



He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

3. Choosing a research topic

I went to a hui at the marae where the old people started getting up and telling stories and they said, ‘Someone needs to record these stories.’ And so I thought, ‘Oh, I want to do a PhD and I like those stories, how can I make those stories into a PhD?’ And so that’s where the idea was born. (Student)

I would definitely say that on the whole, looking around and looking at other people’s projects, that the personal is political for Māori. The students do bring a whole lot to it and often what they are studying is their own communities, their own settings, right down to real specificities. Very, very close stuff. (Māori supervisor)

Introduction

Many of the students we talked to were undertaking projects that had a mātauranga Māori dimension. Often the students also had political intentions, in that they hoped to contribute to improved circumstances for their iwi or for the Māori community at large in a particular sector; for example, health or social work. These dimensions had various, sometimes far-reaching, implications for their work. Other students undertook projects for which they could get funding, or through which they could learn particular skills or work with a particular supervisor. Sometimes their doctoral research was a continuation of their master’s research. 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.

Topics often came from the heart of students' lives

The chief of health for [my] tribe said, 'I need you back here next week because you have to do at least a master's on this topic, preferably a PhD please.' So I was corralled into doing the PhD on behalf of the tribe, it was not my idea, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it. (Student)

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 a certain academic status, or a certain academic standard, and the doctorate was the benchmark. (Student)

My supervisor knew I'd already done all that work and it was a passion, it was an interest of mine. So it was just a case of marrying it together, that passion and interest, into a formal sort of arrangement. (Student)

Many students were researching topics and questions that had a strong connection with their identity as Māori, with their whānau or iwi, or Māori at large. For example, some students described being *given* their thesis topic by members of their iwi. In these cases complex accountabilities ensued and the ownership of the doctoral work was not simply the student's. Sometimes the process of doing the research involved intense mentoring or grooming for leadership from a key player in the iwi and so there would be reciprocal responsibilities. Some students designed their research projects to highlight and to validate traditional knowledge. For example, one saw her doctorate as giving status to her grandmother's teachings, while another moved between the worlds of intellectual and spiritual knowing, and yet another's thesis presented a defence of the contemporary pedagogical importance of traditional narrative forms. These kinds of examples illustrate different ways in which a Māori doctoral student's thesis work may have to navigate not only separated, and seemingly incommensurate, knowledge domains but also potentially difficult emotions that may result from competing allegiances—to iwi or loved relatives on the one hand, and to the academic disciplinary community on the other.

Topics were often interdisciplinary in scope

I'd ask the students what their thesis was and it was great, you know, a fantastic idea. And I was saying, 'Well, how are you doing that?' Then I actually realised that the idea's actually all they've got. There's real difficulty, they can't drill down and a lot of this is either because they've come from interdisciplinary backgrounds and they've shifted from, say, education and now they're doing something that's sort of pushing for the Māori focus. And often they aren't familiar with—and in some cases can't even identify—what literatures they are going to need to do this piece of work. (Māori supervisor)

The student was very good at going off and reading and finding stuff from all sorts of other disciplines and bringing it together. So it felt like she was going well, but I didn't quite realise, until some time had gone on, that it was somewhat directionless. (Non-Māori supervisor)

My topic didn't fit into indigenous funding and indigenous didn't fit into the research field's funding, so I was declined by every scholarship I could find. (Student)

Many students were undertaking interdisciplinary work. This is a likely consequence of pursuing questions that have arisen through their own experience or the experiences of other members of their whānau or iwi. In other words, their research questions haven't arisen from "gaps in the literature" so much as from urgently felt social needs. Interdisciplinary work can pose challenges for finding a home department as well as supervision (because supervisors tend to be positioned within a disciplinary base). It can also pose a challenge for dealing adequately (as a doctorate requires) with a wider-than-usual range of literatures and concepts. This may become particularly clear at the examination stage: like supervisors, examiners tend to be situated within a home discipline, and they may apply their discipline's norms more or less single-mindedly in the examination process.

Some research topics had very little literature

I think the biggest challenge, though, is that Māori students are working in whole new areas where there is no supporting literature. Where the literature that they're working with is full of gaps. Their question is, when you get to the nub of it, it's a real question in the real world but it's not a question in the literature world. (Māori supervisor)

So when students come to me and say, 'Why should I read? Why should I refer to anything? No one says anything about Māori, it's all international stuff, why should I read it?', I can come back quite strictly at them about the need to read, the need to learn about what other learned people have to say, the need to structure argument in certain kinds of ways. The need for a certain kind of logic, a linear logic. And they are great skills for you to have. You need them if you're gonna make a political difference in this environment. (Non-Māori supervisor)

People told me, 'Don't do that topic, nobody's ever done that before.' I say, 'Precisely the reason to do it.' And then it's, 'Where's the literature?' And I'm like, 'Somebody's got to start this.' Then I thought to myself, 'Somebody's going to start this, jeepers, what am I saying?' Because I was more or less doing it because people told me not to do it, and all of a sudden I found out I was the only one doing it, and, yeah, it's going to be hard. (Student)

In contrast to the challenge posed by too much literature (sometimes found in interdisciplinary work), we found that another challenge for mātauranga Māori research is that there is often very little published literature. This means the student does not have an established research context in which to situate their work, with which to dialogue, and through which to make their work more intelligible to other researchers. It means students will have to throw their reading nets quite widely, even a bit eclectically, in order to find literatures and arguments that they can connect their work with. Because, as the supervisor above says, through reading and understanding, doctoral students learn more deeply how to make their own arguments in ways that are valued within contemporary political spheres. In this sense, the lack of literature is an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Some topics came through supervisors or previous academic work

I basically said to this potential supervisor, 'No, look I've got my dreams and I really want to go overseas to do my PhD.' And he was really lovely, he basically said to me, 'Well, I know a lot of people in this research community and we believe that a PhD in New Zealand has greater value than an overseas one, because you don't work on one area of the project, you work on all of it.' And he said, 'I'll help you follow your dreams.' (Student)

My PhD is an extension of my master's. For my master's I did not have the tools and the resources at the time to do it properly in the time frame. That was a combination of the technology at the time and also the national controlling body was very precious about what I wanted to study. (Student)

Not all doctoral research topics arose from cultural or political concerns. In some disciplines research is very dependent on significant funding, and in these areas students were likely to be pursuing research topics that could attract funding or that already had funding. Sometimes they might have taken on a topic because they wanted to work with a particular supervisor who was a leading researcher in the area worldwide.

Some topics are dangerous

It's dangerous when their topics are totally dependent on the fact that they work in an institution or they know a certain group of people with whom they want to do research. Because, you know, there's been a couple of cases where the person had a fight with the institution, got kicked out or left, so that study collapsed and they had to go and find another topic. (Māori supervisor)

I had a PhD topic before in which I recorded a process between a Māori organisation and a service company. Kaupapa Māori was the framework that was to be used all the way through. It did to the point of the first stage, but what the service company realised was that they couldn't do a kaupapa Māori system even if they tried. They couldn't fathom how the organisation worked in a kaupapa Māori framework. In the end that company took everything, they took the first stage, they took the whole documentation, they took everything and the organisation was left with nothing. And, although it was three years of my PhD, I had nothing in the end. (Student)

I've found sometimes that you've gotta try and put brakes on people's enthusiasms for going off on tangents and preaching. You have to be really careful about that sort of thing, everything you say must be backed up by evidence that you've interpreted. Okay, your interpretation may actually be a personal reaction to something, but the evidence has got to be produced. (Non-Māori supervisor)

One potential student sent me a whole lot of material that she'd written and her whole proposal. And the thing with it was it was boring. My first response to it was, 'Oh, God, I don't want to read this.' But she was so passionate about it. I said, 'Do you really want to do this for three years? Because if I was doing this, I'd be bored.' She was kind of shocked, and then I said 'Well, think about it, if you're gonna do this for three years, is that really what you want to do?' I think some of them don't realise it's a long time to carry a kaupapa. It does have to have something interesting in it. (Māori supervisor)

We heard about various kinds of dangerous research topics. One kind was those topics where the student thinks from the outset that they know the answer to their research question and so is unable to see anything to the contrary. Sometimes this was because the student had very strong feelings or past experiences in relation to the topic. In such cases, a student may resist any alternative interpretations of their research material, and the supervisor may come to feel that the student is unsupervisable.

Another dangerous kind of topic was one that was totally dependent on another organisation or group of people to complete. In some senses, all research that involves other human beings is risky in this way, but sometimes the risk is particularly acute. Having said that, some students went ahead with projects that were "dangerous" in just that way and produced very successful work.

Yet another dangerous kind of topic was one that was not substantial or interesting enough to keep the student stimulated for at least three years nor to lead to a substantial enough thesis! In contrast, several supervisors and students talked about another kind of research topic that is just as dangerous—the one that is too big, that takes what seems like a lifetime to complete.

Some guidelines for choosing a good research topic

- Choose a topic that is going to keep you interested for at least three years—and that feels worthwhile.
- If your topic is interdisciplinary, think about what your home discipline will be (and talk to others about this).
- Make a preliminary exploration of the literature as part of deciding on your topic so you know how the land lies.
- Consider finding a supervisor you want to work with and learn from—and then choose a topic in conjunction with their research interests.
- When you think you've got a topic, examine it for "dangers"—talk about it with other experienced researchers or fellow students who are further down the track.
- Find a supervisor who is as excited by your topic as you are.

Be open to unexpected findings, perspectives and answers to your research question.