

Thrive in Aotearoa: Using Te Whare Tapa Whā to Support the Well-Being of International Students and Migrants

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Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini

“My strength is not mine alone. It is the strength of many.”

Abstract

The international student satisfaction rate in Aotearoa New Zealand is 87 percent. However, beneath that headline, sizable numbers of the same students navigate confusion, loneliness, and a sense of being an outsider. Both accounts are valid, and this practitioner paper argues that the gap between them is where career development work is most needed and most often missing. It presents Te Whare Tapa Whā, Sir Mason Durie’s Māori model of holistic well-being, not as an adjunct to well-being support but as a practical tool for career practice. Drawing on a 2026 APCDA skill-building workshop, it offers three practical resources that practitioners can use immediately: a set of deficit-to-dignity language reframes; one powerful question for each of the four walls; and a reproducible map that embeds those questions, alongside a career-theory question, across all six modules of a pre-arrival course. The aim is straightforward: to move the model from the presentation slide into career conversations.

The 87 Percent Figure and the Realities Underlying It

Education New Zealand (ENZ) reported that 87 percent of international students rated their overall experience positively. However, findings reported by ENZ and in Australasian research indicate that sizable numbers of students experience confusion, loneliness, and a sense of being an outsider.

In one New Zealand survey, more than a quarter of students rated their sense of “feeling part of the community” as only adequate or poor, and one in eight reported

having no one to rely on in New Zealand. Across the Tasman, a systematic review of international students in Australia reported loneliness or social isolation among approximately 60–65 percent of students.

In my own work with more than 3,000 international students, I have yet to meet one who has not, at some point, experienced confusion, loneliness, or a sense of being an outsider. I do not dispute the 87 percent figure. I seek to draw attention to the realities underlying it.

Both accounts can be valid simultaneously. An international student can love living in

New Zealand and still feel invisible in it. Career practitioners meet such students at the exact point where the 87 percent figure and lived reality collide: during CV reviews, mock interviews, and cover-letter clinics. Too often, however, we work on only one wall of the house, the practical one, while the other three quietly buckle. We help people secure a job but forget to support their well-being throughout the process.

That is what moving beyond survival toward thriving means.

Te Whare Tapa Whā as a Tool for Career Practice

Te Whare Tapa Whā was developed by Sir Mason Durie in 1984. The model represents well-being as a wharehau (meeting house) with four walls and whenua (land) as its foundation. Taha tinana encompasses the body and practical needs. Taha hinengaro encompasses the mind and emotions. Taha whānau encompasses family and belonging. Taha wairua encompasses spirit, identity, and meaning. If one wall is weak, the whole house is unstable.

The application of this concept to career practice is direct. Taha tinana concerns clients' practical needs, including CV preparation, interviews, and systems navigation. Taha hinengaro concerns internal experiences, including self-doubt, the grief associated with starting over, and impostor feelings. Taha whānau concerns clients' sources of belonging in the host country and the relationships they have lost. Taha wairua concerns who clients are becoming. Whenua provides the foundation for all four dimensions and encompasses the host-country context, labor market, treaty, and systemic racism encountered by newcomers.

We cannot build careers on unstable foundations. A CV handed to someone

whose whānau wall has collapsed is a tool with no hand to hold it.

The Case of “P”: When a CV Review Misses Four Walls

During the workshop, I ask participants to sit with one person, whom I call P.

P is 31. She arrives as an international student with 14 years of leadership experience in luxury brand management at global fashion houses. She speaks four languages. Within six months, she is working a minimum-wage job and experiencing exploitation. She is subsisting on basic food. She has sold everything she owned to relocate. A career advisor reviews her CV and tells her she lacks local experience. She begins to internalize a quiet thought: “Maybe I am just not good enough for this country.”

P is a composite drawn from my own arrival in 2012 and from patterns I have observed among more than 3,000 students and migrants with whom I have worked since then. Viewed through one wall, her situation appears to be a CV problem. Viewed through all four, the fuller truth of her situation becomes apparent. Her tinana needs are real, but her wairua is under attack, her whānau wall is bare, and her hinengaro is absorbing the effects of a system in which she remains unrecognized. Fixing the CV alone still leaves P believing that she is the problem.

From Deficit to Dignity: How Language Influences Service Design

How we describe people influences the services we design for them. In the workshop, practitioners rewrite four statements that they have all heard and most have used.

Deficit phrase	Strength-based reframe
“She lacks local experience.”	“She brings an international perspective and is learning to communicate the value of her experience.”
“He has poor soft skills”	“He is navigating unfamiliar communication norms, which requires courage.”
“They are not work-ready”	“They have not yet received support across all four dimensions of their transition.”
“She needs to be more confident”	“Her confidence has not disappeared. It has been shaken by a system wherein she remains unrecognized.”

These reframes do not downplay the challenges; they describe them accurately. Deficit language hides a systemic problem inside a personal one. Strength-based language locates the problem within the system, where it belongs.

One Powerful Question Per Wall

You do not need all four walls in a single session. However, if you ask only about taha tinana, you see only one wall. The following questions open discussion of each wall.

- **Taha Tinana:** What practical issue feels most unclear or overwhelming right now?
- **Taha Hinengaro:** What are you telling yourself about why this feels difficult?
- **Taha Whānau:** Who knows that you are going through this? Who do you talk to?
- **Taha Wairua:** When you imagine yourself settled and thriving, what does that look like?

Each of these four questions may require only ninety seconds, but they change the purpose of a career conversation.

From Model to Method: Embedding the Whare Across a Course

A model admired in a workshop but forgotten by Friday changes nothing. The real test of Te Whare Tapa Whā as a career tool lies in whether it can be built into the

structure of a program, so the four walls are tended in sequence rather than left to chance.

This is what we did in Thrive in New Zealand, a six-module course for international students and migrants during the pre-arrival period and their first 100 days. Each module focuses on one wall and pairs a reflective question rooted in that wall with a question grounded in career theory that turns research into personal insight. The learner never has to memorize a theory. They recognize the experience that the theory describes.

Here, the theory serves a substantive rather than decorative function. When a student in Module 2 learns that their experience has a name and follows a recognizable pattern, Social Cognitive Career Theory helps them understand that the barrier lies within the system rather than within themselves. At that moment, the student’s understanding shifts, demonstrating the theory’s practical value.

Mauri as the Measure

Beneath the four walls is one concept that the survey does not assess: Mauri, understood here as life force, prana, energy, dignity, and vitality.

Migration depletes Mauri long before anyone seeks career support through the associated paperwork, waiting, goodbyes, and first exploitative job. Therefore, every module concludes with a Mauri check: a

single honest question about whether the learner's energy feels heavier, lighter, or about the same.

Module · core question · lead wall	Te Whare Tapa Whā reflective question	Career-theory question (learner-facing)
M1 · The Courage to Begin “Why am I really here?” Taha Wairua	When you picture yourself thriving in Aotearoa, what does that look like, and why does it matter to you?	Whose definition of success have you been carrying, and what would it take to begin authoring your own definition? (Narrative Career Theory, Savickas)
M2 · The Invisible Struggles “Am I the only one feeling this way?” Taha Hinengaro	What are you telling yourself about why this feels difficult?	Is what you feel a personal failing or a recognizable and predictable part of a transition? (Social Cognitive Career Theory)
M3 · Academic Power Moves “What does academic success look like here?” Taha Tinana + Hinengaro	What practical aspect of studying here feels most unclear right now?	What does each small win in the classroom quietly reveal about what you are capable of? (Self-Efficacy Theory, Bandura)
M4 · Your Overseas Advantage “How do I make my experience count here?” Taha Tinana + Wairua	What did you do before that you have stopped recognizing as valuable?	Your story is not being deleted; it is being translated. Where might your next unexpected opportunity come from? (Narrative Career Theory; Happenstance Learning Theory, Krumboltz)
M5 · Your Place in Aotearoa “What does belonging mean, and what is my role?” Taha Whānau + Wairua	Who already makes you feel that you belong here, and whom could you greet first?	What support is already available within the culture you are entering that you have not yet accessed? (Transition Theory, Schlossberg, the Support dimension)
M6 · Overcoming Barriers “How do I stay well while doing all this?” All four walls + Mauri	Which wall of your whare feels unstable today, and what is one small thing you can do to support it?	When the outcome is not yet clear, what helps you trust the process and take the next step anyway? (Positive Uncertainty, Gelatt)

Mauri is not a soft metric; it is the leading indicator. A student whose Mauri is restored attends the interview, asks for help, and accepts an opportunity that feels intimidating. A student with depleted Mauri does none of these things, regardless of the strength of their CV. When we protect Mauri, we do not just help people obtain employment. We help them ensure their

well-being while they do it. That is career development at its deepest.

Conclusion: Belonging Is Built, Not Given

International students are not merely enrollment figures to be counted. They are people building a life across all four walls at once.

Te Whare Tapa Whā provides career practitioners with a way to recognize all four walls. The reframes help us change our language. The four questions help us change our conversations. The six-module map helps us change our programs. The Mauri check indicates whether any of these changes are effective.

Belonging is not something you wait to be given. It is something you build.

Our role is to provide people with the tools needed for every wall of the house and then step aside while they build. Culture is most powerful when it is lived, not laminated. The same is true of a framework.

Whāia te iti kahurangi; ki te tuohu koe, me he maunga teitei

“Seek the treasure you value most dearly; if you bow your head, let it be to a lofty mountain.”

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