



When the Crown controls mātauranga

Summary

It has been 11 years since the release of Ko Aotearoa Tēnei – a Waitangi Tribunal report into the Wai 262 claim concerning laws and policies that adversely affected Māori culture and identity. The Tribunal noted that “every Crown agency that appeared in our inquiry, and most of those that did not, deals with mātauranga to some extent.” The Report contended that the Crown had intentionally damaged mātauranga and its traditional systems of transmission and advocated for a principled partnership between Māori and the Crown in the support, oversight, ownership and custody of mātauranga Māori held or managed by the Crown.

More than a decade later we revisit the Crown’s policies on mātauranga to ask: Is there now an overarching policy? If not, why not? Is the ‘principled partnership approach’ the Tribunal suggested the best way forward?

Mātauranga Māori most commonly refers to the knowledge system of Māori, grounded within the values, beliefs and practices of Māori. The knowledge and culture are fundamentally and inextricably linked.

In May 2021 we sent six questions to the Chief Executives of the 32 government agencies (as listed on the Public Service Commission website). These inquired about their policies, legislation, funding, administration, measurement of, and overall contribution to, mātauranga. Ultimately 84% of the departments responded, with three additional agencies included in responses.

The responses highlighted a lack of a central, whole-of-government approach to, and policy for, mātauranga. Several other issues also emerged, such as very few legislative protections for mātauranga Māori and few funding opportunities available specifically to uplift mātauranga Māori.

Many government departments undertake activities related to mātauranga, but the majority do not have an overarching policy in place to guide them.

Despite the best intentions of the departments behind these activities, the gains and progress identified in the survey responses are not anchored in policy or legislation. Overall, the survey responses illustrate that a coordinated and principled approach has not been undertaken across the whole of the New Zealand government in respect to mātauranga. Some departments appear to be performing better than others; however, the large majority are still lacking in the implementation of processes to guide their interaction with mātauranga Māori.

Ko Aotearoa Tēnei signalled the Crown’s main role regarding mātauranga should be its active protection. A focus on active protection would re-orient many of the existing policies, programmes, and funding from collecting, curating, and classifying as in-house activities to connecting, collaborating, and co-creating.

Our intention is not to disincentivise work with mātauranga Māori, but it is inappropriate and unacceptable for the Crown to continue its current work regarding mātauranga Māori without overarching policy and objectives.

A co-developed mātauranga Māori policy would result in many benefits, including providing clarity and direction for the Crown and Māori; providing transparency and accountability of government resourcing; and helping to foster an inclusive, respectful New Zealand society.