

Making a Doctorate in a Small Dominion: The Early Development of the PhD under the University of New Zealand, 1922–1961

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Abstract

This article argues that the early PhD in Aotearoa developed through hesitation, collapse, and reinvention as the University of New Zealand attempted to build a research culture within the constraints of a small dominion. Examining the period 1922–1961, it traces the doctorate's fragile introduction, its suspension due to limited supervision and resources, and its wartime reinstatement amid expanding scientific and national needs. Analysis of early cohorts demonstrates narrow disciplinary participation and persistent dependence on overseas training. The article shows how structural inequalities shaped who could pursue doctoral study, revealing the uneven foundations of Aotearoa's modern research system.

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Introduction

On 25 May 1925, botanist John Stuart Yeates graduated with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) from Victoria University College, becoming the first person to earn a PhD in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa¹). The centenary of this milestone provides an opportunity to reassess the PhD's early development, its fragile beginnings under the federal University of New Zealand (UNZ), and its uneven path toward becoming the country's principal research qualification. Although now widely recognised and offered across all eight universities and several other tertiary providers, the degree's local origins were far from secure. For much of the early twentieth century the PhD was a contested, ambiguous, and at times unwelcome addition to the higher education landscape.

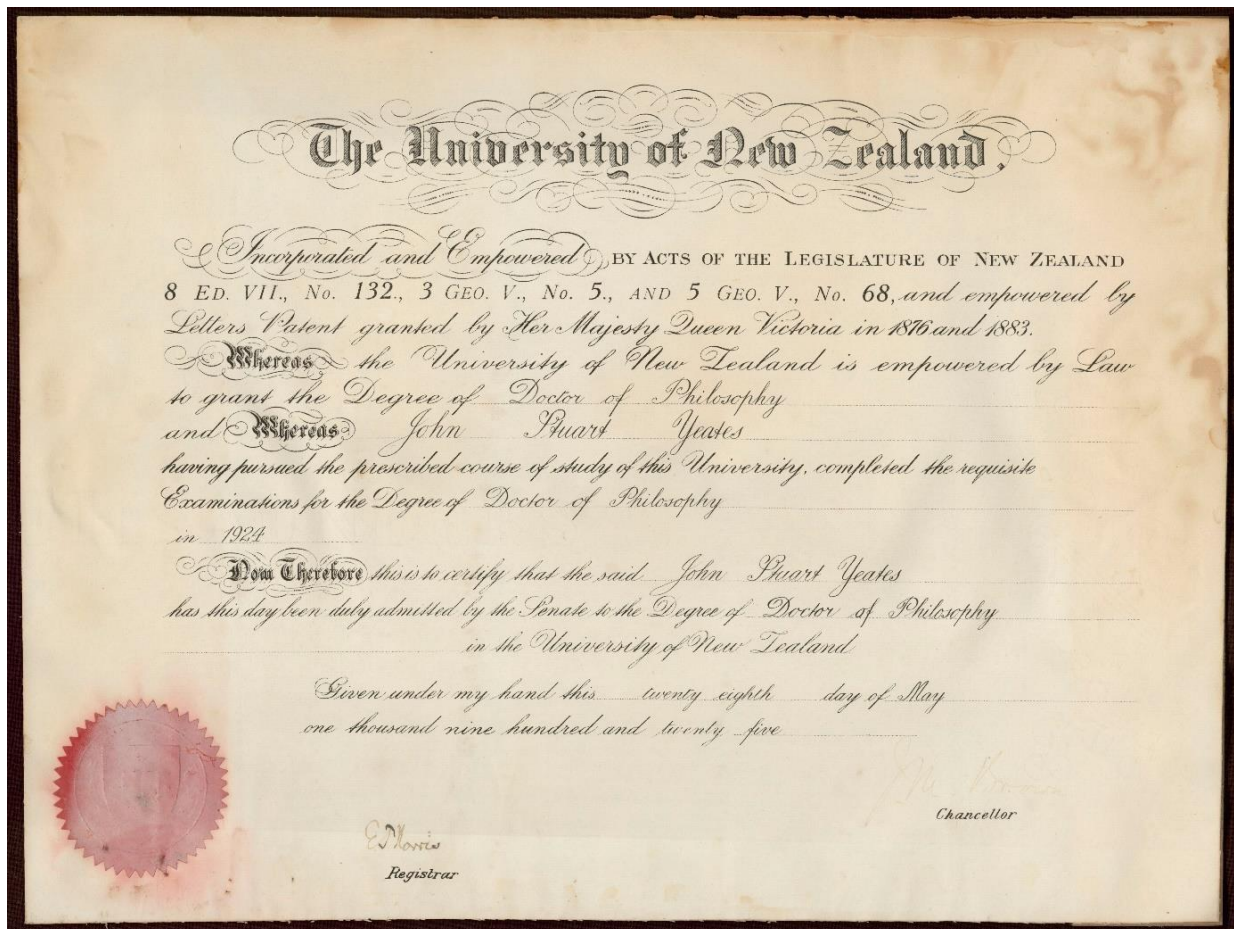


Figure 1: University of New Zealand, University of New Zealand PhD certificate – John Stuart Yeates (28th May 1925). Victoria University of Wellington, accessed 10/12/2025, <https://tapuaka.wgtn.ac.nz/nodes/view/8378>

This article examines the first four decades of the Aotearoa PhD, from its hesitant adoption in 1922 to its first cohort of graduates in the 1920s, its suspension in the 1930s, its revival in 1944, and its consolidation in the years leading to the dissolution of the UNZ in 1961. Rather than attempting a full history of doctoral education across the century, the focus is on this formative period – a time of institutional fragility, limited resources, and ongoing uncertainty about the degree’s purpose and future.

The Aotearoa PhD developed at the intersection of inherited imperial academic traditions and the practical constraints of a small settler society. The degree’s relatively late adoption in Britain after 1919 shaped local debates over how, when, and whether to introduce a research doctorate at all.² UNZ colleges possessed thin research infrastructure, uneven disciplinary strengths, and a student population accustomed to externally examined British degrees. University leaders also struggled to distinguish the PhD from existing higher doctorates, leading to decades of uncertainty and reluctance.³

This article argues that the early development of the PhD under the UNZ was characterised by institutional caution and uneven adaptation. Grafting a supervised research degree onto a system built for undergraduate teaching produced a fragile programme whose brief uptake, collapse, and revival reflected the tensions of a dominion trying to build research capacity while

remaining aligned with British norms. As Mike Grimshaw shows for Canterbury in the mid-1940s, the turn to research was neither automatic nor evenly distributed, but driven by particular individuals and institutions working against entrenched examination-centred structures.⁴ The experiences of the first graduates illustrate both the promise and precarity of early doctoral training, while the programme's suspension underscores deeper concerns about supervision, resourcing, and standards.

The article proceeds chronologically. It first outlines the development of the university system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It then examines the PhD's introduction in 1922, explores the first cohort of thirteen graduates (1925–1931), analyses the suspension of new enrolments in the 1930s, and traces the degree's wartime reintroduction and postwar expansion, situating this within the wider 'manifesto moments' that Grimshaw identifies in the 1940s push to normalise research as a core university function.⁵ It then considers the sharply limited participation of women, Māori, and Pasifika students, and concludes by reflecting on what this early history reveals about the shaping of research culture in a small dominion.

Taken together, this period shows that the PhD in Aotearoa did not arrive fully formed. It was shaped by hesitation, debate, collapse, and reinvention. Its centenary invites not only commemoration but reflection on the complex, contingent path through which a once-uncertain degree became a central pillar of academic life.

Before the PhD (1870–1920)

The early development of doctoral education in Aotearoa must be understood within the wider context of its colonial university system. Calls for local higher education led to the establishment of the University of Otago in 1869, followed the next year by the creation of the federal University of New Zealand (UNZ). Otago eventually, and reluctantly, agreed to be absorbed into the federal structure, which later incorporated Canterbury (1873), Auckland (1883), and Victoria (1897). The colleges remained small, geographically dispersed, and oriented primarily toward undergraduate teaching.⁶ Local supervision capacity was thin, and the emergence of a research culture depended heavily on a handful of scientists whose work was shaped by imperial networks and settler priorities.⁷ Although the college founding chairs were evenly distributed between arts and sciences, the institutional conditions that enabled sustained research existed primarily outside the colleges and were concentrated instead in agencies with a scientific and applied focus. As a result, in the late nineteenth-century New Zealand context, "research" was most visibly associated with empirical scientific investigation rather than with the humanities.

Early scientific research in Aotearoa was carried out largely by museum-based naturalists and fieldworkers whose practice was strongly Humboldtian in method: grounded in field observation, empirical collection, and descriptive classification.⁸ Many were gentleman professionals, working as surveyors, doctors, or lawyers, whose route into science reflected class-bound conventions and the priorities of a settler state.⁹ Their networks linked Aotearoa to German, British, and North American scientific circuits and, at times, allowed colonial researchers to bypass bottlenecks in London.¹⁰ This tradition produced substantial knowledge in geology, botany, and zoology, but it did so without an institutionalised model of supervision or graduate education.¹¹ When doctoral training later arrived, it had to be bolted onto a system whose research culture had developed largely outside the university.

By the early twentieth century, the gradual professionalisation of science brought researchers with formal qualifications into the colleges and state research organisations, particularly after

the retirement of James Hector loosened an earlier centralised control over national science.¹² Before the First World War, this work remained strongly shaped by German and British influences; the war ruptured these networks and intensified an orientation toward Britain, while the expansion of applied research culminated in the creation of the New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) in 1926.¹³ Yet the federal colleges themselves still lacked robust laboratories, graduate-school structures, and the staff required to sustain a British-style PhD.

Throughout this period, the federal university relied on external British examiners to maintain standards. Until 1939, all undergraduate examinations were sent to London for marking, a system justified in the name of impartiality but also reflecting a persistent deference to British academic authority.¹⁴ In almost every respect – including regulations, curricula, and academic dress – the colleges awarded degrees that closely mimicked British models.¹⁵ This mimicry underscored Aotearoa’s dominion status and constrained the development of local approaches to research training. The reliance on external examinations reflected what Grimshaw describes as an “idolatry of pure examination,” critiqued as early as the 1911 University Reform Association and the 1925 Royal Commission, which both argued that the UNZ fostered degree-chasing rather than a genuine research ethos.¹⁶

Before the introduction of the PhD, the UNZ already awarded several doctoral-level qualifications – what we would now call higher doctorates, such as the LLD, DSc, and DLitt. These degrees recognised sustained scholarly contribution and were commonly earned by examination of a thesis or published work, often without formal enrolment or supervision. They recognised cumulative scholarly achievement rather than structured research training.¹⁷ The first such degrees earned included Frederick Fitchett’s earned LLD at Canterbury in 1887 and the early medical doctorates at Otago in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁸ These degrees could also be awarded *honoris causa*, typically to distinguished public figures. They established a precedent for doctoral-level recognition long before the introduction of the PhD.

When proposals to introduce the PhD surfaced as early as 1906, university leaders struggled to distinguish it from existing higher doctorates and to imagine how a supervised research degree might operate in local conditions.¹⁹ In Senate, Chancellor Sir Robert Stout questioned whether scientific research should fall under a “Doctorate of Philosophy,” suggesting such a degree should be reserved for mental or moral philosophy.²⁰ His remarks reflected both disciplinary assumptions and the broader logic of the period: research was seen as the domain of scholars who had already demonstrated expertise, not students in training. The supervised model associated with the PhD was unfamiliar within Aotearoa’s academic culture.

From the late 1890s, travelling scholarships enabled promising students to study overseas, especially in Britain and North America, and several completed PhDs abroad, helping to normalise the degree.²¹ By the early twentieth century, the UNZ found itself caught between British traditions and emerging international models, yet without the resources to commit fully to either.

Even before the PhD was introduced, critics had identified structural weaknesses that would later undermine the degree: large classes, underfunded libraries, a curriculum built around external examinations, and too few staff to support sustained research supervision.²² The PhD thus arrived in a system whose regulatory framework mimicked British norms, but whose material conditions were closer to those of a lightly resourced teaching college.

The First World War also accelerated the reorganisation of science at state level. Anti-German sentiment disrupted scientific networks and redirected attention towards Britain.²³ The creation of the UK DSIR in 1916 and its Aotearoa counterpart in 1926 signalled a turn toward applied research and national coordination. Yet while state science expanded, the UNZ still lacked the research infrastructure and staffing required to adopt Britain's new PhD model.²⁴ By 1920, the federal colleges had accumulated experience with higher doctorates and were beginning to support more systematic research in selected fields. Yet the system was still small, unevenly resourced, and shaped by examination-centred practices. These structural conditions would strongly influence how – and how cautiously – the University of New Zealand approached the introduction of a supervised research degree.

Introducing the PhD (1922-1930)

When the UNZ formally adopted the PhD in 1922, international models loomed large. The degree's German origins, its expansion in the United States, and its late adoption in Britain after 1919 created a template that Aotearoa sought to emulate.²⁵ But the decision also exposed the limits of the federal structure: colleges varied in staffing and facilities, and there was no shared understanding of how a supervised research doctorate should operate in a small dominion.

By the early 1920s, conditions within the colleges were shifting. Scientific research was becoming more systematic, student numbers were rising, and returning scholars – some with overseas doctorates – offered local examples of supervised research in practice. In 1921 the Board of Studies recommended adopting the PhD, and the degree was formally introduced in 1922, appearing in published regulations the following year and in academic dress regulations in 1925.²⁶

The new degree deliberately mirrored international expectations: three years of full-time study, supervised research, and examination by thesis. This clarity of structure distinguished the PhD from the higher doctorates, which recognised accumulated achievement rather than training. Yet these very features exposed the university's limitations. Few staff had completed doctorates themselves, supervision practices were inconsistent, and the colleges' research facilities varied widely. Grimshaw's account of later debates at Canterbury makes clear that these limitations were not incidental but structural: research was squeezed by heavy teaching loads, low staffing, and libraries that fell far short of international standards.²⁷ This was compounded by noted financial struggles in the young university.²⁸ The weaknesses that would later be condemned in the 1940s were already visible at the moment of the PhD's introduction.

These weaknesses were repeatedly discussed in Senate and Examination Board minutes from the 1920s and early 1930s, echoing concerns later voiced in the 1940s research manifestos about uneven disciplinary expertise, patchy infrastructure, and the absence of any coordinated research policy.²⁹ Committees struggled with how to ensure consistent standards, how much supervision candidates should receive, and whether the federal system could manage the degree at all. Limited laboratory capacity further constrained the sciences, while in the humanities, limited staffing left few supervisors capable of guiding advanced research.³⁰

By the mid-1920s, doubts had emerged about whether the UNZ possessed the staff, infrastructure, or coherence to sustain the degree. Enrolments remained very low, and the distinction between the PhD and the higher doctorates remained unclear. Within a few years,

questions arose about whether the PhD had been introduced prematurely or without adequate preparation.

The introduction of the PhD thus exposed the tension at the heart of the UNZ system: a desire to emulate international research norms within an institution still shaped by small scale, unevenly distributed expertise, lack of appropriate research funding, and longstanding habits of deference to British academic models. The first graduates emerged from a degree that was symbolically significant but structurally fragile – an experiment in modernising research training before the university was fully ready to support it.

The first cohort (1925-1931)

Although the PhD was formally established as a supervised research degree, its early years bore strong resemblance to the existing higher doctorates. In the 1920s the distinctions in purpose between these degrees remained blurred, and graduating numbers were comparable. Only from the mid-twentieth century – mirroring developments in Australia – did the PhD begin to displace the higher doctorates as the principal research qualification.³¹

Against this backdrop, the thirteen PhD graduates of 1925–1931 provide a valuable snapshot of early doctoral culture. Their disciplinary profile was overwhelmingly scientific: botany, chemistry, agriculture, entomology, and physics dominated, reflecting national priorities in farming, industry, and applied research. The colleges' strongest supervision capacity also lay in these areas.

Geography shaped the cohort's distribution. Although nineteenth-century research strength had been concentrated in the South Island – especially at Otago and Canterbury – by the 1920s Aotearoa's demographic and economic centre of gravity had shifted north.³² Auckland overtook Dunedin as the largest city in 1911, and Wellington's expanding public service reinforced the North Island's ascendancy. It is therefore notable that roughly three-quarters of the first PhDs were completed at Auckland and Victoria. The degree's early life took root not in the colleges with the longest research traditions but in those positioned within the country's growing urban and administrative hubs.

The table below summarises the first cohort. Thesis topics are included where recorded.

Table 1: The first PhD cohort (1925–1931)

Name	Discipline	Institution	Year	Topic
John Stuart Yeates (1900-1986)	Botany	Victoria	1925	Nucleolus of <i>tmesipteris tannensis</i> , bernh
Gordon Herriot Cunningham (1892-1962)	Botany	Victoria	1927	Lycoperdaceae
John Reader Hosking (1896-1946)	Chemistry	Auckland	1927	Natural product chemistry
Rudolf George Penseler	Chemistry	Otago	1927	Synthesis of Apofenchocamphoric Acid
John Clark Andrews (d.1966)	Chemistry	Auckland	1928	Food chemistry
David Miller (1890-1973)	Entomology	Victoria	1928	Unknown
James David (JD / Jim) Salmond (1898-1976)	History	Otago	1928	NZ Labour movement to 1894
Walter James Boraman (1896-1990)	Economics	Otago	1929	Public finance in NZ to 1890
Walter Stanley Hill (1896-1945)	Botany	Auckland	1929	Lucerne growth
Wallace Armstrong Macky (1903-1988)	Physics	Auckland	1929	Unknown
Francis Gerard Maskell (1905-1979)	Botany	Victoria	1930	Unknown
Ivan Wingate Heston (1895-1994)	Economics	Victoria	1930	Agricultural economics
Earle Fead Northcroft (1896-1962)	Botany	Victoria	1931	Chatham Islands flora

Yeates's 1925 thesis inaugurated the degree in Aotearoa,³³ and he was soon followed by a group whose work formed the backbone of early botanical, agricultural, and chemical research. Several members of this cohort went on to shape national scientific institutions. Plant pathologist Gordon Herriot Cunningham became foundational at DSIR; entomologist David Miller later led research at the Cawthron Institute; and Yeates contributed significantly to agricultural and horticultural science at Massey.³⁴ Their careers demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between doctoral training and institutional nation-building: the early PhD did not merely credential researchers but supplied the scientific workforce needed for new colleges, government departments, and research institutes.

Two early humanities and social science doctorates stand out as exceptions to the scientific pattern: the Very Reverend James Salmond's thesis on the New Zealand labour movement, and Walter Boraman's work in economic history.³⁵ Their presence indicates the potential for broader disciplinary participation, even though such opportunities remained rare for several decades. While a passion for science could sustain the other scholars, humanities and social

sciences were constrained by rigid syllabi, exam-focussed teaching, and patchy library resources – the very conditions later identified by Canterbury staff and students as barriers to building a research culture in the humanities.³⁶

The survival of early theses is uneven. Many have not been preserved, reflecting inconsistent archiving and the lack of mandatory deposit before 1930.³⁷ The narrow disciplinary range also highlights where supervision capacity was absent.

Taken together, the first cohort illustrates both the promise and limits of the early PhD: it attracted capable researchers who went on to staff key scientific institutions, but in a narrow range of disciplines, at a small number of colleges, and in very small numbers.

Collapse / Hiatus (1926-1944)

By the mid-1920s, the limitations of the fledgling PhD programme had become increasingly apparent. Although a handful of strong candidates completed doctorates, concerns about supervision capacity, inconsistent standards, and very low enrolments led Senate discussions. In 1926, the UNZ resolved to halt new PhD enrolments, allowing only those already admitted to finish. Final submissions were required by the end of 1931, effectively suspending the degree for nearly two decades.³⁸ The suspension reflected recognition not of the value of research (although in retrospect this was variable), but of the university's inability to support a modern doctoral programme. Academics at the time (writing in the 1930s and 1940s) noted that the country had always run the university 'on the cheap'.³⁹ In this sense, the PhD's collapse prefigures what Grimshaw calls the mid-century "turn to research": only in the 1940s did staff, students, and administrators begin to articulate systematically that UNZ's examination-bound, under-resourced model was incompatible with serious research training.⁴⁰

Supervision was the most persistent challenge. Very few staff across the four colleges had trained in graduate-school systems that normalised structured supervision, laboratory-based research, or regular mentoring; many held master's degrees or higher doctorates awarded by submission rather than supervised study. Senate and Academic Board minutes from the late 1920s repeatedly highlight uneven disciplinary expertise, the difficulty of coordinating expectations across colleges, and the challenge of guaranteeing consistent standards within a small, teaching-oriented, federally organised university.⁴¹ The decision to suspend new PhD enrolments acknowledged these limits: the university lacked the staff, facilities, and governance structures required to sustain a modern doctoral programme.

Economic pressures compounded these problems. As the Great Depression took hold, university budgets were curtailed, scholarships reduced, and postgraduate study, already limited to a privileged minority, further restricted. Many promising graduates continued to pursue doctoral work overseas, where facilities and funding were more robust, reinforcing doubts about the feasibility of sustaining a domestic programme.

Even as the PhD was suspended, advanced research continued through the existing higher doctorates (LLD, MD, DSc, DLitt). Because these awards recognised completed bodies of work and did not require structured enrolment, they remained viable. Their persistence, however, underscored the system's limitations: higher doctorates acknowledged scholarly achievement, but did not cultivate a pipeline of early-career researchers.

No new PhD candidates were admitted from 1926 until the degree's reinstatement in 1944. During this hiatus, Aotearoa's research landscape was developed through organisations such as DSIR and the Cawthron Institute. These organisations provided limited opportunities for advanced research but did not offer doctoral training. As a result, many of the country's most promising students continued to seek training overseas, reinforcing longstanding patterns of academic migration.

The suspension of PhD enrolments was therefore not an isolated administrative act but a reflection of systemic constraints: a small, unevenly resourced, federally organised university system grappling with limited staff, insufficient facilities, severely under-resourced libraries, and economic crisis. Only after significant institutional, scientific, and demographic change during the 1930s and 1940s would conditions exist to reinstate the degree in 1944.

Reintroduction & expansion (1944-1961)

The University of New Zealand reinstated the PhD in 1944, nearly two decades after suspending new enrolments. Its revival reflected a transformed intellectual and institutional context. The Second World War had accelerated scientific research, expanded state involvement in applied science, and heightened demand for highly trained specialists. In parallel, the constituent colleges had grown substantially in staffing, facilities, and disciplinary depth compared with the 1920s.

Although pressure to restore the degree existed earlier, it was the middle years of the war that made reinstatement unavoidable. University leaders anticipated that large numbers of returned servicemen would pursue tertiary study under government rehabilitation schemes. Without a viable local research degree, capable students risked being funnelled overseas. Reinstating the PhD therefore became both a strategic response to projected postwar demand and an institutional move to strengthen the academic workforce.⁴² *Research and the University* (1945) and *Statement on Research in the Humanities* (1946), discussed by Grimshaw, gave this strategic logic a sharper intellectual edge, insisting that without a genuine research tradition – including support for humanities research – the university could not fulfil its obligations to postwar society.⁴³

This reinvigoration aligned closely with national reconstruction priorities. Postwar expansion in agriculture, chemistry, engineering, and economics required expertise that universities were expected to supply. Government departments and research organisations – including DSIR – increasingly depended on local research capacity. Doctoral training thus became central to national planning, echoing similar moves in Australia though on a smaller scale.⁴⁴

By the mid-1940s, the federal university encompassed four university colleges (Auckland, Victoria, Canterbury, and Otago) and two agricultural colleges (Massey and Lincoln). Although the agricultural colleges remained non-degree-granting institutions at this time, they played an important role in applied scientific research, further strengthening the case for a local PhD.

The first graduates of the reinstated programme completed their degrees in 1948. Chemists Richard (Dick) Dean Batt (1923–1994, Otago) and William Irving (Bill) Taylor (1923–2021, Auckland) were the first to finish, completing doctorates that reflected the continued dominance of laboratory sciences in this period.⁴⁵ Both later earned additional doctorates – Batt a DPhil at Oxford and Taylor a DSc at Auckland – illustrating the still-strong presence of overseas study and the ongoing coexistence of the PhD with the higher doctorates.

Their completions were followed quickly by others across the colleges. Mosquito biologist Marshall Laird graduated at Victoria in 1949; chemists John Trevor Law at Canterbury (1950) and William Anderson McGillivray at Massey (1950) came shortly after, alongside agronomist Diwaker Ganapati Dakshindas, the first Colombo Plan scholar and first to complete a PhD at Lincoln (1957). Many early postwar graduates spent their careers in applied science, working in agricultural colleges, DSIR divisions, or government research institutes.⁴⁶ Their work bridged the fragile interwar doctoral culture and the more systematised postgraduate structure emerging by the 1950s.

Despite improved local capacity, many promising scholars continued to pursue doctoral study overseas. In some fields – notably linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and later Māori Studies – appropriate supervision and library resources simply did not exist in Aotearoa, making overseas study the only viable route. Elsewhere, British and North American universities offered more established graduate schools and better-funded laboratories. These structural gaps intersected with prestige logics and longstanding patterns of Australasian mobility, encouraging students who could afford to travel to seek metropolitan training even where a local PhD was technically possible.⁴⁷ The reinstated PhD therefore operated within a mixed environment: shaped by necessity, aspiration, and inherited hierarchies of academic value.

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, PhD enrolments increased gradually, still dominated by the natural sciences, particularly botany, zoology, chemistry, and agricultural science. Humanities and social science doctorates also expanded, though from a small base. Progress varied sharply across the six colleges, reflecting differences in staffing, facilities, and disciplinary traditions. Grimshaw notes that during this period college libraries were under-resourced and understaffed, with humanities and social sciences particularly disadvantaged and forced to rely on small departmental collections rather than adequately funded central libraries.⁴⁸

During the 1950s the UNZ attempted to standardise supervision and examination practices, but these reforms did little to overcome the structural limits of the federal model. It had become clear that the federal system no longer served the ambitions of the colleges. Each had developed distinct research identities and sought greater control over postgraduate training, funding, and academic appointments. The PhD made these tensions visible: doctoral supervision required local expertise, sustained infrastructure, and discipline-specific decision-making – conditions difficult to achieve under a centralised examining body.

Reform intensified through the decade, culminating in the 1959 Report of the University Grants Committee and the dissolution of the University of New Zealand in 1961.⁴⁹ Disestablishment fundamentally reshaped doctoral education, granting each newly autonomous university full authority over its PhD programme and enabling targeted investment in staffing and research infrastructure.

The reinstatement of the PhD in 1944 thus marked a turning point. Although constrained by limited resources, uneven disciplinary strengths, and the enduring draw of overseas training, the postwar period laid the institutional foundations for modern doctoral education in Aotearoa. After 1961, autonomous universities expanded doctoral offerings, diversified supervision

capacity, and developed the more robust postgraduate systems that define the contemporary landscape.

Gender & ethnic diversity

Patterns of gendered and ethnic participation in doctoral study reveal not only who gained access and when, but also where advanced research training took place. Across the federal era, doctoral opportunities were structured by two intertwined dynamics.

First, many scholars – especially Māori, Pasifika, and women – had to look overseas for doctoral supervision because local disciplinary capacity was thin, unevenly distributed, or shaped by exclusions embedded in the UNZ system.

Second, a broader current of academic aspiration encouraged outward mobility: the prestige of British and North American training, cultural cringe, and the appeal of taking Aotearoa-focused research into international intellectual networks.

Alongside this outward flow, a much smaller domestic doctoral pathway slowly developed, sustained by pockets of supervision staffing and emerging research cultures in a small number of disciplines.

This mixed landscape produced distinct trajectories for women, Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā scholars, shaped by different forms of constraint and possibility.

Women

Women entered the UNZ from its earliest decades, with pioneers such as Kate Edger (BA 1877), Helen Connon (MA 1881), and Emily Siedeberg (MBChB 1896) establishing precedents.⁵⁰ Early opportunities for doctoral-level study, like those for men, were concentrated in the sciences. The first woman to earn a doctorate was the first registered female physician, Margaret Cruickshank (1873-1918, MD Otago 1910), followed by botanist and mycologist Bella McCallum (later Cross) (1886-1927, DSc Canterbury 1919) a decade later.⁵¹ Historian Mary Hickey / Mother Mary St Domitille (1882-1958) expanded the disciplinary range with her DLitt (Canterbury) in 1925.⁵²

The closure of PhD enrolments in 1926 did not prevent women from undertaking doctoral research. During the twenty-year hiatus, four women completed higher doctorates: nutritionist Muriel Emma Bell (1898-1974, MD 1926; Hon. DSc 1968 Otago);⁵³ physician and Plunket advisor Muriel Helen Easterfield (later Deem) OBE (MD Otago 1928);⁵⁴ linguist and missionary Phoebe Ann Macdiarmid (née Harrington) (1892-1971, DLitt Otago 1929);⁵⁵ and medical superintendent Sylvia Gytha de Lancey Chapman (1896-1995, MD Otago 1934).⁵⁶

After the PhD's reinstatement, progress remained slow. The identity of the first woman to earn a PhD in Aotearoa remains contested. Microbiologist Margaret Elaine di Menna (Otago 1954) is frequently credited, yet archival evidence indicates that Joan Elizabeth Gries (nee Corbett) completed a PhD in English at Auckland in 1952.⁵⁷ Gries was a member of the first cohort of Fulbright Scholars, completed her PhD in a little over two years, and returned home to the USA.⁵⁸

Between its founding and closure, the UNZ conferred more than 34,000 qualifications. Of these, 492 were doctorates, and of those 154 were PhDs, awarded between 1925 and 1962.

Between 1945 and 1962, only nineteen doctorates were awarded to women, of which twelve were PhDs. This means that women were awarded 8.5% of PhDs in that period and 5.1% of all doctorates. These patterns reflect persistent barriers: limited access to supervisors in suitable disciplines, entrenched gender expectations, and very few academic appointments for women. For the women whose post-graduation careers are known, these same structural and gendered constraints continued to limit opportunities in both university and professional contexts.⁵⁹ The absence of biographical information about many of the women underscores how women's doctoral achievements were poorly documented and often overlooked. As Kate Hannah argues, the historiography of science – largely written by retired Pākehā men – has also obscured women's contributions.⁶⁰

Table 2: Women doctoral graduates of the University of New Zealand, 1934–1962

Name	Degree	Year	Institution	Subject
Mary Joyce Marples	MD	1951	Otago	Medicine
Joan Elizabeth Gries	PhD	1952	Auckland	English
Elsa Beatrice Kidson	DSc	1952	Canterbury	Chemistry, soil science
Margaret Elain di Menna	PhD	1954	Otago	Microbiology
Dorothy June Sutor	PhD	1954	Auckland	Chemistry
Una Vivienne Cassie	PhD	1955	Auckland	Botany
Patricia Mary Frances Burns	PhD	1957	Victoria	English, history
Beryl Iris Brewin	DSc	1958	Otago	Zoology
Aola Mary Richards	PhD	1958	Victoria	Entomology
Violet Hilary Jolly	PhD	1959	Otago	Marine biology
Lucy May Cranwell Smith	DSc	1959	Auckland	Botany
Una Elizabeth Balfour	PhD	1960	Canterbury	Unknown
Elizabeth Edgar	PhD	1960	Canterbury	Botany
Marjorie Mary Edwards	PhD	1960	Otago	Unknown
Joyce Mary Waters	PhD	1960	Auckland	Chemistry
Elizabeth Ann Fanning	DDS	1961	Otago	Dentistry
Patricia Marjorie Ralph	DSc	1962	Victoria	Marine biology
Patricia Rose Bergquist	PhD	1962	Auckland	Zoology

Māori

For Māori scholars, the barriers to doctoral study were profound and structural. Although Māori students could complete undergraduate and master's degrees within the UNZ, the university offered *almost no* doctoral supervision in the disciplines most relevant to Māori knowledge and language. Anthropology, linguistics, and what would later become Māori Studies lacked staff with the expertise – and in some cases the scholarly recognition – required to support Māori intellectual work. During the mid-twentieth century, influential academics still characterised Te Reo Māori as an “uncultivated” language lacking a sufficient literature base for advanced linguistic study, an assumption later forcefully overturned by the scholarship of figures such as Bruce Biggs.⁶¹ Such views foreclosed the possibility of serious, modern linguistic research being undertaken within Aotearoa institutions.

Te Rangi Hīroa (Ngāti Mutunga) became the first Māori doctoral graduate with his MD in 1910,⁶² and was one of the first recipients of an honorary doctorate in 1937 (DSc, Otago). For decades, however, he remained the sole Māori doctoral graduate in any field.

In this context, advanced training necessarily took place overseas. The first generation of Māori doctoral scholars enrolled in well-established graduate programmes abroad – not necessarily because international training was inherently preferable, but because it was the only viable route to doctoral-level intellectual development. This cohort included Maharai Winiata (Ngāti Ranginui) at Edinburgh (1954); Bruce Grandison Biggs (Ngāti Maniapoto) and Patu Wahanga Hohepa (Ngāpuhi, Te Mahurehure, Te Ātiawa) at Indiana (1957, 1965); Hugh Kawharu (Ngāti Whātua) and Ngāpare Hopa (Tainui) at Oxford (1962, 1977); M. P. K. (Keith) Sorrenson (Ngāti Pukenga) at Oxford (1962) and Hirini Moko Mead (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tūhourangi) at Southern Illinois (1968).⁶³ These scholars became foundational supervisors, discipline-shapers, and institution-builders, creating the intellectual architecture that later enabled Māori doctoral training to take root domestically.

A very small domestic pathway nonetheless existed. In 1955, Martin Te Punga (Te Ātiawa) became the first Māori scholar to earn a PhD in Aotearoa, with a thesis on the geological history of western Wellington at Victoria.⁶⁴ His work demonstrates both the possibility and precarity of local doctoral study for Māori scholars in fields where supervision and disciplinary legitimacy were fragile or contested. Only a handful followed in the subsequent decades, including Ranginui Walker (Te Whakatōhea), whose 1970 Auckland PhD marked a shift toward doctoral scholarship grounded explicitly in Māori communities, education, and social transformation.

The half-century between Te Rangi Hīroa's MD and the emergence of these Aotearoa doctorates reflects broader structural forces: limited access to matriculation-level schooling; economic and rural constraints; assimilationist education policy; and intellectual traditions that positioned Māori primarily as subjects of ethnographic inquiry. Prestige hierarchies also mattered. Graeme Stevens argues that the Professorial Board's reluctance to regard the reinstated UNZ PhD as equivalent to British doctorates contributed to Te Punga being passed over for the geology chair – a case where cultural cringe intersected with racialised academic norms.⁶⁵

The first Māori woman to earn a PhD from an Aotearoa university, Ngahuia Te Awekōtuku (Te Arawa, Tūhoe, Waikato), completed her degree at Waikato in 1981,⁶⁶ decades after the reintroduction of the PhD and the dissolution of UNZ. She may also be the first openly queer PhD graduate in Aotearoa, although archival confirmation remains limited.⁶⁷

These patterns echo Nolan's argument that Māori and women were often relegated to an 'underclass' whose upward mobility rarely appeared in New Zealand's egalitarian narratives, whether in official statistics or popular historiography.⁶⁸

Pasifika and other under-represented groups

Reconstructing early Pasifika doctoral histories is even more challenging. Mid-century university records rarely identified ethnicity, and the number of Pasifika students in the system was extremely small. Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa (MA Victoria 1958; PhD London 1960) appears to have been the first Pasifika doctoral graduate, albeit overseas. Senipisi Langi Kavaliku's PhD at Victoria in 1966 is the earliest clearly identifiable Aotearoa example.⁶⁹

Alongside these structurally constrained pathways, many non-Māori and non-Pasifika scholars undertaking Aotearoa-focused research also pursued their doctorates overseas. Some were

drawn abroad by prestige hierarchies or cultural cringe; others sought opportunities unavailable in local institutions. Yet this outward mobility was not simply a one-way extraction of talent: these scholars also carried with them intellectual traditions forged within Aotearoa's supposed "tyranny of distance." As recent historiography of science suggests, antipodean scholars often adapted, reframed, and exported ideas with a distinctively local inflection, revealing that geographical distance from Britain could enable originality rather than constrain it.⁷⁰

Across the federal era, doctoral education remained overwhelmingly shaped by the structures of a small colonial university system: narrow disciplinary offerings, uneven supervision capacity, restricted access to advanced schooling, and prestige hierarchies that privileged overseas training. Women, Māori, and Pasifika scholars encountered these limitations most acutely, producing long delays in "firsts" and sharply uneven participation. Outward mobility – sometimes compelled by structural constraints, sometimes driven by aspiration – occurred alongside a slower, domestically rooted tradition that gradually produced local supervisory capacity. Together, these intertwined pathways shaped who could become a doctoral scholar, where they were able to do so, and the intellectual traditions through which Aotearoa's early research culture developed.

Discussion & conclusion

The early development of the PhD under the University of New Zealand reveals a system attempting to modernise research training while constrained by the scale, resources, and intellectual hierarchies of a small dominion. From its cautious adoption in the 1920s to its suspension in 1926, its wartime revival in 1944, and its gradual expansion until the dissolution of the federal university in 1961, the PhD's trajectory reflects both ambition and institutional fragility.

The first cohort of 1925–31 demonstrated the promise of the new degree, particularly in the applied and natural sciences, where doctoral research aligned closely with national priorities in agriculture, industry, and environmental management. Yet the PhD remained fragile. Low enrolments, limited supervision capacity, and uneven institutional support led the UNZ to suspend new registrations in 1926 – an outcome that reflected structural weakness rather than any lack of intellectual interest.

Its reinstatement in 1944 marked a turning point. Wartime planning, postwar reconstruction, the expansion of scientific research, and the growth of the colleges all contributed to the re-establishment of doctoral training on a more secure footing. The first graduates of the revived programme went on to staff research divisions, agricultural colleges, and government laboratories, forming a bridge between the early, experimental phase of doctoral education and the more systematised structures that followed.

Across the federal era, access to doctoral study remained narrow. Women, Māori, and Pasifika scholars appeared only in very small numbers, their trajectories shaped by wider educational inequities, limited supervision opportunities, and prestige hierarchies that privileged British training and Pākehā scholarly norms. These patterns are rooted in the colonial foundations of the early university and the assumptions about who counted as a producer of knowledge. At the same time, the emergence of the PhD reflected the professionalisation of science: as research shifted from museum-based naturalists to laboratory-centred investigators, the MA and MSc could no longer supply the required research training. The PhD answered a problem generated by changes in scientific practice, even as its fragile early history mirrored the uneven evolution of scientific institutions themselves.

By the time the UNZ was dissolved in 1961, the PhD had become a more recognisable and viable pathway for advanced research, though still uneven in disciplinary distribution and accessibility. Its dissolution enabled universities to develop distinct doctoral programmes, expand into new disciplines, and eventually diversify their academic communities – developments built upon the uneven foundations of the UNZ era.

Understanding this early history matters for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how research cultures form in small systems, where scale, staffing, and prestige generate distinctive forms of pressure. Second, it highlights the structural inequalities that shaped – and continue to shape – participation in doctoral education. Many dynamics visible in the UNZ era – disciplinary concentration, tension between local and overseas training, and uneven participation across communities – remain relevant in contemporary debates about access, supervision, and the purpose of the PhD.

One hundred years after the first PhD was awarded, the degree now sits at the centre of Aotearoa’s research landscape. Reflecting on its early history highlights not only the institutional decisions that made the doctorate possible, but also the cultural, social, and political forces that shaped who could participate in advanced research. While this article has focused on the federal era, further work could examine the demographics, disciplines, and career trajectories of later cohorts; the effects of post-1990 policy and funding reforms; and the place of the Aotearoa doctorate within global higher-education systems. The centenary offers not only a moment for historical reflection, but an invitation to future research.

Appendix – University of New Zealand PhDs awarded

Table 3: List of PhD graduates 1923-1961 per university college, grouped by decade

Decade starting	Otago		Canterbury		Auckland		Victoria		Massey		Lincoln		Total
1925	3	23%			4	31%	6	46%					13
1935													
1945	8	21%	9	23%	14	36%	7	18%	1	3%			39
1955	20	20%	19	19%	32	33%	20	20%	4	4%	3	3%	98
Total	31		28		50		33		5		3		150

Table 4: Number of PhD graduates 1923-1962 per broad disciplinary area, grouped by decade

Decade starting	Agriculture	Biological Sciences	Chemistry & Biochemistry	Earth Sciences	Engineering	Mathematics	Medicine	Physics	Social Sciences / Humanities	unknown
1925		6	3					1	3	
1935										
1945		9	17	1			4	3	4	4
1955	5	20	35	6	4	1	4	9	8	10

This second table extends into early 1962, as four Auckland PhDs completed in 1961 but were not reported until after the University of New Zealand had dissolved, appearing in the 1962 University of Auckland Calendar as graduates. Much of this research was interdisciplinary and frequently crossed fields – for example, oncology and agriculture theses conducted within in chemistry departments.

Table 5: Number of PhD graduates 1923-1962 per broad disciplinary area, grouped by institution

Disciplinary area	Auckland	Canterbury	Lincoln	Massey	Otago	Victoria	Total
Agriculture			2	3			5
Biological Sciences	11	3	1	1	6	13	35
Chemistry & Biochemistry	30	10		1	11	3	55
Earth Sciences	2	3			1	1	7
Engineering	2	2					4
Mathematics	1						1
Medicine					5		5
Physics	5	8					13
Social Sciences / Humanities	2	2			3	8	15
unknown	1				5	8	14
Total	54	28	3	5	31	33	154

¹ While “Aotearoa” was not in widespread use to describe the nation during the period under study, the term is used here as a contemporary scholarly choice. Its use reflects current academic practice in Aotearoa New Zealand and acknowledges the Indigenous Māori name for the country. References to historical actors and institutions retain the terminology used in their own time.

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