



He Rautaki mo te Akoranga Kairangi

4. Choosing supervisors

I had taken several papers and one of those was with Jane and also a kaupapa Māori one with Hone and methodology with Michael. So I developed quite a good relationship with each of them, but particularly with Jane, and also she demonstrated she was willing to take on a supervision student. Hone is very busy and he was quite clear that he would be absolutely happy to be a supervisor but in a more of a secondary capacity, because of his time commitments. And Michael was very willing just to cover off the methodology, he's just been there if I needed him. (Student)

The student started off with a different external supervisor and that didn't work out, so that person withdrew and so there was some time where the other co-supervisor and I just worked on our own with her. Then I went overseas on leave for a year and, when I came back, a third supervisor came on board and that worked out really well. He was very helpful and, you know, sometimes it's a matter of getting the right combination, isn't it? (Māori supervisor)

Introduction

Talk in our interviews focused on how students chose their supervisors and why supervisors agreed to supervise. In some ways, the idea of "choosing" supervisors is a bit misleading as, for any particular student and their project, there will be a finite pool of possible supervisors. Sometimes that pool is very small indeed. At the same time, we found that students had quite a lot of input into this matter and so it's worth thinking through quite carefully what (and who) would be best for you and your project. Here are some of the experiences and insights shared with us by students and supervisors, along with some guidelines for you as a doctoral student.

Choosing supervisors strategically

It was really important for me to have a supervisor that I did not have to enter into a debate with about everything ... not at the early stages where I was really exploring things. I didn't want to have to defend my complete and utter belief that Māori theory actually exists in these aspects of traditional Māori knowledge. I wanted somebody to say, 'That's a logical idea. Okay now, how are you going to demonstrate that?' (Student)

I chose him because he had the strength that I lacked. He had the theoretical knowledge and he is a very pedantic, detail-conscious person, which I'm not. So I knew that we would be a very good balance for each other. (Student)

Many students described in some detail the kind of thinking they went through when considering who their supervisors might be. They were aware of the importance of getting this as right as possible, especially (but not only) if they were doing mātauranga Māori projects. For example, they didn't want to spend precious time convincing sceptical supervisors that this was a viable field of research. They were often very thoughtful about putting together the right mix of supervisors in order to cover all the aspects of input they thought they would need.

Several students we interviewed were sought out by potential supervisors (or departments). This was seen to be a compliment but, at the same time, some wanted to find out why the supervisor was interested in them. For example, one student described being very clear with a prospective supervisor that she did not want to be a "token brownie" in his research group.

Reasons supervisors take on the role

Each supervision sprang out of a relationship really. We liked each other. So it was not so much 'I'm working in a field and I'm interested in your field', and it's never been like that with Māori students. Well, it hasn't been like that for me with Pākehā students either to be honest. I find that my supervisions tend to spring out of relationships with people when we just hit it off. (Non-Māori supervisor)

[At our research centre] we've never really recruited, people have always sought us out, we're the only Māori centre of this kind. You know, two friends tell two friends and it's sort of happened more like that. So we've never really advertised or tried to recruit, largely because I don't think we could cope with the demand if there was one. (Māori supervisor)

Supervisors described a really wide variety of reasons for agreeing to supervise. Most talked about there not being enough academics qualified to supervise mātauranga Māori projects. Many agreed to supervise because they already knew the student in some way or the student's topic was in their area of research interest. However, even when the student's project was in an unfamiliar area, some agreed to supervise for other reasons. For example, they were aware of how few options the student had, or they found the project exciting, or they felt a strong commitment to the importance of building the number of doctorally qualified Māori in the New Zealand community. In these cases, they wanted to have other supervisors included who *could* provide expert advice in aspects of the project.

Māori supervisors in particular reported having high loads of doctoral students. They were aware that they were often invited to be supervisors because they were Māori rather than because they had relevant academic expertise. This sometimes worried them, although less so when the student was highly motivated and making good use of other kinds of support and interaction (such as participating in doctoral student groups, the local National Programme for Māori and Indigenous Doctoral Postgraduate Advancement cohort or other kinds of institutional support activities).

All the supervisors we interviewed talked about enjoying supervision, in particular the exchange of ideas through talking with their students and reading their work.

There's a variety of supervision arrangements

There was a wide variety of successful supervision arrangements: two co-supervisors; a main supervisor and second supervisor; a main supervisor and several second supervisors and/or advisers as well; or sometimes a supervisory panel. The least common arrangement was to have just one supervisor, probably because most doctoral regulations insist otherwise. In practice, often the student had one main supervisor who they interacted with regularly and who was the main source of advice and support. Students usually consulted with their main supervisor about who the other supervisor(s) might be. Whether or not they all met together, and how often, varied considerably. One of the things that came through our study is the benefits of everyone understanding what their roles were, and the student having ways of keeping their supervisors in the loop about what was happening with the project.

Many students had a mix of Māori and non-Māori supervisors; they sometimes came from different departments or even institutions. Many students also had cultural advisers and, again, they had different kinds of arrangements. (See *Getting cultural advice for your research* for more on this.)

Changes in supervision are common

I don't think it's unusual for Māori students to have a series of supervisors. I think it's more common than [with] any other students and I think that that does create issues both for supervision and for them. (Māori supervisor)

My secondary supervisor's workload increased so she had to withdraw over time. And then I asked someone else if she was able to do it and she'd just had two students hand in, so it was timely. So she took it on, and so it was those two supervising me. But when my first supervisor left, the secondary carried on by herself because my university couldn't come up with another first supervisor. (Student)

So I could see in the future that this was not going to work with one of my supervisors. The differences were too great and becoming wider. I was not going down a Western perspective, I was going much more down a Māori one. So I could see that, and I didn't want to harm the relationship, and I didn't want to harm my studies or my future studies or my doctoral scholarship, so that's when I contacted a senior Māori academic. I felt that he was the best person to turn to and he put me in touch with someone who became my supervisor. (Student)

He played a few more power trip things on me as well, in terms of when he wasn't giving me feedback as agreed. And then he actually wasn't giving me any decent feedback at all. And so that's when I thought, 'No, I don't really think that this is going to work. And I don't trust you any more.' And so I emailed him to say, 'This is going to take me longer and I actually need way more in-depth supervision than I originally anticipated, so I'm going to look for someone else.' (Student)

Lots of students we talked to had experienced changes of supervision for all sorts of reasons. Commonly the main supervisor had moved institution. In such cases, the student had to get a replacement because institutions require main supervisors to be their employee for accountability purposes. Less frequently, it happened because a supervisor was no longer actively contributing to the student's progress. Sometimes the change was to add a new supervisor rather than replace one, as this was likely to be less disruptive. While changing supervisors did pose challenges for both student and supervisor, in some cases it made a big difference to the student getting finished. New supervisors sometimes gave the student a new lease of life, allowed them to "see the wood for the trees" and to find the energy required to get through the finishing stages.

Overlapping relationships

[W]e [Māori supervisors and Māori doctoral students] have relationships that precede supervision. So sometimes we have to say, ‘Right we’re gonna focus on the thesis first and get that out of the way and then we’ll go have a kai somewhere and talk’, you know, about life in general and moan about our husbands. (Māori supervisor)

We are from the same place, me and my supervisor. He had a little bit of a vested interest in wanting me to complete. So he was pretty regular with me. We did speak about it probably on a weekly basis. And I’d go home and bring him back deer and pigs and drop them off at his house. And I’d spend evenings at his house, even stay at his house. (Student)

Overlapping relationships were common between Māori students and Māori supervisors. As one supervisor remarked, “Māori people aren’t happy till they figure out how they’re related. Or that they’ve someone in common.” From what we heard, this is not necessarily a problem, although some supervisors said that it could make giving critical feedback difficult—especially if the student was resistant to it. If that’s your situation, the best strategy is probably to talk about how to make this work early on. Maybe, like the supervisor above, you agree to get the business done first when you meet and then talk about other things. Maybe you agree that you won’t talk about supervision stuff when you see each other at outside events like hui or tangi (unless you agree to in advance). And so on.

Find someone who will make you work

So I look at my first supervisor [who’s an expert in one area] almost like a father figure ... and my second supervisor [who’s an expert in another aspect of my work] is more like a big brother or an uncle. He still kicks me in the arse when I’m not performing correctly but he’ll be the guy at the pub with me. (Student)

You don’t want a student to be frightened of you so that they get paralysed, but you want them to be frightened enough of you to do their best work. So that they’re always trying a bit harder, ’cause they want to impress. (Non-Māori supervisor)

Many students need a supervisor who they are a bit in awe of or who they know will give them a “kick” when they need it. Along the way, lots of things including self-doubt will come along to distract you, and they will often feel like good reasons to put your doctoral work aside. At times like this a staunch supervisor can help you get back on track so that you do get finished.

Some guidelines for choosing supervisors

- Think about what academic and cultural expertise your project will need—and get a mix of supervisors to provide that.
- Think about the kind of person you will work best for—and have at least one active supervisor like that.
- Check out potential supervisors if you don’t already know them—and don’t jump into supervision with them too fast.
- Understand you won’t get everything you need in one person—and look around to put together a good supervision team.
- Don’t be afraid to change supervisors—but don’t do it just to escape yourself.
- If you have several connections with your supervisor, talk to them about how you might manage this. Sometimes it works best to keep a boundary between supervision and nonsupervision interactions, but the interconnections may also be very fruitful.
- Don’t be too grateful to get supervisors—most academics enjoy this part of their work immensely, especially learning from an active and committed student.