

# Academic freedom and the demands of Indigenisation

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*In reply to an article by PVC Maori Associate Professor Te Kawehau Hoskins ['Indigenise' universities so Māori can be Māori](#):*

Universities have been co-opted in the past to serve various agendas. This is certainly true of the domination of English universities by the Church from their inception until they sought their emancipation.

It is exactly 150 years ago that universities in England were liberated from any religious tests by the passing of the Universities Tests Act 1871. Luckily New Zealand universities were founded at a time when such religious tests could be avoided. However not all universities have a secular constitution defining their role.

In the 20th century some universities subject to Marxist Communism were co-opted to meet the demands of dialectical materialism. Many still attempt to free themselves from this orthodoxy.

Which agendas should universities attempt to realise in their teaching and/or research? None in our view. If there is any agenda, then it can only be to attempt to establish the truth of claims in one's area of research and to provide the best evidence for them.

This much is specified by clause 161 of the Education Act 1989 concerning Academic Freedom which tells us, amongst other things, that *academic freedom* means:

*the freedom of academic staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions.*

We take academic freedom to include within its scope the examination of claims about the indigenisation of universities.

What does indigenisation mean? Two researchers at the University of Alberta, Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz, give an indication of the wide spectrum it covers with three salient points.

(1) At one end of the spectrum is “indigenous inclusion”. This is an equity goal ensuring there is a more representative number of indigenous staff and students in the university.

(2) In the middle of the spectrum is what they call “reconciliation indigenisation” in which there is power sharing throughout the university. Included within this is the recognition that the different “knowledge systems” of indigenous and non-indigenous people are given equal recognition.

(3) At the other end of the spectrum is “decolonial indigenisation” in which indigenous people are in full control.

Aspects of (1), indigenous inclusion, are already being addressed by this university. But where do the remarks of the PVC Māori fall on this spectrum? It might appear that they fall in the middle: *‘Indigenisation of the University ...does mean building respect for the values of Māori knowledge in a university’s strategic plan ...’*

It is unclear what ‘respect’ means. Does it mean some requirement of veneration, or more minimally some kind of recognition? Whatever it means, it is something which ought to fall within the scope of ‘the questioning and testing of received wisdom’ specified by academic freedom. According to the doctrine of academic freedom there are no claims which are exempt from critical evaluation. Even though these can involve matters which are deeply contested, the functioning of academic freedom to critically evaluate takes precedence over any agenda that might be specified for a university.

In addition, we are told: *‘Indigenising our universities is at heart about recognition that all of us at the universities are woven into a particular set of relations in the ‘here’ ...’*. But it is unclear what this means. Perhaps it might be positioned between (2) and (3) on the spectrum of indigenisation.

Finally, we are also told of *‘... an indigenous way of seeing and being in the world.’* But there are probably as many ways of seeing and being as there are indigenous societies in the world. Academic freedom should allow testing and questioning the wisdom of any of these.

There is no agenda, religious, political or indigenous, to which the university must conform. If there is any agenda at all, it is the exercise of academic freedom as spelled out in our Education Act 1989.

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