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A Harvard University medical student has suggested ways in which links might be identified between Māori cultural identity and better mental health.

Stephen Pomedli, who spent time at Massey University's academy for Māori research and scholarship, Te Mata o te Tau, last year as part of an exchange programme, had an article called Cultural identity and mental health published last month.

He says the exchange programme, funded by Harvard Medical School, was a valuable opportunity to learn, compare, and contrast the experiences of different cultures and consider the similarities as well as differences between indigenous peoples.

"Te reo Māori, for example, is unique to, and distinct within the Māori world, and thus may be especially useful in evaluating certain aspects of cultural identity," Mr Pomedli says.

"A possible option would be to look at the relationship of an individual's ability in te reo, their satisfaction with this level of ability and participation, and the mental health of those individuals that self-identify as Māori.

"This analysis would offer a unique opportunity to examine a variable of cultural interest such as te reo, and to consider what possible relationships to mental health, if any, exist.

"Overall, I was interested in exploring some of the methods and identity scales currently being used to assess cultural identity and ways in which these scales might be modified to better capture the experiential identity of indigenous peoples in the 21st century. I was interested in how these scales might subsequently be used to make associations between cultural participation, experience and identity, and mental health.

"In terms of the Māori language, I proposed that it may be interesting to quantify language ability in te reo Māori and see how this correlates with subjective experience in terms of individual satisfaction with one's participation with the Māori cultural world, ultimately to see if this putative correlation impacts mental health indicators.

"One of the most interesting things that I learned from my time at Massey relates to the dynamism of the Māori culture, and the way in which Māori culture has adapted and continues to adapt to the multitude of forces from without and within. It was fascinating to hear about, read about, and consider how these forces have shaped the culture in the past, and how Māori continue to reassert their core values in new ways within the 21st century context, and still retain tangible ties to the values of the ancestral culture."

Mr Pomedli is 24 years old and is in his second to last year of medical school at Harvard in Boston, Massachusetts. He is currently completing a psychiatry clerkship at Mclean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts.

Te Mata o Te Tau Director, Dr Te Kani says he was impressed with the depth of Mr

Pomedli's analysis of cultural identity and how this could be measured.

“Te Mata o Te Tau aims to provide a forum for fostering Māori academic advancement and creating new knowledge. As an international scholar Mr Pomedli's paper is making a contribution to Māori development,” Dr Kingi says.

“While his paper stopped short of establishing a link between culture and positive mental health he did raise a number of important points for consideration and highlighted the complexities involved with measuring identity in a contemporary context.”