

Reflective piece**Reflections on an action-oriented workshop: *How can more of our professors be Māori and Pasifika?***

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Abstract

There is a chronic underrepresentation of Māori and Pacific academics in our university sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. Sitting behind the disparity are a range of practices that support some groups in Aotearoa New Zealand to succeed and move more freely through higher education institutions than others. In response to scholarship highlighting this issue, a collective of students and staff at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington came together to organise an action-oriented workshop to draw attention to ways that universities are governed through power relations. Attention was also paid to mitigating power imbalances in the organisation, format, and delivery of the event, and between attendees, presenters, and event facilitators from dominant and non-dominant ethnic and cultural groups. This reflection piece is not so much a recounting of the event itself but rather an opportunity to share with the wider academic world ways in which the collective attempted to hold our university accountable for failing in their responsibilities to the people on whose ancestral lands they exist.

As scholars in Aotearoa New Zealand, we have seen our universities be publicly accused of institutional racism and found ‘guilty’ of structural bias (Roy, 2020; Brown & Tolbert, 2020). And we have adopted a national Tertiary Education Strategy that states that places of learning must be inclusive and free from racism and discrimination (Ministry of Education, 2020). Looking internationally, we have seen the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements mobilise people worldwide to stand up to racism, discrimination, and the ongoing impacts of colonisation. You may think that all of this would naturally lead to changes in who is being hired as academic staff at the eight universities across our country, to build an academic workforce that better reflects our diverse national population.

Unfortunately, there is still a chronic underrepresentation of Māori¹ and Pacific² academics in our university sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. At our own institution, Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington, over 50% of academic staff are hired from outside of Aotearoa New Zealand and are largely of Euro American origin. Within the domestic cohort, 5.6% of staff are Māori and 2.8% are Pacific compared with 16.5% and 8.1% respectively in the general population (Stats NZ, 2019). Inspired by recent scholarship about the lack of Māori and Pacific academics on permanent contracts in universities in Aotearoa (McAllister, Kidman, Rowley & Theodore, 2019; Naepi, 2019), and with the awareness that our university was literally built on land that belonged to Māori, we decided to turn the reflective lens onto ourselves and our institution.

A collective of students and staff at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington came together to organise an action-oriented workshop³ to draw attention to the lack of Māori and Pacific scholars on campus. The title for the event: *How can more of our professors be Māori and Pasifika?* An action-oriented workshop sought to: (1) raise consciousness among attendees regarding the importance of equitable inclusion of Māori and Pacific permanent academic staff, and (2) transform the hiring process by insisting that the university community move beyond epithets to work towards real change. A lengthy yet careful planning process ensured that the format, organisation, and delivery of the event acknowledge and mitigate the power imbalances between attendees, presenters, and event facilitators from diverse ethnic and cultural groups. This reflection piece is not so much a recounting of the event and its outcomes but rather an opportunity to share with the wider academic world the ways in which we have attempted to hold our university accountable for failing in their responsibilities to the people on whose ancestral lands they exist.

Designing an action-oriented workshop

As well as the wider university community, we specifically invited all senior leaders and managers, as well as members of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, as key influencers in the university. Each of our workshops also was attended by two *witnesses* who were there to really listen to what was being said (more on this below).

¹ *Māori* are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

² *Pacific* is an umbrella term used for people of the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia who may be recent migrants, long settled in New Zealand, or New Zealand-born (Ministry of Education, 2019).

³ The planning for this workshop started in 2019 but COVID-19 delayed the event from happening twice and it was eventually held in October 2020.

The focus and tone of the day was communicated to all attendees beforehand through a *Spirit of the Day* statement that read, “This event aspires to work productively with uncomfortable emotions” and asked participants to “come prepared to sit with your potential discomfort and consider what it could be attributed to”. This approach, and preparing participants for it, felt key as interrogating the beliefs and assumptions sitting underneath emotional discomfort provides the basis for productive action.

We felt, as a collective, how important it was for our event to not simply include but be led by Māori and Pacific people, be grounded in Māori and Pacific practices, and attempt to mitigate the power imbalances within the room. The event began in the university’s whareniui (Māori meeting house), where the presenters sat alongside the attendees to physically and symbolically neutralise hierarchical relationships. Liana MacDonald (Rangitāne ki Wairau, Ngāti Kuia, Ngāti Koata) oriented the group to the day’s core purpose and encouraged attendees to sit with their discomfort. Sereana Naepi (Fijian) and Hine Funaki (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whātua, Ngāi Tahu) then staged a conversation that identified core causes and charged the group with a strong sense of how vital and urgent it is to address this issue for both students and staff. Funaki asserted “my story is not for your consumption” to impress upon attendees that the event aimed to carve out spaces to normalise Māori and Pacific worldviews, rather than uphold cultural conditions that naturalise with Pākehā⁴ perspectives. In alignment with tikanga Māori (Māori protocols), this session was followed by an extended opportunity to greet each other and eat, before participants moved into workshops.

Workshops

The organising committee identified three key areas where current university processes can be changed to make a difference to the inclusion of Māori and Pacific permanent academic staff: hiring practices, culture of workplaces, and promotion criteria. The team invited people who had/were currently involved with initiatives from each of these areas, to share their learning as part of three parallel workshops for the event.

The first workshop explored various efforts to increase Māori and Pacific permanent academic staff via strategic hires and cluster hires and was run by those involved in such initiatives. Nimbus Staniland (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe) spoke on Auckland University of Technology’s Māori and Pasifika Early Career Programme (2015-present), and Kevin Shedlock (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) and Suzan Hall spoke about the School of Engineering and Computer Science’s strategic hire of two Māori and Pacific Assistant Lecturers.

With 24 Māori and Pasifika hires at AUT since 2015, Staniland noted their programme has been very successful but emphasised that strategic hiring remains only one step, as both pre-hire work to prepare current staff to support new Māori and Pacific staff and three-year post-hire support and community for this cohort, supportive academic managers, and clear reporting lines are crucial to success. Shedlock reinforced this by highlighting the isolation and added workload concerns that come with being a recent Māori hire, given extra labour in supporting Māori and Pacific students as well as staff regarding mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), and in continually convincing others as to the rigour of Māori science and work within a culture contra to kaupapa Māori workplaces.

⁴ Pākehā describes non-Māori people in New Zealand, usually of European descent.

The second workshop considered every stage of the hiring process – from job advertisement phrasing to committee membership making appointment decisions – and identified practices that impacted negatively on Māori and Pacific academic staff recruitment. The first half of the workshop drew on real examples from the facilitators' own experiences. Meegan Hall (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Ranginui) shared the difference that the wording of a job advertisement can have on the types of applicants that are attracted. Miriam Ross shared how the interview process can marginalise Māori applicants and missed opportunities to be more inclusive and welcoming.

Hall and Ross designed and facilitated the session to make the participants more aware of the implicit and explicit biases that often underpin hiring practices. The workshop culminated in group discussions about what an ideal, more inclusive recruitment process would look like. Ultimately, the workshop put the onus on the university and its staff to improve its recruitment processes, rather than defaulting to blaming the quality of the candidates.

In the third workshop, Pauline Harris (Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Rakaipaka, Ngāti Kahungunu) and Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga (Faa'a Tahiti, Canton Chinese) spoke about how mentoring and other initiatives can support and increase the retention and recruitment of postgraduate and new staff. Both presenters articulated challenges faced by Māori and Pacific Early-Career Academics (ECA). Harris spoke about the double and triple duty workloads held by Māori and Pacific scholars, which are not always valued or acknowledged by the institution. This point was reinforced by both speakers when they relayed their own experiences of working at the institution for many years as non-permanent staff before being made permanent, despite attracting large grants and sitting on government boards and advisory positions.

Harris and Chu-Fuluifaga also explained how Māori and Pacific academics can also face blatant racial discrimination, stereotyping and assumptions about their ethnic and cultural identities, for example, being mistaken for the cleaner or assumed to be a student. Unsurprisingly, large workloads, racial discrimination and dismissive attitudes from colleagues regarding indigenous knowledge and academic contributions, and the normalisation and dominance of Pākehā culture, can take a toll on Māori and Pacific ECAs. Pacific and Māori academics are often approached out of the blue to fill research bids or join committees. Chu-Fuluifaga highlighted the severe exhaustion, spiritual and mental toll of being the 'tick box' diversity person and existing "on the periphery of the institution".

Closing plenary

To broaden the reach of the workshop's insights as well as ensure the event translated into tangible commitments and actions, we ended the day with a plenary session. It began with the witnesses offering their synopses on all three workshops.

The witness role - an adaptation of the traditional notetaker role who is usually vested with reporting back key points of a presentation to a wider group - was two-fold: (1) Listen (do not contribute) to workshop discussions and report back information that addresses the following questions: What were the key things that led to successful initiatives? What were the key blockages to transformation? What does this mean here?, and (2) to model to the event attendees how difficult emotional responses to workshop content can be attributed to your ethnic and racial positioning. The rationale for the second

aspect of the witnessing role is attributed to work by Megan Boler (1999), who challenges the emotional response of passive empathy, to advance the notion of testimony and the responsibility of listening. While a notetaker may be asked to report back on group work in ways that assume distant and objective participation, the task of bearing witness emphasises the relationship between participating and listening; to “recognise oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront” (Boler, 1999: 164-165). A witness must pay attention “to herself as much as to the other ... in terms of the power relations guiding her response and judgments” (p. 167)

After the witness accounts, the event attendees brainstormed ideas for collective action inspired by what they had heard over the day. That was followed by a member of the Senior Leadership Team sharing what ideas Senior Leadership would like to pursue in light of the day. The organising committee then invited each person to write down one individual action they could make, which was collected on departure. We, as an organising team, collated both the collective ideas and individual commitments, and shared the latter in a follow-up email to participants to collectivise the project and enable accountability over time.

Recommendations from the day

Three interconnected recommendations to shift institutional culture and elicit more effective hiring practices of ECA’s came out of the day’s events.

The hiring process within the University is a significant site for corrective action. To ensure that more Māori and Pacific applicants apply and make it through the interview process, universities should look beyond advertising in predominantly Pākehā spaces. Bilingual advertisements can include sentences like, “We encourage applications from Māori, Pacific and Indigenous scholars” to make it clear to prospective candidates that they are wanted. Similarly, strategic or *cluster hires* can provide another layer of support for marginalised scholars and signal a cultural change to the hiring process.

In addition, Human Resources should understand and enact the University's *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*⁵ obligations. For example, this requires drawing on local expertise as opposed to looking externally for candidates. A formal process should outline the exact steps that were put into place to invite indigenous scholars. If no Māori or Pacific applicants are forthcoming, the search should be relaunched. Additionally, hiring committees should have a well-justified reason for not selecting a Māori or Pacific candidate.

Shifting the workplace culture from one that is competitive, and outputs focussed, to one that acknowledges the importance of relationships, will better support Māori and Pacific candidates. Often, Māori and Pacific scholars feel isolated and unintentionally excluded within departments. On one hand, they can be seen as specialists in indigenous knowledge rather than contributors to a broad range of intellectual conversations; on the other, an indigenous perspective is not valued as highly as

⁵ *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* is the Māori language version of a treaty first signed on 6 February 1840 between representatives of the Māori people and the British Crown. It outlines the basis for governance and citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Western worldview. Pākehā can better support Māori and Pacific colleagues by ensuring they are not overburdened with all the Maori and Pacific issues, like mentoring students, and providing cultural content in course syllabus.

Promotion criteria is another area in need of significant change. Universities prioritise academic outputs as opposed to relational and community-focussed work, which Māori and Pacific academics can do more of. The standard university work model is based on a division of time between research, teaching, and service, as well as standard (international, publication-focused) markers of research excellence. Changing hiring practices to ensure proportional representation of Māori and Pacific scholars, and promotion criteria to reward mentorship and community work, can help to progress Māori and Pacific academic careers, in turn changing workplace culture.

All three workshops emphasised grassroots, relational, and student-focussed approaches when working with Māori and Pacific communities. Close and supportive mentoring of Māori and Pacific undergraduates are a necessary precondition for progressing a pipeline to ECA's and beyond. Above all, when Māori and Pacific academics leave or complain it should be taken very seriously and the reason investigated. Minimum proportional representation of Pacific and Māori scholars and an institutional culture that makes universities a supportive and safe place to work are the responsibilities of every academic that lives, works, and benefits from the system that operates on unceded indigenous land.

Concluding notes

We understand that universities are places that primarily attend to the perspectives and worldviews of those from the dominant Pākehā culture (Hutchings & Lee-Morgan, 2016; Manathunga 2020). We wanted our event to disrupt and challenge the dominant cultural norms of the university (Smith, Funaki & MacDonald, 2021); to bring attendees towards the margins of the university to spaces where indigenous peoples and those from non-dominant groups tend to operate and are usually hidden, invisible or overlooked by those from the dominant culture. Through doing this, we understood that the event would evoke uncomfortable feelings about the nature of racial injustice and leave attendees with no easy answers. As the event wrapped up, we collectively looked at each other and recognized our exhaustion. This work is heavy, especially while juggling PhD thesis work for some and full-time academic job responsibilities for others. The University does not make space or time for anybody to do this radical work. In light of the collective exhaustion, we met to discuss what worked and what did not, and then made plans to regroup in a few months to write about our findings.

Several follow-up activities have taken place since the event. Our first piece of writing was a collation of the narratives and recommendations that emerged during the workshop, which the presenters and participants graciously granted us permission to share. Our second document was an Executive Summary with three distinct sections focusing on hiring practices, workplace cultures and promotion criteria, which was shared with various senior university leaders, who in turn shared it with their teams. We also met with Human Resources to discuss the summary, who then agreed to implement the recommendations to change the University's hiring practices. Two key changes are already in place — jobs advertisements are now bilingual, and jobs are advertised on search sites that cater to a non-white audience.

We see these early steps as promising but are aware that there is much more work to be done; institutional change is often arduous and frustratingly incremental. Furthermore, some parts of the University remain stubbornly resistant to change and continue to perpetuate the overrepresentation of white male scholars. In the face of such challenges our collective remains committed to leveraging the power we have to hold the university accountable for hiring more Māori and Pacific scholars.

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