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Associate Professor Elizabeth Rata
e.rata@auckland.ac.nz

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Critical inquiry and intellectual risk-taking are essential elements of the university's culture. However the findings of my most recent research, undertaken with Professor Roger Openshaw from Massey University, suggest that such inquiry is increasingly restrained by the culturalist ideology now dominant in New Zealand education.

We looked at a number of cases from several New Zealand universities, including The University of Auckland, where intellectual risk-taking was actively discouraged. In each case politically powerful interest groups that derive their power to condemn from culturalist principles, either attempted to, or succeeded in, silencing critical research. These interest groups claim a degree of 'cultural sacredness' – that is, a right not to be offended by critical inquiry, especially from those not of their ethnicity or religion.

One of the most serious consequences of such cultural relativism, and of immediate relevance to the university, occurs when objective scientific inquiry is regarded as just another cultural story. It is indeed true that all cultures have asked and answered the big questions about natural and social phenomena, - about how the world began, the nature of human beings, and the meaning of life. Yet a fundamental difference exists between such cultural knowledge and world-views on the one hand and science on the other in the way the questions are answered.

Traditional cultures and neotraditionalist groups within modern societies turn their answers into sacred knowledge. This serves a number of purposes; as the group's social cement, as a means for the spiritual wellbeing of individuals who identify with the group, and in the case of neotraditionalist groups, the sacralisation of knowledge is used to justify strategies promoting political and economic interests.

Science, on the other hand, is skeptical, refusing to accept the latest answer as the final say on the matter. It doubts, investigates, overturns and attempts new answers, ones that will stand only until the next challenger. Both forms of knowledge are important. But only science has a place in the work of the university. The place of the other is peripheral, useful perhaps as the ritual in ceremonies of social bonding.

Matauranga Maori and kaupapa Maori have the status of science in our universities yet, unlike science, are protected from critical scrutiny. How this came about is itself a matter for inquiry. The assumptions that underpin culturalism (the belief in an essential cultural being resulting from the individual's ethnic or racial heritage), require analysis and critique, not because they are necessarily right or wrong, but because they are powerful ideas in New Zealand education. The ideas are used to justify the policies of a separate kaupapa Maori education system from tertiary to

early childhood, the practices of a Maori pedagogy, Maori mathematics and science, and of considerable significance to the university, kaupapa Maori research itself.

Despite the politics which have promoted ethnicised knowledge, the responsibility of a university lies in subjecting all social phenomena to criticism, including that protected by political interests. Our research shows that the current culturalist environment does restrain individual academics from intellectual risk-taking. This is reason enough for the university to increase commitment to its 'critic and conscience of society' role.

However the contradiction between this role and the requirement that the university adheres to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi poses a major dilemma. Indeed the place of treaty adherence in university life is the single most effective mechanism in ensuring that culturalist ideology becomes the accepted and uncritiqued way of doing things.

Immanuel Kant's 'turbulent individual' caught in the grip of 'self-imposed tutelage' is a apt metaphor for the university's current conundrum – suggesting as it does an institution driven by the energy and creativity of turbulent forces but at the same time yoked by a self-imposed restraint.

On the one hand the university should be critical of all social and political forces. On the other hand it is required to adhere to what is in fact a political position in support of the current dominant interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi. Given a possible constitutional role for the treaty in the nation's future it is important that its various interpretations and the political debates about the extent of its significance are subject to rigorous critical inquiry.

This is a difficult task when the university itself has taken on a political position in relation to the Treaty. It suggests that the university's role in relation to social and political phenomena requires more, rather than less, turbulence if it is to fulfill its critic and conscience role.

A detailed discussion of culturalism by a number of academics writing in the field is available in the edited collection:

Rata, E and Openshaw, R (2006) *Public Policy and Ethnicity, The Politics of Ethnic Boundary Making*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.