SUPervising
DOCTORATES
DOWNUNDER

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CHAPTER 21

Supervising Māori doctoral candidates

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years there has been a steady increase both in the number of Māori candidates enrolled in doctoral programs in Aotearoa New Zealand universities and Māori doctoral completion rates. While this is heartening, we shall need to wait and see if rumours of a trend are premature. Māori doctoral candidates form a small and statistically vulnerable group, comprising only 6.0 per cent of all domestic candidates. Moreover, the combination of high student attrition in the first year of study and lengthy completion times suggests that predictions about future retention and degree attainment rates should be made with some caution. However, the Tertiary Education Commission has recently established a series of Māori education development strategies aimed at increasing the number of Māori in higher degree study, and over the next few years it is likely that universities will be strongly encouraged to embed these principles into their institutional profiles. Alongside these initiatives, new funding formulas supporting Māori educational success in tertiary settings should, with judicious planning and allocation of institutional resources, lead to strengthened Māori doctoral enrolments and completions across a range of academic disciplines.

However, as it stands at present, doctoral advisers are often disappointed when able and enthusiastic Māori candidates they have mentored throughout pre-doctoral programs decide to withdraw from study early in their doctoral candidature or, alternatively, take longer to complete degrees than other student cohorts. While the reasons behind these decisions and delays in completing theses vary greatly according to personal circumstances, protracted completion rates
and early attrition have long been exigent factors in Māori doctoral education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

MĀORI CANDIDATES

Part of the reason for early attrition has been a mismatch between Māori educational needs and priorities in relation to the production of higher-level knowledge, and university expectations about higher degree study. Complex knowledge systems are applied in tribal settings for the benefit of current and future generations, and usually have tangible outcomes either through increasing the collective prosperity of the tribal group or developing the material wellbeing of the tribal environment, while university degrees often provide rather more tenuous benefits to a less insistently visible entity—the body of knowledge, the knowledgeable individual, or some vaguely defined future generation, social group or 'non-tribal except by accident' landscape. This is a persistent problem and one that frequently occurs when institutional and tribal cultures of knowledge interact.

Alongside these differing epistemological perspectives, it should also be noted that it is not always clear what people in universities mean when they talk about 'Māori' doctoral candidates. Indeed, the phrase 'Māori candidates' is often used as a generic term that ultimately disguises the tribal, cultural, social, economic and educational diversity that exists among Māori. Despite the fact that the size of the national Māori doctoral population is very small, and while shared understandings and common goals can often be identified within this group, candidates within Māori doctoral cohorts also, at times, display heterogeneous characteristics in terms of varying—and sometimes competing—understandings, learning priorities, goals and so on.

Moreover, dissimilarities and resemblances between the learning needs of Māori and non-Māori doctoral cohorts tend to be somewhat fluid because they are not solely defined by candidates' cultural perspectives. Māori doctoral candidates, for example, have similar requirements to other doctoral candidates in relation to effective supervision and supervisor advocacy within the wider institution. On the other hand, they are often older than their non-Māori counterparts, and this may well lead to a different kind of supervisory relationship from that experienced with younger candidates. Cultural factors therefore form an important, but not exclusive, part of a wider picture.

Given the diversity of the Māori student population and the variety of their educational needs and aspirations, it may be tempting for supervisors to simply treat Māori doctoral candidates as culture-free individuals and be done with it. And yet this does not suffice either; rather, it frequently leads to a simmering resentment among Māori who feel they must leave their culture at the door (rather like a wet umbrella) when they arrive for supervision meetings. In
addition, opportunities for extending knowledge within a discipline are lost when Māori cultural perspectives are removed from the learning equation, or if candidates are encouraged to exclude their own cultural mores in favour of conducting their research within the existing formulas, standards and conventions of methodological, scholarly and theoretical investigation. What, then, can be done?

Perhaps the first thing that many non-Māori supervisors of Māori candidates can do is to ‘chill out’ a little. In the university environment, supervisors are expected to assist their doctoral candidates to become competent scholars who are able to conduct research and communicate the results of their investigations in a way that is recognisable to other, usually non-Māori, scholars in the field. However, the recent implementation of additional reporting mechanisms designed to ensure that candidates complete their degrees in the shortest amount of time possible has increased pressure on supervisors. In this environment, it is sometimes easier to become engrossed in the smaller technical details of thesis writing—for example, the ability to construct a simple sentence or the niceties of grammar—than with the broader intellectual development of their candidate. But a supervisor who sees only unpunctuated sentences or worries over-much about how an ethics committee will respond to a candidate application is in danger of missing the point.

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION

Certainly the myriad of technicalities that need to be mastered during the thesis process are extremely important, but the intellectual development of Māori candidates often involves a changing awareness of the cultural ideals and priorities that brought them into the university and the degree program in the first place. This is partly because Māori doctoral graduates are still very thin on the ground, and in the past, the doctorate has in the main been the preserve of Pākehā aspirants. For that reason, some of us have thought a great deal about the way in which our feelings about attaining a doctoral qualification in the non-Māori environment of the academy interacts with our understanding of what it means to be Māori and to live in the world. In consequence, culture comes into the equation in different ways and has an impact on the way people learn and what they consider to be important.

Supervisors should therefore be aware that Māori candidates are often engaged in finding their place within conventional academic structures at the same time as navigating their own changing cultural spaces. It is important, then, that an environment is created in which they may successfully find ways of managing both. In this respect, difference or diversity becomes a prime motivation in the Māori doctoral environment. Difference, as Martin (2000) writes, ‘is a movement
on from assimilation as a paradigm, whether it be at an intellectual or a cultural level, and this is where new ways of thinking about the supervision relationship can effectively recalibrate the learning environment for many Māori doctoral candidates' (p. 83). Indeed, when the supervision relationship moves synchronously with candidates' cultural perceptions about their research topics, even when those perceptions are in a state of flux, the act of supervision can itself be viewed as a 'post-assimilation endeavour'.

With this in mind, it is worth asking what a doctoral learning environment that takes Māori epistemological and cultural perspectives for granted would look like. Fortunately there are already strong models and programs operating around Aotearoa New Zealand, primarily through Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga—the government-funded Māori Centre of Research Excellence, which are open to all Māori doctoral candidates regardless of discipline or place of enrolment—and supervisors can encourage their candidates to use these as a learning resource (see Endnote 1).

Certainly the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga-initiated MAI Te Kupenga program for Māori and other indigenous doctoral candidates, which is now operating across the country, has introduced an exciting new dynamic into Māori doctoral education. The program operates on the assumption that various Māori and other indigenous knowledges and perspectives are normal modes of learning. By taking this premise for granted, candidates are free to create an intellectual environment that allows them to question, challenge and debate conventional theoretical and methodological research mores through their own scholarly and tribal networks. In the process, they are able to generate new ideas, knowledge and perspectives. Alongside these formal program events, Māori candidates have subsequently begun to establish their own student-led discussion groups within their disciplines and academic departments.

All of this may seem a little worrying for supervisors who take a proprietary interest in their candidates' progress or are concerned that they may lose a measure of influence in a candidate's intellectual development. Certainly there has been an increase in the number of doctoral candidates involved with Māori postgraduate discussion groups, who subsequently wish to explore and apply Kaupapa Māori or other related indigenous perspectives in their research. Anecdotally, we know of supervisors who are unsympathetic or unfamiliar with these ideas who have, at times, responded negatively to a candidate's desire to seek explanations that do not fit neatly into their own understanding of academic conventions. However, as Smith (2000) noted, 'Kaupapa Māori [...] challenges, questions and critiques Pakeha hegemony. It does not reject or exclude Pakeha culture. It is not a "one or the other" choice' (p. 6). Non-Māori supervisors, then, need not fear a wholesale rejection of their own cultural values or academic priorities, although they may well be asked some tricky questions. However, it is as a result of the Ngā Pae o
te Māramatanga program for doctoral candidates and the growing number of informal Māori discussion groups that have sprung up around the country, as well as the increase in Māori doctoral student numbers and the associated pressures for supervisors, that several doctoral advisers have chosen to adopt new approaches to the supervision relationship. One of these approaches involves working with clusters of Māori candidates for the purpose of reducing the level of institutional and cultural isolation experienced by many newly enrolled Māori doctoral candidates, particularly those conducting research in social sciences fields, as well as addressing the problems of early attrition and lengthy degree completion rates.

CLUSTERED SUPERVISION

Given that problems often occur early in the candidature process that affect candidate retention in the first year of study, it is important that support mechanisms are set in place either at the outset of candidature or, preferably, prior to enrolment. The slight increase in numbers of Māori moving directly from their masters degrees into doctoral study in recent years allows academic staff to begin planning clustering strategies in the pre-doctoral stages (see Endnote 2).

Clustered supervision involves small groups of Māori thesis candidates within an academic department or discipline working regularly with different supervisors. Within these clusters, Māori tribal and cultural knowledge, perspectives and ways of operating are taken for granted and embedded into group processes. How this works depends on the way in which candidates define these matters as a group; this cannot be instituted by supervisor decree, nor at the whim of one or two individuals with fixed ideas about how ‘Māoriness’ should ideally operate. Rather, the mode of operation needs to evolve with the unique rhythms and understandings of the group, and always with the knowledge that there is no single ‘correct’ way of being a doctoral student or of being Māori.

It should be noted that these meetings do not replace one-to-one sessions with doctoral advisers; rather, they are intended to create a peer environment running parallel with individual supervision in which specific research and thesis writing skills can be developed. This also provides an opportunity for candidates who already have strengths in a particular area (such as theoretical knowledge or research design) to pass their knowledge on to others who are new to the process of building understandings at the doctoral level. In academic departments where there are simply not enough Māori candidates to form even a very small group, it is often possible to work across disciplines with supervisors and Māori doctoral candidates in related fields, and this also adds a valuable interdisciplinary perspective to the doctoral research process.

This approach tends to work well when the transition from the masters degree to the doctorate becomes a shared experience. Moreover, candidates often have
similar learning requirements in the transition period, and pressure on supervisors is reduced if they can deal with these needs in group situations rather than having to repeat the same information several times over to different candidates during one-to-one supervision meetings. We have noticed that members of clusters often meet their thesis and research deadlines in a timely fashion because this actively contributes to the progress of the group as a whole. In this respect, Māori doctoral clusters can be viewed in terms of a community of learners who have changing cultural and scholarly needs, rather than as separate individuals working in intellectual and cultural isolation.

We have also found that candidate clusters do not increase the workload of supervisors. On the contrary, when candidates have a pool of academic advisers to draw upon for information and advice, and when they are building their thesis skills within a group environment, one-to-one supervision sessions are likely to become much more focused and less likely to be sidetracked by roundabout or circular discussions that achieve very little. The primary supervisor, then, is not replaced; rather, he or she has recourse to a group of colleagues who can be relied on to impart their own knowledge and skills with newly enrolled doctoral candidates, ensuring that the load is shared rather than increased.

In the early enrolment stages of candidature, candidates and supervisors need to jointly identify the shared learning needs of members of the cluster and plan the program. Generally speaking, monthly cluster meetings are sufficient to meet candidates' needs. In the initial phase of establishing a group cluster, it seems to work best if candidates leave meetings with a sense that they have not only had a forum to interact with their peers, but also that they have learned something new that has immediate relevance to their thesis research. We usually offer presentations or workshops intended to develop new research competencies or extend existing skills, and we always ensure that our sessions are directly linked to the candidates' topics or their current thesis concerns. For that reason, our sessions are highly interactive and candidates are provided with opportunities to work on a piece of their own writing or thesis planning, either as a group or in pairs.

In the past, we have run sessions aimed at increasing candidates' awareness of topics such as: writing research proposals, the writing process, framing a research question, developing a literature review, effective supervision relationships, thesis planning and goal setting, academic and university expectations of doctoral candidates, university library databases, and university administrative requirements. When we hear of academic staff and other colleagues who have developed workshops on topics of interest to our candidates, we invite them in to meet the candidates so that group members have a chance to widen their circle of acquaintance with university members outside our academic department who can offer new resources or skills.
Alongside the skills-based training that takes place within these clusters, candidates also report back on thesis work they have done since the previous meeting and identify goals for the following month. This gives candidates an opportunity to provide support and encouragement to each other; it also serves the purpose of giving supervisors early warning if a student is floundering or becoming overwhelmed with non-thesis concerns, which are likely to affect their ability to manage their research for a period of time (for example, sick children, whānau and/or tribal commitments, financial problems, job stress). It is often the case that when these issues are discussed within the group, other members are able to suggest solutions or coping strategies for dealing with matters that may, on the face of it, seem insurmountable to a student. Candidates are also encouraged to present aspects of their own work to the group or facilitate discussion on matters of mutual interest, such as methodological approaches or theoretical frameworks.

It is our intention that candidate clusters need to become autonomous at around mid-point of the thesis process. Our goal is to support Māori doctoral candidates to manage these clusters themselves once group members are willing and able to do so. Academic staff are then released to begin new clusters while drawing on the strengths of more established groups of Māori candidates. Ideally, once a cluster has become entirely student-governed, members can apply to supervisors or other members in their academic and/or tribal communities to run workshops or sessions on a one-off basis, if and when the group desires. These clusters can be linked to other groups of Māori doctoral candidates across Aotearoa New Zealand through national organisations such as Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga’s MAI Te Kupenga program. In this way, Māori clusters can operate at both local and national levels and active Māori scholarly networks can be developed in consequence.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

While the purpose of these clusters is to provide support and skills training for newly enrolled Māori candidates at a vulnerable time in their candidature, this works best when candidates have a vested interest in the planning and delivery of the program and are actively creating a sense of Māori community and identity within the academy. The ultimate goal, however, is to find ways of ‘normalising’ the Māori doctoral presence in the culturally isolating environment of many academic departments. At present, being a Māori doctoral student usually means being very alone. We hope that candidate clusters will eventually contribute to a shift in understanding whereby being a Māori doctoral student means being part of a large and active community of Māori scholarship within academic disciplines and across Aotearoa New Zealand universities.
SUPERVISING MĀORI DOCTORAL CANDIDATES

QUESTIONS

1. What would a doctoral environment in which Māori cultural values and understandings were taken for granted look like, and what can supervisors do to help to create it?
2. How might your discipline change if Māori epistemologies were embedded within it, and what assumptions might be challenged?
3. What might be other ways of building a sense of Māori doctoral identity and scholarship within an academic department or discipline, and how might Māori doctoral candidates and supervisors in related fields be encouraged to work in cross-disciplinary clusters?

ENDNOTES

1. Ngā Pae o te Mīrāmatanga—the Māori Centre of Research Excellence—is a national organisation hosted by the University of Auckland. The MAI Te Rupenga (Māori And Indigenous) doctoral program is a nationwide program run in several locations across the North and South Islands, which is open to all Māori and other indigenous doctoral candidates. The purpose of the program is to build Māori and other indigenous research capacity through creating a critical mass of Māori doctoral graduates. In addition to monthly local and regional meetings, candidates from around the country regularly gather at ten-day research writing retreats, national MAI doctoral conferences, and other country-wide events. As a result, there is now an active network of emerging Māori researchers who have established a strong sense of scholarly identity within their own institutions, as well as in disciplines and physical locations across Aotearoa New Zealand. Candidates can also apply for Ngā Pae o te Mīrāmatanga-funded doctoral scholarships, and summer research internships are available for pre-doctoral candidates. Further information about the program can be found online at: http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/Miramatanga/Mai/

2. New Zealand Ministry of Education (2006) figures show that the number of Māori moving directly to doctoral studies in the year following the completion of their masters degrees has risen slightly from 7 per cent in 2002 to 10 per cent in 2005. (See Ministry of Education 2006, p. 98, below)

REFERENCES


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