

He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

2. Reasons for doing a doctorate

I was encouraged by the old people at home to complete research to a doctoral thesis level, and particularly by one of our leaders when he was alive. I feel very passionate about the knowledge that I'd acquired particularly from my grandmother when I was a child, and I felt that definitely I had something to contribute. And to be recognised, one has to produce to a certain academic standard and the doctorate was the benchmark. (Student)

My doctoral journey was prompted by he moe tapu, which is a sacred vision. At the core was the advancement of Māori. I had a spiritual vision about this particular place and within that dream was an urgent need for me to advance its kaitiakitanga. (Student)

When I started doing some tutoring, I recognised that I really enjoyed the experience of teaching in the university environment. So I was encouraged that doing a PhD might be a really good idea. But another considerable part about it too is that it's very hard to go anywhere in science without a PhD. I worked for a little as a technician in a lab, and I didn't feel like it was an advantage to have a brain in my head. (Student)

Introduction

Students undertake doctoral studies for a wide variety of good reasons. Many we talked to had reasons for doing a doctorate that extended beyond their personal development. Their focus was often on the greater good of their communities, and this would be reflected in the kind of research they undertook—for example, a socially focused study might stem from a student's desire to benefit their iwi. Many supervisors were also actively committed to contributing to progress for Māori within our society and expected or encouraged students to do the same. Some also actively promoted doctoral studies to Māori students with a view to building Māori representation in academia.

Supervisors in particular emphasised the importance of the student knowing why they were doing a doctorate and of researching a topic that would still excite them in three years' time. (For more on this, see *Choosing a research topic*.) Supervisors described how it's distressing for everyone if a student doesn't complete their doctorate, and many thought this was more likely where there was a lack of clear reasons for embarking on the project. Here are some of the experiences and insights shared with us by students and supervisors, along with some guidelines for you as a doctoral student.

Progressing their career

I had decided by then that academia was the place for me. I'd found my niche as it were. It took me all these years in education to finally find a place that I felt was like home to me. And so my thoughts were that if you choose these places to make a commitment, then a PhD's mandatory. (Student)

The main reason why I wanted to get into a PhD was primarily for financial gain and also to further my career in the agency that's currently sponsoring me. In order to get ahead there, you pretty much have to have a doctorate, because the way the system's set up is for scientists to lead research programmes. And, to be a scientist, you must have a doctorate. (Student)

Many students talked about needing to have a doctorate to further their careers both inside the academy and out. Some students simply loved academia and this fuelled their passion for doctoral research; others recognised that to be taken seriously in their field they must have a PhD. They spoke about not being able to run research projects or get certain positions otherwise. Other students were expected to complete a PhD as a condition of their employment. One Māori supervisor frankly put it to his employees: "Are you going to do [a PhD] or not? If not, your contract will be terminated."

Although some of these reasons were created by external circumstances, they also became a personal motivation for the student and often meant extra support in terms of funding and/or employment from their institution.

Being interested in the topic

I thought it would challenge me, but also that it would give me a chance to sort of voice some things which are of huge interest to me. (Student)

I was just aware what sort of interesting, exciting things were going on. It was really fascinating to me in a sort of intellectual sense seeing what people were doing and I was really conscious that the only people writing about the process were lawyers advising them and of course they have a particular role and a particular viewpoint. It was a whole lot of wider questions that kept on coming to mind and I was interested in documenting some of that stuff more formally and having an opportunity to think about it, because of course in the day-to-day work you don't have time to do that reflective process. (Student)

Our students are usually driven by a passion to do it and so not finishing is usually not an option and we find ways to get through. So they're very committed, they haven't just wandered into it. (Māori supervisor)

Most of the doctoral students were very passionate about their thesis topics. The topics had come from a personal interest or a desire to contribute to their hapu or iwi, so undertaking research was itself intrinsically rewarding. Some students' research arose out of prior postgraduate study or employment; for example, a student whose topic and employment were both related to Māori broadcasting. Others built on prior experience; for example, the student who followed a doctoral study path that reflected her desire to advocate for Māori with specific health issues. She was able to produce work that both conveyed her personal struggles and facilitated change in the community. Being motivated to research areas close to their hearts meant that students were more likely to enjoy their doctoral studies, while supervisors pointed out that a student's interest in their topic was often a crucial component in completing.

Undertaking a doctorate based on whānau or iwi motivation

I completed that project and the Rangatira Hauora or Chief of Health for that tribe said, 'By the way I need you back here next week because you have to do at least a master's on this, preferably a PhD please.' (Student)

It used to be that the PhD was an entrée into becoming an academic worker. For Māori the PhD isn't always that, it is often about a whole lot of other things. And nothing to do with getting a lectureship at the other end of it. For so many of them, they are the first ones in their whānau, and it's because they want to show their own children or their whānau or their hapu or their iwi that it can be done. And, if one person goes through, then it creates a pathway that other people can go through. And so it's not about getting the job at the other end of it, it's actually about creating openings. (Māori supervisor)

It was common for our participants to have some form of hapu, iwi or tupuna-based motivation for doing a doctorate. A few students had been told explicitly to do a doctorate by their kaumatua for a particular purpose relevant to their iwi. One student's primary reason for doing a doctorate was a moe tapu from her tupuna in which she was prompted to use her PhD for the advancement of Māori. Another wanted to validate knowledge that had been handed down to her by her grandmother. While many other students may not have received explicit instructions, the concept of role modelling education to their whānau was a strong motive for doing a doctorate. Some spoke about their doctorate becoming a duty at the hapu/iwi level, even in the absence of an explicit mandate. Students with these kinds of motivations often faced the paradox of increased iwi support, but also increased external pressure. So, while this form of motivation was very powerful, iwi pressures and responsibilities could also slow down a student's progress.

Viewing the doctorate as a natural progression from master's research

Why did I enrol in a doctorate? At the time I didn't think there was much difference between master's and a doctorate. And I had the choice. So I thought, 'Hmmm, an extra year, that's alright.' Turned out to be a lot more extra years. So it was kinda by mistake more than by bigger picture thinking. Uninformed choice as it was at that time, it turned out to be a good decision. (Student)

From my particular situation, and being the person I am, I saw the completion of a master's as a natural progression for me to complete a doctorate. It was just a thing that I was going to do. (Student)

Some of the students simply considered doctoral studies a natural step after completing a master's or honours degree. This rationale for undertaking a doctorate was often coupled with another reason, such as wanting to role model education to their whānau. As in the example above, quite a few students were unaware of the actual magnitude of a PhD and began the journey fairly unknowingly. A few students were also invited to upgrade their master's projects to PhDs. Both situations had in common an element of unawareness on the students' behalf about what they were getting themselves into. Moreover, several of the students who upgraded wished they hadn't because they felt underprepared for the demands they faced.

Undertaking a doctorate for political reasons

As I went along though I came to realise the importance of having a PhD was to lift my standing within the community—not the Māori community, but in the mainstream community. So it was to elevate my stance so that I could talk back to local authorities or to Pākehā, and that perhaps with a PhD they might take more notice of me. So it was absolutely not about me being above my Māori people, our Māori people, but it was more being able, being above the Pākehā people at least, at their level as they perceive it. (Student)

I'm very clear there's a deal going on here, when I supervise. It's not just about, as it might be in other areas, producing good research, or producing a qualification. Actually we are training these people because we need them in the cause, for the Māori community. (Māori supervisor)

As both student and supervisor acknowledge here, doctorates done by Māori students often end up as political statements. This may be due to the politically useful skills a doctorate equips a student with, or the sometimes controversial research topic, or simply the status a person achieves once completing the qualification. Some theses became political instruments because students were challenging an aspect of society by simply exploring Māori issues within a predominantly Pākehā environment. A few supervisors spoke about recruiting students for “the cause”; that is, producing people and research that from the outset promote the advancement of the Māori community. And some students, too, chose to undertake doctoral studies to challenge some element of society they felt was wrong. However, one supervisor cautioned: “Suspend the cause, suspend the battle while you're doing your PhD. It can't be that you will personally solve all the woes of Māoridom in three years.” This comment reflected the view of many supervisors that doctoral students often had ambitions for their doctoral research that exceeded what was achievable within the doctoral framework: in these cases, a big part of supervision in the early stages was to turn that big ambition into a doable project.

Some guidelines for deciding to do a doctorate

- Be clear about why you want to do a doctorate—you need reasons that will keep you going in the face of all sorts of competing demands, but they don't need to be the same reasons as other people's.
- Choose a topic that will keep you going for three or four years—but watch out for ones where you are already convinced that you know the answer.
- If you want to pursue an academic or research career, a doctoral degree will be a must.
- Find out as much as you can about what you are getting yourself into before beginning (especially by talking to current or recent doctoral students).
- Doing a master's by research successfully—and enjoying it—is good preparation for undertaking a doctorate.

Although you will learn all sorts of valuable knowledge and skills, the world probably won't be saved through your doctorate—but some doctoral research does lead to significant changes or developments in particular areas of thinking and/or practice