagogy, and theory – a stance elaborated through *talanoa* as methodology later in the book. My role as author is not to speak for these women, but to walk alongside their narratives, attentive to *vā* and accountable to the relationships that made the research possible.

## **What this book offers**

This is a book for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to understand how learning might be reimaged when Pacific women's knowledges are taken seriously. It is grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand yet resonates with Indigenous and diasporic contexts elsewhere where education unfolds across layered obligations and aspirations.

The chapters that follow move from conceptual framing to lived experience, from method to practice, culminating in guidance for teaching and learning that upholds relational, spiritual, and cultural wellbeing alongside intellectual rigour.

Above all, this book is offered in honour of the women whose journeys illuminate what *fakalalakalaka* demands: progress that is shared, humane, and deliberately woven so that those who follow may walk with greater ease.

# Learning objectives

1. To understand ***fakalakalaka*** as an Indigenous **framework** for interpreting educational progress as relational, collective, and culturally grounded rather than individual and linear.
2. To analyse the lived experiences of Tongan women in **higher education** within the intersecting contexts of faith, family, culture, and institutional expectations.
3. To evaluate ***talanoa*** as a Pacific research methodology and practice, recognising its role in centring relational knowledge, voice, and accountability.
4. To critically examine structural and cultural tensions within higher education systems, including how these shape and constrain Pacific women's educational journeys.
5. To apply Pacific feminist and strengths-based perspectives to reimagine teaching, learning, and policy in ways that uphold wellbeing, relationality, and collective futures.

# 1

## Framing *fakalakalaka*

“Our learning is never ours alone; it is braided with the knowledge passed onto us by our elders and the people who raised us, the lands that hold us, and it is purposed to be passed on further to our children and our children’s children, the futures we are preparing for.”

### Opening talanoa

I would like to begin this book by honouring the man who first taught me what *fakalakalaka* looks like when lived with courage, conviction, and love. This work is dedicated to my champion father, the late Faifekau (Rev.) ‘Ahoia ‘Ilaiu – a man of deep faith, sharp intellect, and unwavering service, whose life and teachings continue to bolster my own.

My father was born of Semisi ‘Ilaiū from Mu’a Tatakamotonga (former mayor and steward of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga) and ‘Ilaisaane ‘Ilaiū (née Tu’imoala) from Pukotala, Ha’apai. As the eldest son, he carried the weight of both *fāmili* obligation and cultural expectation – yet even as a young man he imagined possibilities beyond the confines of cultural and social hierarchy of Tonga. He excelled academically, becoming Senior Dux, and

earned a scholarship opportunity through long hours of studying by kerosene lamp at night and balancing his schoolwork alongside plantation duties, and social duties. He often spoke of his memories of working hard as a student. But when the time came, despite his merit, the scholarship was given to someone of higher social rank and nobility – a reminder of the rigid structures that governed opportunity in Tonga.

After years of quiet perseverance in Aotearoa New Zealand, my father's journey of sacrifice began to bear fruit. What started as long shifts in factories and humble living gradually transformed into a life of service and leadership. His resilience and faith opened doors that once seemed firmly shut. In time, he became a respected minister within the Tongan Assemblies of God community in Ōtara, Auckland – a role he embraced not for status, but as an extension of his calling to uplift others. His wisdom was both practical and spiritual, his voice unwavering against injustice, and his love expansive, reaching far beyond our family into the wider church and community. His ministry carried him across Aotearoa and Australia, visiting families, preaching, counselling, and strengthening the *vā* wherever he walked.

Alongside him stood my mother, Rev. Falakika Lose 'Ilaiū, his partner in faith and service for 55 years. Together they raised eight children and nurtured a sprawling generation of grandchildren and great-grandchildren who continue to carry their legacy. When he passed at the age of 81, tributes flowed from congregations, family, and communities across nations – a testament to a life lived with purpose. At his request, we gathered as a family, in white to praise and worship God, a final act of obedience and joy marking his transition into eternity.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up, my father's voice shaped my understanding of *āko* (learning) and *fakalalakalaka* (progress). He spoke often of the importance of education – not for prestige, but for service. Not for individual uplift, but for the collective good. Our home was filled with *lea faka-Tonga* (Tongan language) and the rhythm of *faka'apa'apa* (respect). But it was also filled with his gentle insistence that tradition should never become a barrier to opportunity. Because he had experienced the sting of systemic hierarchy, he taught us to challenge inequities while holding tight to the values that dignify us as Tongan people.

From him I inherited both my love of learning and my obligation to widen the pathway for others. My father taught me, through story and through life, that *fakalalakalaka* is not measured by titles or positions but by how many people you bring with you when you rise. This book carries his fingerprints. It is written in gratitude for a father who believed that progress must be holistic – nourishing the spirit, mind, body, and collective – and who modelled that truth in every part of his journey.

In our household, *lea faka-Tonga* filled the kitchen, the lounge, the car. *Faka'apa'apa* ordered our relationships and our speaking. Church grounded our weeks; family gathered our efforts. And always, my father's refrain: *āko mālohi* – study diligently – because education is not only a personal achievement; it is a way to lift the whole *fāмили* (family) and *kāinga* (extended kin/community).

That is how I first came to understand *fakalalakalaka*: as both movement and meaning. Movement – the visible progress marked by milestones, certificates, and changed circumstances.

Meaning – the deeper, relational flourishing that occurs when mind, body, spirit, and family advance together. This book begins with that paired truth.

## **What *fakalalakalaka* means in this book**

In contemporary Tongan usage, *fakalalakalaka*<sup>2</sup> is often glossed as “development,” “progress,” or “advancement.” But the women whose stories shape this book insist that the word holds more than a linear climb or purely material improvement. In their talanoa, *fakalalakalaka* emerges as a holistic movement – a widening and a deepening – that touches the four core spheres of a Tongan woman’s life:

- *Laumālie* – the spiritual dimension (values, faith, purpose)
- *‘Atamai* – the mind (knowledge, emotions, insight, criticality)
- *Sino* – the body (health, safety, material conditions)
- *Fāmili/kāinga* – the relational collective (family, obligations, reciprocity)

When progress is evident across these spheres together, the women called it *fakalalakalaka fakalukufua* – holistic progress. In this sense, university study is not a destination but one pathway among many by which women move toward fuller lives. Higher education can enable a woman to see farther, question more confidently, contribute with new tools, and open doors for others – but only counts as *fakalalakalaka* when it also strengthens her spiritual footing, supports her family and community, and safeguards her wellbeing.

Throughout this book, then, I use *fakalalakalaka* as a relational and place-attentive framework rather than a narrow outcome. It is

development that refuses to leave parts of ourselves or our people behind.

## Place, identity, and the work of weaving

This book is set in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2011 – a place and time where Tongan women have made homes, raised children, pursued degrees, built churches and associations, and learned to speak across worlds. Here, Tongan, Pasifika, Kiwi, and Christian are not competing identities but braided strands. The language of “minority” sits uneasily with the fullness of these lives; “diaspora”<sup>3</sup> describes a dispersion, but the women’s stories reveal deep re-gatherings – of relatives in South and West Auckland suburbs, of congregations, of student networks, of aunties who become aunties for everyone.

Within these lived places, Tongan culture is both anchor and current. The anchor: enduring values such as *faka’apa’apa* (respect), *tauhi vā* (nurturing right relationships), *fai fatongia* (carrying responsibilities), and *loto tō* (humility). The current: adaptations that women make as they navigate liberal academic norms, precarious work, child-raising in cities, and new forms of leadership. The women in this book do not approach culture as a fixed script but as a *koloa* (treasure) to be kept, re-mended, and re-worn for present journeys.

*Fakalakalaka*, in this sense, is weaving work. Women sift what to keep, what to change, and what to create anew. They do this for themselves, certainly – and equally for sisters, cousins, daughters, sons, students, and neighbours who will follow.

## Why higher education matters – and how it matters

For every woman in the study, higher education mattered. But how it mattered depended on how well the institution made room for whole learners.

- When programmes connected learning to purpose and service – to public health in Pacific communities, to designing spaces that reflect Pasifika values, to teaching that dignifies children’s languages – women described their study as meaningful.
- When study unfolded within supportive relationships – mentors who understood cultural codes around respect, lecturers who invited questions without shaming, student associations that became families – women persisted and flourished.
- When universities recognised spiritual life as a source of resilience and clarity; and when timetables and expectations allowed women to honour family responsibilities without penalty; *fakalalakalaka* took root.

By contrast, when institutions treated learners as disembodied minds; when cultural norms around authority made it risky to ask for help; when the work of care at home was invisible in course design; when racism or deficit framings shadowed classrooms – study felt hollow, and sometimes, hope waned.

The message that repeats through the talanoa is clear: education is “meaningful” only to the extent that it engages the holistic dimensions of the learner. This insight guides the chapters that follow.

## A Pacific feminist stance, grounded in *vā*

This book sits within Pacific feminist thinking that centres relationships, reciprocity, spirituality, and collective wellbeing. Rather than re-telling a familiar story of “individual empowerment,” the chapters show how women’s advancements are purposefully entangled with the flourishing of their families and communities.

Here, I draw on *vā* – the relational space that is cared for (*teu le vā* in Samoan, *tauhi vā* in Tongan).<sup>4</sup> *Vā* is not empty distance but a living field that makes right relationship possible. In research, teaching, and community life, tending *vā* is both method and ethic: we approach one another with care, we speak to build, we disagree without breaking ties, and we measure success by how we have strengthened the space between us.

A Pacific feminist stance also reframes “choice.” When Tongan women say they want the freedom to choose – to be at home, to be at work, to study, to lead – they are not rejecting tradition or performing Western autonomy. They are insisting on the right to make context-wise decisions that honour both ancestral values and present realities.

## Talanoa: How these stories were gathered

The chapters are woven from talanoa (a concept, method and methodology discussed further in Chapter 5) – open, relational conversations in places chosen by the women themselves: lounge rooms, workplaces after hours, a quiet corner in a McDonald’s, an

email thread spanning weeks while one participant worked overseas. No recorders, just shared notes – verified and amended by each participant – and a researcher who is also a Tongan woman, accountable to the people whose stories she carries.

*Talanoa* is not just a data-gathering technique. It is a way of generating knowledge together; it trusts that truth emerges in relationship and that care is a legitimate research instrument. Because *talanoa* honours *vā*, the words here have been handled with the same care: women are de-identified, their phrasing is preserved where possible, and their meanings have been checked.

## The structure of the book<sup>5</sup>

The book follows a movement from concept to context, from foundation to friction, from method to voice, and finally to practice:

1. Framing *fakalalakalaka* (this chapter) – the concept, the stance, and the personal stake.
2. Tongan women in Aotearoa – migration, identity, and place-making.
3. Faith, family, and futures – the spiritual and familial foundations of aspiration.
4. Cultural tensions in the academy – when Western norms meet Tongan values.
5. *Talanoa* as research and practice – Indigenous method, relational ethics.
6. Naming the barriers, reframing the journey – challenges and the strategies women use.
7. Pacific feminist pathways: Walking with others – mentoring, role-modelling, and system change.

8. Conclusion: Teaching for *fakalalakalaka* – guidance for educators and policy-makers; what it means to build learning that is truly meaningful.

Each chapter blends story and analysis. Stories keep us honest; analysis helps us understand what the stories are telling about people and places. Together, they show how *fakalalakalaka* is lived.

## Two orienting claims

Before we set out, I want to make two claims explicit – claims that the women’s voices affirm again and again:

1. Higher education is a meaningful<sup>6</sup> form of *fakalalakalaka* when – and only when – it strengthens the holistic dimensions of the learner. If a degree expands the mind but withers the spirit, strains family bonds, or harms health, it cannot be called progress in the Tongan sense.
2. The measure of a woman’s advancement is collective. Personal success matters; but in these stories, success is complete when it opens doors for others – when younger cousins believe they can, when children watch their mother study and find courage, when a community receives the benefits of knowledge carried home.

These claims are not abstractions. They are the criteria by which the women judged their own journeys, and the lens through which this book invites educators and policy-makers to assess their practices.

## A note on language and translation

Throughout the book, Tongan terms appear in italics with English translations on first use, then used as living words, not artefacts.

This follows the way women actually speak about their lives. The glossary at the end gathers key terms for easy reference. Where I quote participants, I preserve the texture of their voices while protecting confidentiality.

## **What this book is – and is not**

This book is a testimony to Tongan women's insight, tenacity, and love. It honours elders who set their faces toward new lands, parents who worked nights so daughters could study, and students who asked their first brave question in a lecture theatre that didn't quite know what to do with them.

It is a guide for educators who want their classrooms to be places where Pacific learners can bring their whole selves without penalty – and for leaders who want policy to match rhetoric. It is grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand, with resonance for other places where Pacific peoples study, work, pray, and raise families.

It is not an exhaustive account of all Tongan women's experiences. The path of a nurse in South Auckland is not the path of a lawyer in Dunedin; the testimony of a first-in-family student will differ from that of a second-generation graduate. Nor is it a manual for assimilating Pasifika learners into unchanged systems. The aim is not to help students fit better into narrow containers but to reshape the containers.

## **Stepping onto the path**

My father used to say that progress is not measured by how fast you walk, but by who is walking with you. As we begin, hold that

image: a pathway across two lands, where the footsteps of our grandmothers keep time with our own. In the chapters ahead, you will hear how Tongan women have walked – sometimes with steady purpose, sometimes with a wobble – toward futures large enough for faith, family, and scholarship to thrive together.

With this grounding in what *fakalalakalaka* means and where its roots lie, we now turn to the lived places where these women's identities were shaped – Aotearoa, the landscape in which their journeys unfolded, for some an extension of their island homelands, for others a place of birth.

## Chapter 1 Learning tasks – Framing *fakalalakalaka*

Activity: Individual reflective writing (300–400 words)

- In your own words, explain *fakalalakalaka*.
- Compare it with a common Western idea of “success” or “progress.”
- Reflect on how this concept changes your understanding of education.

Learning objectives addressed:

- LO1 (Understand *fakalalakalaka*)
- LO5 (Apply strengths-based perspectives)

