

*Research Article*

## **Learning about the awa: My reflective journey of admission into a doctoral programme at Auckland University of Technology**

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### **Abstract**

Supporting new Māori doctoral students on their academic journey as they begin requires them to adapt quickly and steadily to the university's structures and systems. Contemplating and thinking about doctoral studies entail a huge mind shift from worker to student, and also has to be taking onboard with your whānau (extended family) and the greater hapori (community). To successfully navigate the awa (river) involves meeting minimum entry requirements of a doctoral programme and then submitting a PGR2 proposal on a topic which you will be acquainted with. This paper aims to explore the awa, a metaphorical analogy of navigating and engaging in higher education as a mature student based on lived experience as a Māori doctoral student when entering into a doctoral programme at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and details keys to success, and preparation needed to successfully complete the PGR2 pathway.

**Keywords:** Māori worldview, PGR2 research proposal, supervisors, doctoral entry

## **Getting onto the waka: Transitioning from master's programme to 'thinking I can do a doctoral degree'**

Making the shift to quickly adapt to doctoral research study begins with establishing your keys to success at the master's level. From personal experience, completing a 90-point research component of a master's, had definitely set me up well for embarking on a doctoral study (Abraham, 2021). Being well skilled in time management, being committed to your learning, and having a go-getter attitude are important mental shifts required to help you succeed. Behind this aptitude and determination to do well is your whānau, hapū (subtribe) and iwi (tribe) support. Knowing that your collective is fully supportive of you, not only mentally uplifts you, but it also helps build the mental shift needed to undertake the transition to doctoral student who is ready to undertake the PGR2 journey. Deciding to pursue a doctoral degree in your

mind and then saying it out aloud to those you care about is one necessary step in building your self-belief in believing you can do a doctoral degree.

From my personal lived experiences as a master's student at Unitec, I was offered an opportunity to apply for a pre-doctoral internship, before submitting by master's for examination. This opportunity was just one of many steps in making the transition from a fulltime Principal to a doctoral candidate at AUT. The pathway into academia also allowed me, as a Māori student, to continue on my personal journey and to strengthen my understanding and cultural capabilities in becoming a Kaupapa Māori researcher. The belief instilled within me from participating in Unitec's Māori postgraduate wānanga series, interacting with kaupapa Māori researchers and having Unitec Māori learner support give willingly their time and energy (this is considered to be a koha [gift]), had made a huge difference to my determination to embark on a doctoral journey at AUT.

The pre-doctoral internship offered through Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPM): New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence (CORE), provided an opportunity to work with a Senior Māori academic, Dr Teorongonui Josie Keelan and be mentored within a kaupapa Māori (Māori way of being) environment, which is a rare space to be within in higher education. Being mentored and nurtured by Dr Teorongonui Josie Keelan helped me grow my appreciation for undertaking Kaupapa Māori research, grow as a person learning about my existence and journey within te ao Māori and was the impetus to take that next step on embarking on a doctoral journey. The sharing of kai (pineapple pie), spending quality time through writing workshops, and wānanga with Dr Teorongonui truly was a very special time and memory that I will hold forever. These moments helped me to become more grounded and ready to transition from master's student to doctoral student. As a master's Māori student, having dedicated Māori and Pacific academics at Unitec Institute of Technology take the time to help you with learning tips such as google scholar for referencing, using PERL writing technique, and just providing a space to be Māori, made a huge difference to my student experience and journey.

If any Māori master's or bachelor with honour's student is thinking of doing a pre-doctoral internship, this is a great way to learn what is involved in doing advanced research with a collective of established academic researchers. During this stage of my journey, I looked at systematic literature reviews into Statistical Machine Translations as a tool, to support the collective efforts of revitalisation strategies for maintaining and preserving te reo Māori (Māori

language) for future generations of whānau Māori (Māori families). As there were no doctoral programmes at Unitec I naturally floated towards where my master's primary supervisor, Alison Smith was working at AUT. However, before going to AUT I did some window shopping, and explored what other universities could offer in terms of doctoral programmes, whilst I waited for my examination marks for my master's thesis.

### **Before paddling the awa: Pre-doctoral stage - Minimum entry requirements**

There are a number of doctoral programmes on offer at AUT. For any potential student you have to make an important choice about what your degree will be; will I elect to do a Doctor of Philosophy or a professional doctorate? I elected to do a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and not a Doctor of Education (EdD) based on my Unitec experiences of two professors proudly displaying their Doctor of Philosophy awards in their workspaces and based on reading the AUT enrolment forms. I recognised that the benefits for advancing my career would be better if I had a PhD rather than a EdD, to engage in broader research that shaped spaces for Māori advancement and positive outcomes for my own *iwi*. With a PhD, I saw much greater potential to get involved in reviewing the literature and in identifying the gaps in the research, required to generate new knowledge on transforming outcomes for Māori students in mainstream education. Where a EdD, was for practitioners pursuing educational leadership roles and this was not what I wanted to do in my then former role as a principal. I had come to a stage where I perceived the New Zealand education system to be a let-down (Abraham, 2021; Abraham-O'Leary, 2015), and I saw a new door opening, waiting for me to make that mental, physical and spiritual shift of walking through the door. So, in the end, I ran through that door and never looked backed or doubted myself for doing so. The message is, "have faith, believe in yourself, and trust you are doing the right thing". Your *tupuna* (ancestors, guardians) are by your side, and are guiding you on your journey.

As a potential doctoral student, if you elect to take the PhD pathway, you will normally have completed a research project in a discipline where you have achieved a master's degree with honours or bachelor's degree with honours (Auckland University of Technology, n. d. - a). If you don't meet the criteria, it is also worth talking through this with your potential supervisor(s), who may have another strategy to support you in undertaking a doctoral programme by further work at the master's level.

## Before paddling the awa: Making economic-social choices for doing the PhD and the impact on whanau

There is no easy way in financing a PhD. An important step is working out a plan that is localised to the needs of yourself and *whānau*. Any Māori student has to really think about how you are going to finance your PhD. In my case, I had to consider with my *whānau*, how we were going to manage the four years without me fulltime working as a Principal. In the end I left the role and returned to working fulltime as a teacher in a fixed term role, but it just took up too much of my head space and it wasn't right for me. I was over teaching, and I dearly missed the academic research work (Abraham, 2021). So, after further *wānanga* (to talk and discuss) with *whānau*, another plan was hatched which saw me return to relief teaching a couple of days a week and doing a bit of tutoring at AUT. While at the same time I explored scholarship and education grant opportunities to subsidise the cost of doing the PhD. As a result, I was very fortunate to be awarded an AUT VC Doctoral Scholarship for three years, which meant I could afford to do two days of teaching a week. Additionally, I was able to take time to explore what Māori education grants and scholarships were available to help alleviate the expenses and support my time away from work and to complete my studies. My *whānau* were very important to me so keeping them onside and with their support, we managed to get through this four-year doctoral journey.

Other choices I had to make as part of doing the PhD was not overcommitting myself for four years. It is normal for Māori to be committed to their *whānau* and *hāpori* (community). Serving your people is a Māori way of being and is something that we all do. But making my PhD a priority at the onset with a commitment to finish is about being *tika* (be true and correct) and *pono* (genuine) with *whānau*. So, for any potential Māori student thinking about doing a PhD, be *tika* and *pono* with *whānau*, take the time to *wānanga* about what the cost is in doing a PhD. You have to be a little bit precious with time, by establishing good habits of study and doing what is asked of you by your supervisors. Another point I make is you have to learn to listen really well to your supervisors. If your supervisors ask you to do something on your writing and research, be diligent and get the *mahi* (work) done. Therefore, time management is a critical key to your success, alongside having buy-in from *whānau* who will need to have shared commitment to support you in your endeavours to pursue a dream of successfully completing a PhD.

## **Padding the awa: Admission to a doctoral programme- What's in a PGR2 proposal?**

Entering a doctoral programme at AUT begins with successfully completing a doctoral research proposal known as the PGR2 (AUT, n.d.-b). From my perspective, how long this process takes depends solely on each student's journey. A PGR2 research proposal consists of a conceptual overview of your proposed doctorate, in accordance with Faculty guidance (AUT, n.d.-b). It also involves answering a set of questions related to exploring if you are good enough to embark on a doctoral programme. However, depending on what faculty you are enrolled in, all potential doctoral students have to submit a written proposal of between 1000 to 2000 words (Abraham, 2021; AUT, n.d.-b). This process is the beginning of embarking on a doctoral journey at AUT, and an important step in moving towards doctoral candidature also known as the PGR9 (Abraham, 2022). During the exploration phase of checking out university doctoral programmes, you are also looking for potential supervisors.

In my situation, I had to prepare a 1000-word research proposal. For the first six months, I read selected articles to stimulate my thinking supplied by my first two supervisors and to inform my voice to come through in the PGR2. A great supervisor will also spend time with you, building a relationship and setting time aside to learn about your reasons for considering embarking on a doctoral journey. After some serious soul searching, *kōrero* (talk) and *wānanga* (in-depth talking), mentioned earlier, I made the decision to move across from the School of Education in the Faculty of Culture and Society to Te Ara Poutama. In consultation, I worked through this process with Professor Tania Ka'ai and, with the support of Dr Howard Young, we had a hui to acknowledge a passing over. I really appreciated this cultural process and through *wānanga* I contacted Dr Josie Keelan at Unitec. In the space of one month, I successfully passed the PGR2. What was critical in all this journey was the strength of Māori approaches and collaboration between Western academics alongside Māori academics to support me as a Māori student to navigate the bends of the awa and become successful in higher education (Abraham, 2022; Abraham, 2021).

## **Padding the awa: Recognising your personal journey alongside the PhD journey**

I was fortunate to have great Māori mentors who were senior Māori academics to take me under their wide wingspans as supervisors during my master's journey (Abraham-O'leary, 2015). My two supervisors, Alison Smith and Yo Heta-Lensen were also undertaking a dual

journey as Māori in embarking on their own doctoral journey. So, I already had experienced that feeling of success and knew what it felt like to be cared for in a kaupapa Māori way at the master's level. This was the same inkling I was looking for in my doctoral journey.

Having a space to be Māori really made a difference to my doctoral journey. I went through four supervisors during the PGR2 journey. At the start of my PGR2 journey, I really missed the feeling experienced from my master's journey, the mauri (life force), and the whanaungatanga (building relationships and connections) shared between each other and as the student with Māori wahine (Māori women). Although it took six months during the PGR2 journey, during that time I was very fortunate to come across the Māori and Indigenous (Mai) doctoral support programme at AUT. The MAI programme (Pihama et al., 2019) is unique and special because its philosophies are based on indigenous tikanga (customs and practices) and are about building Māori and Indigenous students' capabilities through a number of Indigenous initiatives such as hosting of wānanga (three-day writing retreats on the marae [meeting house and surrounding areas]; sharing of kai [food]). Being in this unique Māori space at AUT, made me feel alive within and cared for in a Māori way of being.

I was empowered to take control of my destiny and reshape my experience and focus on what I needed to do to advance my kaupapa (topic) of research. Through the support of being with mana wahine (strong, brave Māori academics and scholars), I engaged in the principle of tauutuutu (reciprocity) with my current supervisors. At this hui (meeting), we joined in karakia (prayers) and through wānanga (to deliberate) with them I shared my personal experiences, and my supervisors also shared their whakaaro (thoughts) with me. It was a very special place to be in during this stage of my doctoral journey at AUT.

In summary, what I learnt from the PGR2 experience is to keep the faith and never give up on your dream, no matter what the obstacles. Whānau are your number one supporters and will get you through those difficult challenges, alongside your amazing supervisors. Sometimes you are with supervisors for a certain period of time and in my situation, it was meant to be the way it was. I needed to go through the four supervisors as part of my doctoral journey of navigating the awa. What my voice does reflect is the importance of providing Māori spaces and having Māori supervisors as role models and mentors to guide Māori students on their

entry into a doctoral programme because sometimes we are on a dual journey too within te ao Māori (Māori world).

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