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Paper prepared for the AARE/NZARE Joint Conference
Deakin University _ Geelong, Victoria

22 -26 November 1992

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Abstract: Some Implications of RPL for Maori
Contemplating University Study

RPL offers distinct advantages for mature students whose learning from life and work experiences are given formal credit in an academic context. For mature Maori students RPL encourages participation in courses that give credit for knowledge and skills which may have been gained in a different (Maori) cultural context.

Very little research into the effect of RPL on indigenous cultures is available. For Maori people there are issues to be discussed and debated in order to clarify the likely impact of RPL on the Maori community. These discussions are particularly important to the development of RPL policy and programmes in New Zealand universities.

This paper will acknowledge some of the advantages RPL is likely to have for Maori. It will also identify some of the concerns and issues that are currently being discussed in Maori communities and in tertiary institutions.

Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a means of linking knowledge gained from life and work experiences to the learning outcomes of formal education is a trend of international significance. The literature available however, while providing insights into the development and value of RPL has generally not taken account of the implications of RPL for indigenous people and their aspirations in education.

In many New Zealand Polytechnics RPL policies and procedures are in place, led to some degree by the drive for academic credentialling. Little research has been carried out to ascertain the likely impact of RPL on Maori people, and it would seem that RPL policies and processes have not at this stage, been widely discussed and debated in Maori forum.

RPL has the potential to significantly contribute to the upgrading of qualifications for Maori; a situation of some urgency if Maori are to take their place in senior positions within New Zealand Universities and other education institutions. An examination of statistical data clearly shows the lack of post graduate qualifications for Maori. In 1989 the total number of Maori graduates for post graduate study was 24, compared with 1651 Pakeha/European, 46 Pacific Island and 47 Asian.

In education institutions, in community education groups and in tribal discussions, Maori demonstrate an understanding of the concept of prior learning. Some of the fundamental issues have been discussed for many years. Value has always been placed on the knowledge and skills that are the result of life and work experiences. A key issue is the way

recognition is given in formal learning institutions like polytechnics and universities.

New Zealand Universities are in a position to learn from the work of other education groups in New Zealand, like polytechnics and also from overseas studies. They have the opportunity to research, to discuss and debate with their Maori communities BEFORE setting RPL in place. In line with their charter responsibilities to Maori communities and the will to foster sound working relationships, universities must actively encourage Maori people to be involved from the initial stages of discussions.

A common situation for Maori is that we are invited to participate at a time when projects have largely been discussed and determined. Maori must be given the opportunity to participate from the very beginning. It is the responsibility of project leaders to identify interest groups and to make approaches to those groups for their full participation, rather than seek their input at a later stage.

(1991 Maori working group : Developing a
Qualification Framework for Teachers of Adults)

The issues being flagged in this paper have largely resulted from one to one and small group discussions with Maori people who have involvement or interest in RPL initiatives. The people have included polytechnic and university staff, community educators and others involved in tribal education developments. The discussions have been of an informal nature.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce some of the basic issues arising for Maori at this time. The hope is that New Zealand Universities will institute research for the implications of RPL on Maori, before putting in place RPL policies and processes.

...tutored in genealogy, chant and women's art; she learned of star patterns and of bird calls, the secrets of fumarole, lake and forest. By her two grandparents, she was nurtured in the natural world of the Maori people, coming to understand a complete universe of knowledge and day-to-day life that was already under threat.

So writes Ngahuia TeAwakotuku in her introduction to *Makereti: Guide Maggie Papakura 1872-1930*. *Makereti's* education in her formative years provided the foundation for the field of study she chose as an adult student. In her fifties *Makereti* enrolled in the B.Sc. degree in Anthropology in 1926 at Oxford University. Her thesis *Makereti, The Old Time Maori* is recognised as the first comprehensive ethnographic account of Maori life by a Maori scholar. It was published posthumously in 1938, eight years after *Makereti's* death. The source of her knowledge was not the hallowed halls of Oxford, but the people responsible for her education from the time of birth and throughout her life. After her death it was her tribal people of

TeArawa who gave approval for the publication of her thesis.

Like Makereti there are many mature Maori students undertaking study in New Zealand universities. They too bring to their study a wealth of knowledge and skill taught by their grandmothers and grandfathers, their aunties and uncles and their parents. These teachers encourage an understanding of knowledge that integrates the past, the present and the future; the physical world and its spiritual dimension. It is a dynamic force, neither static nor isolated but forever interweaving and developing. Yet throughout this process some things remain constant. These are the values and principles (tikanga) handed down from the beginning of time, from generation to generation, to ensure the preservation of a culture and to provide guidance and wisdom for the well-being and sustenance of the people.

RPL: Positive Impact

RPL has positive implications for Maori wanting to undertake tertiary study, whether that study be in Maori Studies or in other faculties of study, for example, Science or Teacher Education.

As a result of transition education programmes like ACCESS and Training Opportunities Programmes (TOP) many Maori people have been employed as community educators over the past ten years. Significant numbers of them have completed training and education workshops and have proven to be effective teachers without holding formal qualifications in teaching. RPL would enable these people to have relevant learning credited to a qualification that has national and international recognition. Work and life experiences may translate into learning acknowledged in the academic world.

One of the most significant advantages of RPL for Maori is having work and life experiences gained from learning in te ao Maori, the traditional world of the Maori, credited in an academically recognised course of study. The implementation of an RPL process would make it possible for some Maori to be awarded qualifications on the basis of their prior learning; that is, without participation in the course of study. In speaking with a number of Maori university lecturers the comment was made that the level of learning held by Maori educated in te ao Maori was often far beyond the level of knowledge expected of university graduates.

An important issue Universities must examine is appropriate processes for the assessment of Maori knowledge. These decisions should be made by Maori people as a result of discussion and debate among formal education institutions, community and tribal educators.

RPL for Maori could result in the acknowledgement of a level of learning that already exists and is recognised in Maori communities. The lack of recognition has generally been due to the place in which learning occurred. Not only was it outside of the academy; it was also within a totally different cultural context.

RPL also enables Maori people to maximise their time and financial resources by not requiring them to undertake a course of study in which their learning is already proven to be of an appropriate level and kind.

Issues

It is well known and documented that Maori performance in the New Zealand system of education is traditionally one of failure.

Statistical data for 1990 (Education Statistics of New Zealand, 1991) indicate the continuing trend of low achievement in School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and in tertiary academic qualifications. It is not surprising that many Maori are very cautious about participating in university study. Their schooling record is usually one of failure or mediocrity. The perception held is one of failure in the system, rather than an education system that from its inception has failed Maori. University study is often seen as a challenge well beyond their level of achievement.

The Diploma of Maori Studies at Victoria University is a course of study that has given many mature Maori students the confidence to participate in university study because it is based on Maori knowledge, language and culture. An important result of this diploma is that it encourages Maori students to more confidently pursue higher qualifications in Maori and in other disciplines.

The Department of Maori Studies (Victoria University) provides a valued support network for Maori students. Throughout the university it is important that support networks are in place. In our recent research at Victoria University (RPL: July 1992) a number of academic staff acknowledged the need to provide extra support for those students who had gained entry to courses on the basis of their life and work experiences. It was often stressed that students should not be accepted for courses in which it seems likely they will fail. Having granted students admission, the university has a responsibility to provide support to help students successfully complete their studies. A record of failure may well be an indictment on the university rather than the students undertaking study.

Publicity and the Power of Knowing

While RPL is not in place at Victoria University at the present time, significant recognition is given to the life and work experiences that students bring to academic study. Several cases of advancement to postgraduate degrees (thesis only) with no requirement for undergraduate study are recorded and others are currently in the pipeline. The issue is

one of knowing what is available and acceptable. The Maori community must be well informed of the possibility of having one's prior experiences recognised. The availability of information and the quality of that information must reach Maori communities in many ways; newsletters to Marae committees do not necessarily reach the people, or if they do they are not always clearly understood. The importance of broad networking between the university and the Maori community would ensure that the information is distributed in a number of different ways including face to face liaison. Keeping the information simple leads to clarity of understanding. As one ACCESS tutor recently explained, 'If I can't understand the title of the

course what chance do I have of understanding the course?'. Some course titles may have a catchy tone to them but they may also be confusing.

Learning Outcomes and People Skills

With the focus of learning outcomes on knowledge and skills, one may wonder how abilities to relate and have empathy for people, that is 'people skills' will be measured. The trainee nurse may be able to tick a number of learning outcomes at the conclusion of training, but that does not necessarily make him/her a good nurse.

It is not so much a question of how people skills will be measured but rather a concern that these things will become lost in the process of competency based learning outcomes.

Qualifications Inflation

The 1991 Maori Working Group discussing a qualification framework for teachers of adults debated the issue of qualification inflation. There was a feeling that any qualification may initially have some professional credibility, but in a short space of time qualification inflation is likely to mean it loses its worth. The concern was uncertainty that the qualification track would be beneficial to Maori aspirations in education. The diploma under discussion was a first step on that track and participants were not convinced that the benefits accruing would outweigh any possible disadvantages. Would they improve the effectiveness of tutors, trainers and teachers? Would they cause divisions and serve to further disempower those choosing not to participate? Who would be making the decisions about Maori knowledge and processes?

The main advantage identified by the group was that qualifications make it easier to be accepted in some places of employment where formal qualifications are highly valued.

RPL and Partnership

Crucial to the development of RPL is the responsibility of universities to their Maori communities. In all initiatives sought by crown agencies with Maori communities the results have inevitably resulted in Maori accommodation by the agency, rather than meaningful changes occurring because of the new partnership.

RPL has the potential to advance the partnership between universities and

their Maori communities. Here is an opportunity to examine university structures and systems to create an institution that recognises the dual cultural heritage of Aotearoa; an institution where Maori are full participants as planners and decision makers. There will always be Maori people choosing to participate in courses of study at universities. They have a right to a meaningful education that meets their learning needs and their aspirations in education as individuals, as members of their tribal groups and as Maori people in Aotearoa. They seek nothing less than excellence in education.

In discussions of education issues for Maori, a recurring theme is the need to change crown/institution structures and processes so that Maori and non Maori may work together in real partnership. Most initiatives in New Zealand education have resulted in minimal benefit to Maori. They have served to add a little colour or flavour to what exists, but ultimately the rewards for Maori are few.

It is time to dispense with a monocultural system of education which continues to oppress indigenous knowledge, pedagogy, values and principles for learning.

Conclusion

Whether the discussion is at the level of preschool, primary, secondary, tertiary or community education, for Maori people the key issue continues to be a need to change structures and systems. Until this happens the implementation of any initiatives like recognition of prior learning will be viewed by many as a continuation of assimilation practices. There must be a commitment by the crown, represented in this instance by the university, to work in partnership, to equitably share resources and decision making so that the dual cultural heritage of Aotearoa moves beyond the rhetoric. Cosmetic change is no longer acceptable. For many Maori it has never been acceptable.

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