



He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

5. Getting cultural advice for your research

I also have a couple of kaumātua who I have conversations with. One of those relationships is relatively formal, he's like a mentor, and he will come over and talk things through. And another one, Auntie Ani, is more informal but we spend a lot of time talking about things, including my research. I take a lot out of those conversations. I'm not related to either of them in a blood sense, they're just committed to supporting me. (Student)

We set up an advisory team. A lot of it was around both the cultural safety aspect for her but also protection for her, because, you know, she's looking at Māori and health. We wanted to ensure that she was protected in her process as well and that she had a strong group of Māori practitioners and tikanga specialists. (Māori supervisor)

Introduction

Formal academic supervision was frequently complemented by more or less formal cultural supervision—for example, through an advisory panel or one-to-one mentoring. Both students and supervisors described the value and importance of this advice, especially when the student's research topic had a mātauranga or kaupapa Māori dimension. In most cases the student took the lead role in setting this up, drawing on existing relationships or obligations. In other cases—for example, if there were potential professional implications coming out of the research—the supervisors assisted. Sometimes the supervisor fronted up with the student before their advisory group or iwi, especially in the early stages of developing the research proposal, but when the arrangement was more one-to-one, the supervisor usually had no involvement. Some supervisors thought the student had a right, as an adult, to involve whomever they wanted in getting advice for their 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.

Secondary Māori supervisors

[He] is officially on my supervision team as my Māori adviser and that was because of the tikanga Māori component. Me and my main supervisor had a really good talk about it. We both said that he's sort of been my mentor for a long time, so we wanted to officially recognise him as someone who's contributed to our work. (Student)

Sometimes I've become the supervisor—it depends often on the student and the department—but the fact that the student's Māori is the factor. Because what happens if their topic gets too difficult, or the student becomes too difficult, the main supervisor gets stuck, they don't know what to do, they don't know how to motivate the student or they let the student play games with them. So it's often there I'll kind of intervene and just, say for a year, take over that part of the process. (Māori supervisor)

Several supervisors talked about being invited into supervisions because they were Māori and the main supervisor was not. Often they had little or no relevant disciplinary expertise, and they took more or less active roles depending on the situation. Non-Māori supervisors also talked about including Māori colleagues because they felt anxious about their lack of knowledge and/or they wanted to ensure the student was well supported from a cultural point of view. Or, as in the case cited above, the supervisor did not know how to respond to their student effectively when things were not going well. (Some non-Māori supervisors described actively seeking advice from Māori colleagues as well.) Including Māori supervisors in the supervision “team” gives the advantage of having a cultural adviser with formal responsibility towards the student and their project. It can also benefit the Māori academic, who should get workload recognition for their role, whereas if they do the work informally, they won't. Inviting Māori supervisors in from outside the discipline is largely a result of insufficient Māori supervisors in some academic areas, which results in a heavy workload for existing staff. One of the long-term effects of there being more Māori doctoral graduates could be to change this situation, as more go on to become academics.

Community-based cultural advisers

The student had a much closer relationship to the advisory team than I did, and just before she submitted she had a big meeting with them, and immediately after submission she did too. She really held tight to that because I've seen other people put this into place and then not use it. I think she realised that she actually needed it. (Māori supervisor)

This student has a very strong mentor in his life, who's also very active. In a sense he's the student's other supervisor. The student is actually being groomed for a leadership role and the mentor's taking a very active hand in that. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Throughout my research I've always gone back home and always consulted with my aunty and always consulted with my kaumātua very regularly. So I've had a lot of guidance and direction from many of the kuia, although many of them have passed on now. It's been a journey and experience. The direction may not have come directly from the old people but it was more a spiritual force down through the tūpuna. (Student)

Now what's really important in that process is a concept that I theorise called ‘apprenticeshiping’, engaging in one's own apprenticeship in methodology, in the embracement of kaumātua and kuia. (Student)

Community-based cultural advisers can play a very important role for the student and their project, providing all sorts of contextual and local advice, connections and emotional support. However, this advice takes place at the interface between academic requirements and cultural and community-based requirements, and these things don't always mesh easily. As the supervisor above says, it's important to think about why you need such advisers and what kind of role they might play. Some of the most successful arrangements described to us were very informal and drew upon pre-existing iwi and whānau relationships. Mostly the student initiated the relationships—but sometimes they also grew out of the

research design to include participants. An issue that sometimes arose was when the adviser did not understand the nature of academic work and time frames. Whether or not the supervisor got involved in this relationship varied across the different stories we heard.

Cultural advisers have an essential role in some research

I couldn't have gone to the old people's places without my father. It just wasn't appropriate. The first interview that I did was with a kuia and, when I rang her and asked if she would like to participate, she said, 'Yes, yes.' And then she said, 'But you will bring someone with you, won't you dear, somebody that I can talk to,' she said, 'like your father.' 'Cause they were friends in the church together. (Student)

The student had to present his proposal and we went into the tribal trust board rooms, which was quite a daunting place for a Pākehā person. So I found to my amazement rather than us telling the board what this was all about and what the student's role was, they proceeded to interrogate us both on what we thought we were doing, what we wanted to do. They controlled that process very tightly, they asked the questions and we answered. Basically I found to my amazement, and actually my delight as well, though we were very much on edge, that they were running the show and they would find out what they wanted to know. They laid some very strong requirements on both of us to make sure we reported back regularly, to make sure that whatever was written was respectful to the tribe. And that the student should seek advice constantly, which he did. And they were trying to see that I knew enough to know what I was getting into. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Sometimes the role of the cultural adviser was essential for the research to be able to proceed. In the student's quote above, she describes how access to her research participants depended on the physical presence of someone they trusted from within their everyday world. In the supervisor's story, he was taken aback but then pleased at the level of involvement that the tribal trust board wanted to have. From his perspective, this gave the student a strong structure to work within and he felt supported as a supervisor. These kinds of stories were quite common in our interviews.

Students often set up the advice on their own initiative

Some of those students have felt that they wanted formal Māori advisers or co-supervisors, and that's usually happened outside of my knowledge or, not so much knowledge, but I don't have anything to do with that. They can go off and talk to whoever they like in terms of Māori input. And they do, not just formally, but informally, all the time. (Non-Māori supervisor)

I would go and talk with my kaumātua. It was informal. I would sit with them and get their advice. Like if I was going to a marae outside of my rohe, say down on the Bay of Plenty or West Coast way, I would talk to the kaumātua about what I should do, how I should approach it and did they know those kaumātua there. And I'd give them the names and they knew them. (Student)

In most cases, students set up relationships with their cultural advisers independently of their supervisors, and supervisors were happy with this. Because of the advanced level of doctoral education, the maturity of most Māori doctoral students and the cultural demands implicated in many of their research projects, the student was expected to have autonomy over such matters. At the same time, supervisors appreciated knowing who else the student was consulting and, in some cases, expected to have contact with those individuals or organisations, at least at the beginning stages. In some cases the adviser(s) clearly wanted to have contact with the supervisor in order to assess their awareness of the responsibilities the student was undertaking.

Recognising the work of cultural advisers

Part of my contribution back to my mentor is we're putting him through a professional certification course, because that's what he wanted to do. So it's quite a clear relationship, it's a reciprocal relationship. And I've indicated to him that when I get further into my writing, I'll need to call on him more. (Student)

Every year I make sure I budget for koha. For example, the student's kaumātua came to Auckland one time, not specifically about the project, but I gave him some koha for petrol. It becomes very important because the request to assist the student happened at a time when the kaumātua was coming anyway, but he may not have come quite that quickly. My institution is very good, they don't ever question those kinds of expenses. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Because the role of cultural adviser is usually informal, it often goes unacknowledged and unrecompensed by institutions. Some of our interviewees talked about finding monies (or petrol vouchers etc.) for koha from their institution, and others talked about more personal ways of recognising the contribution their cultural advisers made.

Cultural advisers are not always needed

I've had other students who have had advisers in the community, and I've had varying degrees of satisfaction with them. I'm always interested in why students think they need all this advisory support. Because some of them want to set up very elaborate sort of advisory structures and it's all about this shared kind of project under kaupapa Māori. And then I have two anxieties about that. One is that I'm beginning to think, who does the student think's gonna do the work? And another, you can design neat models but life doesn't work like that in research, and a student starting off doesn't necessarily know the advice they need three years down the track in their research. So they set up an elaborate structure, but in fact it can't deliver what they think it will deliver. (Māori supervisor)

There have been some notable failures of advisories going to senior Māori academics outside of the discipline in an advisory role. In one instance it worked well, in another it didn't work so well. It was just a matter of never co-ordinating it and being in the right place at the right time and, in some instances, there were mixed messages about the supervision. (Non-Māori supervisor)

There were a small number of stories of cultural advisers (academic and nonacademic) who hadn't been particularly successful and had sometimes complicated things unhelpfully. It seems to be an aspect of supervision that needs to be approached thoughtfully.

Some guidelines for including cultural advisers

- Having a Māori academic as a secondary supervisor on your supervision "team" can give formal cultural support for your doctoral work—but it may not always be possible because of academic workload.
- Finding cultural advisers from within your existing networks (including iwi and whānau) is a strong strategy for many students and projects.
- Getting cultural advice and support through membership of groups like the National Programme for Māori and Indigenous Doctoral Postgraduate Advancement (MAI) cohorts was helpful for some students we talked to (for contact details in various regions, visit the MAI website at <http://www.mai.ac.nz/>).
- If you intend to include cultural advisers, talk to your supervisor about ways to get koha, or other forms of acknowledgment, for them.
- Think through why you need cultural advisers and, where possible, talk explicitly with those you wish to invite about the kind of role you want them to take and/or that they see being required. Also, consider waiting before you make arrangements until you can see more clearly what you need.