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Multidisciplinary Research Collaborations, Vision Mātauranga Science, and the Potential of Anthropology in Aotearoa-New Zealand

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ABSTRACT | Vision Mātauranga policy has been created to commodify and globalise Māori knowledge that belongs to Māori communities, and is now the expected mechanism for all engagement between university researchers and Māori communities. However, much of the risk associated with forming new collaborations rests with Māori communities, and even more so with the Māori researchers who act as intermediaries and brokers between these communities and the research team. In this new knowledge landscape what opportunities and spaces for action does Vision Mātauranga hold for social anthropology? Furthermore, how does Vision Mātauranga force anthropology to be more inclusive of the descendants of Maori ancestors on whose backs the discipline was built?

Keywords: Vision Mātauranga; Māori knowledge; interdisciplinary research; commodification; science



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Let me ‘unlock my Māori potential,’ ‘share my distinctive contribution,’ and ‘wonder at the input Māori communities make to New Zealand’s knowledge economy.’ These are phrases embedded in the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (MBIE) Vision Mātauranga policy. Drawing on my participation at gatherings addressing the formation of a University of Auckland Vision Mātauranga Community of Practice, this brief discussion investigates the shifting power relationships and fluid boundaries of natural and physical scientists who make intellectual claims to natural resources, to new technologies and to social issues in which whānau, hapū and iwi (sub-tribal and tribal groupings) have cultural interests and property rights. With a focus on the shifting relationships between identity, knowledge and power, I ask what opportunities and spaces for action does Vision Mātauranga policy hold for social and cultural anthropology.

In 2003, the Ministry of Research, Science, and Technology (MoRST) started a programme to refocus investment in Māori research. As part of the programme, Charles Royal, a scholar educated at Te Wānanga o Raukawa at Otaki who later became the Director of the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (Māori Centre of Research Excellence), was commissioned to develop a programme that would ‘unlock the innovation potential of Māori knowledge, resources and people to assist New Zealanders to create a better future’ (MoRST 2007). This framework, now known as Vision Mātauranga, is underpinned by the Māori concept of mātauranga, which is often translated as knowledge, wisdom, and ways of knowing. When Māori speak of knowledge, they commonly use the word mātauranga, though words such as māramatanga (to understand), mōhiotanga (to know), and ākona (to learn) also convey much of the same meaning. For anthropologist Hirini Mead,

mātauranga can be seen as constituting the knowledge base which Māori people must have if they are to be comfortable with their Māoritanga and competent in their dealings with other Māori people. It represents the heritage of the Māori, the knowledge which the elders are said to pass on to their mokopuna, the wahi ngaro which our youth long for, and the tikitiki mō te mahunga (the topknot for your head) which Sir Apirana Ngata talked about (1997: 26).

A similar definition for the term was provided by Whatarangi Winiata, who headed Te Wānanga o Raukawa. At an address given at Te Herenga Waka Marae at Victoria University in September 2001, Winiata described mātauranga as:

A body of knowledge that seeks to explain phenomena by drawing on concepts handed down from one generation of Māori to another. ... mātauranga Māori has no beginning and is without end. It is constantly being enhanced and refined. Each passing generation of Māori make their own contribution to mātauranga Māori (cited in Mead 2003: 320).

In 2005, Royal’s Vision Mātauranga framework was approved and in 2010 the policy was integrated across all New Zealand investment priority areas, including MBIE, the Royal Society, National Science Challenges, Centres of Research Excellence, and the Health Research Council (although it is termed ‘Māori Responsiveness’ rather than ‘Vision Mātauranga’ by this last funder). A Vision

Mātauranga Capability Fund was also created at this time. Whilst the policy concerns distinctive issues and opportunities arising within Māori communities, Vision Mātauranga encourages research whose outcomes make contributions to New Zealand as a whole. Its four science research areas are:

1. Indigenous Innovation – contributing to economic growth.
2. Taiao-Environment – achieving environmental sustainability through Māori relationships with land and sea.
3. Hauora-Health – improving health and social wellbeing.
4. Mātauranga – exploring indigenous knowledge and science and innovation.

In 2012, I wrote an article titled ‘Māori Research Collaborations, Mātauranga Māori Science, and the Appropriation of Water in New Zealand.’ The article attempted to critique Vision Mātauranga policy by examining the relationship between Ngā Pae ō te Māramatanga, Ngāi Tahu iwi (tribe), and scientists with interests in freshwater. I admit now to having barely scratched the surface regarding the multiple ways the policy is used as a mechanism to advance and create relationships between scientists and tāngata whēnua (Māori) (Muru-Lanning 2012). My commentary was somewhat sceptical of the policy’s design, which does not deal with the unequal power relationships created between science experts and flax-root communities. Furthermore, I argued that Vision Mātauranga had been created to commodify and globalise Māori knowledge that belongs to Māori communities, and had now become the expected mechanism for all engagement between university researchers and Māori communities. However, much of the risk associated with forming new collaborations rests with Māori communities, and even more so with the Māori researchers who act as intermediaries and brokers between these communities and research teams.

As a researcher at the James Henare Research Centre, I have written and am a named Principal Investigator on research projects spanning the spectrum of funding bodies. Projects I am working on with Māori and non-Māori researchers from other disciplines, faculties and institutions include:

- National Science Challenge Ageing Well Fund - Kaumātuatanga in Te Tai Tokerau Feasibility Study (population health, medicine, social work, and education).
- QuakeCore Fund Whare Māori - Pilot Studies on Earthquakes Resilience of Marae and Māori-Owned Community Buildings (engineering, architecture, and planning).
- Waikato River Authority Fund - Next Generation Membrane Technology (chemistry, engineering and iwi research collaborators).
- MBIE Partnership Fund - Developing a Big Data Platform for New Zealand (electrical engineering, business management, and computing).

While there are challenges in these research collaborations, participation in multidisciplinary collaborations is where I see an opportunity for anthropology. What I have found when working with my new colleagues is that they recognise

the need to work with people who have a disciplinary training in listening to what flax-roots people think. Our understanding of kinship, inequality, hierarchies, power, and other concepts within anthropological theory allows us to bridge cultural gaps for those people that our science colleagues are not used to working with. Anthropologists may open up another world for the scientists and demonstrate that not all people think in the same way that they do. I am finding that the collaborative work our research centre does with the scientists is complementary. Vision Mātauranga, done properly, forces scholars to come together for long periods of planning where we listen to one another, participate in debates, and figure things out. I argue that what we are actually doing in these situations is participant observation. Thus, I suggest that social anthropology goes back to its roots so we may develop alternate ways of thinking and acting. Penelope Harvey offers the comment: ‘the powerful are those who have the ability to move things around’ (2001: 207). The relationship between location and movement involves the ability to create fixity and draw people into relationships with you, marking your place as central and defining the marginality of others. Instead of talking ourselves out of the game, we must carve out spaces where our disciplinary skills and training are desired and respected by our science colleagues.

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