A People Torn in Twain: 
Colonial and Indigenous Contexts of 
University Education in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the development of the university system in New Zealand and explores the impact of colonisation on the development of research priorities.

The paper covers four main areas. The first area discusses the question of identity and location in the early settler colonies and how early contact between Maori and Pakeha led to significant shifts in cultural codes; the second area concerns the historical foundations of higher education in New Zealand and the establishment of Victoria University of Wellington. It includes a discussion of colonial and indigenous identities in the academic context; the third area deals with the contemporary university with particular reference to Victoria University of Wellington; the final section offers some reflections on the ways in which colonisation and local identity are presently influencing educational research priorities.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, higher education, history of education, Maori, national identity, New Zealand, pacific research priorities, settler, Wellington.

Dislocation, isolation, and exile. These are underlying themes in a society which has undergone a process of colonisation. The words don't mend. Nor can they bind together disparate groups of people who find themselves occupying the same landscape. Yet, they are significant concepts in mapping the territory of a new society, its values and ways of perceiving itself. Against this backdrop, the social institutions of education take on a particular flavour and identity. New Zealand is one of those places.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1995) have argued that settler colonies have never been able to construct simple concepts of nationhood which are based on linguistic, racial, or religious homogeneity (p. 151ff).
They experience instead a kind of mosaic reality, in which a sense of place and placelessness become crucial in constructing identity (p. 151ff). The spread of the British Empire during the 19th century led to a partial breakdown of distinct cultural values as different peoples adopted this mosaic pattern of new reference points, symbols, and cultural meanings. In New Zealand, the British colonial presence was pivotal to changing indigenous concepts of cultural identity, but similarly with the passage of time, the British colonies in distant territories such as New Zealand, also ceased to be purely British. Colonial interaction led to a mutual reconstruction of identity and culture whereby Maori and Pakeha social and cultural mores shifted and occasionally merged in response to the changing environment.

These shifts in reference also led to a pervasive sense of isolation and displacement and were to become a recurring theme in New Zealand writing and post-war academic discussion during the 1950s. While questions of national allegiance and identity informed much of the New Zealand intellectual and literary debate of the 19th and early 20th century, Britain was for a long time seen by the immigrants as the “mother country” or “home” (Curnow, 1960, p. 20). Although New Zealanders were formulating a separate identity, many still held themselves in most respects, to be British.

Yet, they were not quite British. In 1954, the New Zealand historian and academic, John Cautre Beaglehole noted that: “For the New Zealander, to go home was to go into exile ... consider the plight of sensitive and articulate New Zealanders who have lived much abroad. They are people torn in twain” (Beaglehole, 1954, p. 8).

In 1940, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand and Principal of Victoria University College, Professor Sir Thomas Hunter wrote of the sense of having “no past and no history” (Hunter, 1940, p. 16). From the late 19th century through to the middle of the 20th century, Pakeha New Zealanders could be seen to exist in a state of cultural transition, being not quite British but not yet fully New Zealanders. These factors were crucial in the construction of a Pakeha identity and had implications for the foundation of university education in the colony.

There can be many roles for education in colonised societies that may not have the same relevance or urgency in the mother country. Basic literacy and numeracy are two pressing functions, but the professionalisation of people living in the colonies; the immediate needs