JUTLP
Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Reflecting Māori Principles into Learning Design: Experiences of Migrant Educators at Universities in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

Dr Nhung Nguyen[a], Dr Bettina Schwenger[b], and Professor Lucila Carvalho[c]
[a] University of Tasmania, Australia; [b] University of Auckland, New Zealand; [c] The University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Debates around culturally responsive and inclusive educational practices have intensified across the globe. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the need to understand how to integrate Māori principles into learning design has never been so critical. Grounded in critical theory and using an autoethnographic methodology, this article offers a critical reflection on the lived experiences of three migrant educators working in tertiary education in Aotearoa. The article explores how these educators navigate the complexities of embedding Māori principles in their educational practices, and their efforts to act as allies to indigenous knowledge. The article highlights practical ways for enacting the Māori concepts such as manaakitanga (care and support), whanaungatanga (relationships), and ako (reciprocal learning) through learning design, and how Māori principles can enhance learning environments by fostering social connectedness and holistic well-being. The perspectives of these educators on the integration of Māori principles are discussed through perceived opportunities and challenges at the micro (course and individual) and macro (institutional) levels. Overall, the article offers insights for curriculum indigenisation, with practical strategies for developing culturally responsive learning design practices and for ways of supporting non-indigenous educators to respectfully work with Māori principles. The article contributes to global efforts to decolonise curricula, highlighting the transformative potential of indigenous knowledge systems in higher education.

Editors

Section: Special Issue
Senior Editor: Dr Cassandra Colvin
Associate Editor: Dr Navneel Prasad

Publication

Received: 9 April 2025
Revised: 4 January 2026
Accepted: 12 June 2026
Online First: 5 November 2026
Published:

Copyright

© by the authors, in its year of first publication. This publication is an open access publication under the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY-ND 4.0 license.

Practitioner Notes

1. Māori principles such as manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and ako can be embedded in learning design to foster inclusive, relational, and culturally responsive learning environments.
2. Non-indigenous and migrant educators can contribute to curriculum indigenisation through ongoing reflection, professional learning, and respectful partnerships with Māori colleagues and communities.
3. Educators are encouraged to consider relationships, belonging, and holistic well-being as part of educational design to support student engagement and success in both face-to-face and online learning environments.

Citation: Nguyen, N., Schwenger, B., & Carvalho, L. (2026). Reflecting Māori principles into learning design: Experiences of migrant educators at Universities in Tāmaki Makaurau. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 23*(8). https://doi.org/10.53761/9ew8y922

4. The meaningful integration of Māori knowledge requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion towards authentic incorporation of Māori principles, language, and perspectives in curriculum, teaching, and assessment.
5. Higher education institutions should provide sustained professional development, resourcing, and policy support to enable educators to embed Māori principles in learning design and teaching practice.

Keywords

Māori principles, learning design, migrant educators, curriculum indigenisation, indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Academic mobility is a common phenomenon in higher education, which refers to teachers and researchers (but also students) relocating to a new country for work (or study) (Hutchinson, 2016; Liu & Willis, 2021). International relocation can offer professional and personal benefits to academics, such as cross-cultural exchange, development of intercultural sensitivity, and new exciting opportunities to experience different ways of living, knowing and working (Uusimaki & Garvis, 2017). Academic mobility can also be challenging, for example in relation to language difficulties, family integration, and loss of existing social connections. As with many other disciplines, learning design has been influenced by academic mobility and enriched cross-cultural perspectives. This article explores the experiences of three migrant learning designers/teachers (the three authors in this article) in Aotearoa New Zealand. It starts with a reflection on our positionality as non-indigenous migrants, to then focus on our journeys as learning designers/teachers trying to navigate and learn to work at the intersection of Māori knowledge and Western educational practices. Overall, the article discusses our efforts to act as allies and supporters of Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Learning design involves the creation of opportunities for students to learn. Such activity might include many different decisions about learning tasks, digital and material resources, and the social organisation of students. For example, a teacher will often decide how to pace and sequence information in a learning task, what their students will be asked to do, what tools and resources students will be working with, and how such activity will be socially organised (e.g., students working individually or in groups) (Goodyear et al., 2021). Essentially, learning design is an activity where educators are making choices, always working with the intention of creating educational experiences that are both engaging and effective.

Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, there has been a movement towards addressing Māori participation in mainstream higher education (Theodore et al., 2015), driven by a demand for offering more appropriate learning choices (Barnes, 2013) and accompanied by concerns about processes and methods used to achieve these (Smith, 2012). Over the years, an increased influence of Māori principles in learning design processes is noted, alongside the need for such processes to be more attuned to indigenous ways of being and knowing. Māori principles and values are deeply rooted in the culture and history of Aotearoa New Zealand, and by embedding such principles into learning design educators can offer opportunities for a more culturally responsive and inclusive education.

As educators living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand, we navigate this landscape striving to contribute to culturally responsive learning design. This includes a design approach that appreciates, honours, and celebrates the varied cultural heritage, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students contribute to a learning environment (Rātima et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2024; Schwenger, 2019; Taylor & Sobel, 2011). Our position as non-indigenous migrants is unique, because we are neither detached observers nor primary guardians of Māori culture. Having this awareness allows us to search for ways to act as allies, committed to understanding and integrating Māori principles into our learning design and teaching practices. And as we will discuss in this article, this commitment manifests in our efforts to develop a deeper understanding of Tikanga Māori (Māori customs and practices) and how these can be applied in face-to-face,

online, and hybrid learning environments. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the creation of learning opportunities that are respectful of Māori culture and also beneficial to all learners.

A critical area of our work as learning designers/teachers relates to exploring how new technological innovations can support and expand pedagogical practices. With the increasing prevalence of digital technologies in teaching and learning, these innovations must be evaluated through the lens of Māori principles (Rātima et al., 2022; Rood & Barbour, 2024). Such an approach ensures that technological advancements in education do not merely replicate existing biases but instead promote equity and inclusion (Green et al., 2023). We are principles-led in our approach, consistently guided by Māori values as we integrate new technologies into our pedagogical frameworks. Our focus is on pedagogical practices that acknowledge the increased presence of digital technologies as part of everyday living, but also on theoretically informed learning design, and robust academic development, which altogether forms the cornerstone of our contribution to this field. As we create and share educational opportunities that are inclusive, engaging, and culturally responsive, we align our work with Māori principles and hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how Māori knowledge systems can enrich modern educational practices in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. Drawing on our experiences as migrant educators working in tertiary education, this article addresses the following research questions:

1. How can migrant educators in Aotearoa New Zealand integrate Māori principles in educational practices?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities at micro and macro levels faced by non-indigenous educators in integrating Māori principles into their work?

To address these questions, we first discuss our positionality as Tangata Tiriti and outline the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study. We then present findings on how Māori principles are enacted in learning design and teaching practices, followed by a discussion of the opportunities and challenges faced by migrant educators. The article concludes by considering implications for curriculum indigenisation and culturally responsive learning design in higher education.

Research Context and Positionality

In Aotearoa New Zealand, people are generally understood to belong to one of two groups: Tangata Whenua (the Indigenous Māori people) or Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori). Tangata Whenua is a Māori term that translates to "people of the land." It refers to the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand who have ancestral and genealogical ties to the land. Tangata Whenua includes the Māori iwi (tribes), hapū (sub-tribes), and whānau (extended families) who have historical, cultural, and spiritual connections to specific areas of the country. The term carries deep significance, recognising the Māori people as the original custodians and guardians of the land, with inherent rights, responsibilities, and authority (mana whenua) in relation to their ancestral territories. Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori) are “those who belong to this land by right of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi” (Network Waitangi Otautahi, 2023, para. 1).

We approach our study from the perspective of Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori) as we are situated in our cultures and ways of being in the world. We acknowledge the limits of our knowledge and

know that we are open to learning. We are concerned about the outcomes – tangible and intangible results – but also about the processes used to achieve these, as emphasised by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012).

We are academics, working for different universities in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. We teach at university courses, and work on learning design, academic and curriculum development and learning and teaching consultancy. Our separate journeys reflect how we all embraced academic mobility, and we are also highly experienced educators, each with over twenty years of expertise in teaching and learning in higher education.

A key element in our practice is acknowledging that we are situated in, reflect on, and understand our own personal culture, so that we can work reflectively (Barnes, 2013). Our practice evolves while being informed by, and in collaboration with, those whose culture we are currently situated in. An essential part of this work involves critical friends immersed in te ao Māori knowledge and reviews by Tangata Whenua, and whenever possible mixed teams that include Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti educators. Our approach supports a design process through reflexivity, which enables us to inquire, review, evaluate and improve our practice as educators.

About Nhung Nguyen

Fifteen years ago, I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand from Vietnam and began my journey of learning about the people, cultures, and histories of this land. I grew up on the side of the Mekong River, got my education in Asia and Europe. Upon arrival in this country, I had not heard about Māori cultures, values and ways of living. As a newcomer, I have tried to learn the way local people live, their values and cultures. In my learning journey, I am trying to make sense of Māori values, principles and practices. In this paper and in my practice, I reflect on my interpretation of Tikanga and my learning journey, a journey of a Tangata Tiriti, who has been trying to learn about/from the owners of the land, how to respect their ways, their cultures, values, principles and practices. Working for various higher education institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand with Tangata Whenua staff, living with a Māori family closely descended from a Māori chief, sharing many meals and family stories with them, I have gradually learnt more about Tikanga Māori. These experiences have now had a significant influence on my personal and professional identity.

About Bettina Schwenger

After living in Germany, England, and the Czech Republic, I arrived in 1999 in Aotearoa New Zealand. To my surprise, Māori culture and te reo Māori (Māori language) were not as celebrated in society as one could believe from information available in Europe, and I was curious to find out more about this tension. Since then, I have engaged with Māori language, culture, and worldviews through listening, reading, conversations, and courses. As I am situated in my culture and ways of being in the world, I acknowledge the limits of my knowledge. I understand my ongoing learning journey, also as a citizen in a bicultural country, and liken it to a continuum without a finishing point. Reflecting my stance as an ally, my research upholds principles of Kaupapa Māori Research to contribute towards “a socially and culturally just educational present and future” (Barnes, 2013, p.8).

About Lucila Carvalho

I was born in Brazil in a Portuguese (migrant) family. My upbringing was infused by family and community values, and by the importance of sharing and welcoming others. I went to school in

São Paulo, and completed university courses in two other countries before moving to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017. I have experienced living in many different places and have met a lot of different people. Through these experiences, I learnt that there are different ways of being (and all are valid and interesting). However, I sometimes dwell, feeling that I do not neatly fit anywhere, or I do not fully understand the implications of a situation. My Māori learning journey started through my employment at a Te Tiriti led university, where I attended various professional development courses and workshops. Throughout the years, I have also informally and formally consulted Māori colleagues. Even though I see many parallels between the stories and struggles of indigenous people in Brazil and New Zealand, I also see differences. I am still learning about Māori values, principles and culture, but I try to respectfully incorporate my interpretation of those values and principles into my practice.

In what follows, we introduce a theoretical stance on critical theory that allows us to embrace both Western and Indigenous ways of knowing. We also introduce collaborative autoethnography as the methodology we used in this project and the process of data collection and analysis. Finally, we discuss the emerging themes in our findings, arguing that Māori principles offer unique ways to enrich educational design, and can powerfully contribute to fostering deeper connections between students, educators, and across institutions.

Background Context

Critical theory positions education as a means to recognise and critique dominant narratives in society, alerting us to the influence of political and socio-economic structures, and to the existence of hidden curricula and inequity in education (Freire, 1972, 1994). Within this perspective, education is seen as a universal right (Roberts, 2017), and learners are encouraged to engage in the critical construction of just, democratic, and sustainable societies. A central element in critical pedagogies is dialogue, which emphasises the importance of students' voice, and students' contributions with their own experiences and knowledge. Such educational practices allow for knowledge to be contested and co-constructed, as students question the status quo and become empowered to create an alternative world. In adopting a critical theory stance (grounded in Western ways of knowing), we acknowledge the Aotearoa New Zealand's socio-economic and political landscape, and its influence on the educational practices in this country. Therefore, gaining a historical critical understanding of how education evolved within this context is crucial, and this includes understanding the principles of partnership that were set when the British arrived on this land.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi refers to core documents (in their te reo Māori and English versions) in Aotearoa New Zealand history, each outlining the basis for partnership between Māori and the British Crown. From the beginning until the present times, discussions about these documents are surrounded by debates and continuous struggles. Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ the Treaty of Waitangi requires understanding and ongoing engagement with Māori concepts in mainstream higher education and tertiary programs. In the last decades, as part of implementing this 1840 foundational partnership agreement between Māori chiefs and British Crown representatives, support and processes for Māori student equity have become more available in tertiary programs. Although progress has been made, Waitoki et al. (2024) argue that the Māori representation in university strategic documents remains racialised and subordinated.

Counteracting colonial oppression of language and culture, especially in the last forty years, has been supported by Kaupapa Māori research theory, Māori community activism and resistance against the ongoing effects of colonisation such as demeaning behaviour in society and politics towards Māori. Māori groups established educational institutions to offer appropriate learning choices and help to keep Māori culture and language alive (Barnes, 2013). Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1997) emphasises that the work in these institutions has helped to make space for aspects of Kaupapa Māori research which supports work by, for, and with Māori. Examples of elements that should underpin research involving Māori include te reo Māori (language) and Tikanga (customary practices and behaviours).

Tikanga Māori is a complex concept and the meanings of Tikanga Māori are varied depending on contexts, tribes, scholars, and documents (Mead, 2016). According to Durie (1994), Tikanga can be described as Māori principles, laws, customary processes and procedures. Tikanga Māori is defined as “Māori customary values and practices” in the Resource Management Act 1991 (NZ) (sec. 2). In Te Aka Māori Dictionary Tikanga Māori means “correct procedure, custom, habit, lore, method, manner, rule, way, code, meaning, plan, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context” (Moorfield, 2024, para. 1). These values and practices can guide educators to consider how to support learning (Rātima et al., 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, when merging digital technologies with Māori epistemology and Tikanga, we need to validate Māori “people, language, culture and … aspirations” as Pihama, Smith, Taki and Lee (2004, p. 32) emphasise.

In this article, Tikanga Māori is referred as Māori principles as noted in Durie’s (1994) text. The discussion focuses on the key terms such as manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and ako. Manaakitanga embodies the values of hospitality, kindness, and care; whanaungatanga is understood as building and maintaining meaningful relationships (Rātima et al., 2022). Ako represents a reciprocal teaching and learning relationship (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2018) where teachers and learners share knowledge, and educators also learn from students.

As pointed out by Rātima et al. (2022) more work is required to integrate culturally inclusive practices in mainstream education, on a course and institutional levels. When designing for learning in Aotearoa, it is essential to consider how Māori principles can be integrated at a micro (at the course or individual level - such as when taking a relational approach into a course) and macro (at the institutional level - such as in policies and systems) level. Tikanga Māori can be integrated into course design, teaching and learning to support Māori and non-Māori students learning (Rātima et al., 2022; Schwenger, 2019).

The integration of whanaungatanga is an example of how contemporary learning design can benefit all students. Whanaungatanga brings people together for a common cause, such as shared learning experiences (Rātima et al., 2022). Actions for establishing and maintaining relationships have been recognised as fundamental to achieve authentic learning and success for non-Māori and Māori students (Green et al., 2023; Macfarlane & Derby, 2022; Schwenger, 2019). Therefore, strategies to foster students' relationships with their peers and teachers should be vital for all learning design.

Method

This research draws on collaborative autoethnographic methodology (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography involves the use of autobiographical writings and personal insights where the researcher works to find ways of connecting their writings to cultural, social, and political narratives. Autoethnography involves adopting a reflective inquiry stance in the context of a researchers' lived experience (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2012).

This research process involved individual and collective reflections and analysis of the personal experiences of three migrant educators in Aotearoa New Zealand. The researchers (the three authors of this paper) are from different countries (Brazil, Germany, and Vietnam), who have lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for a period of eight to 26 years and each has worked at different tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. All of us have experience as teachers and as learning designers. We collected data for this project during 2023.

Data collection and analysis involved each of us independently writing an 800-word piece reflecting on our experiences of design for learning, with a focus on articulating the ways we connected to the Matauranga Māori values in our practice. Specifically, we wanted to explore how these values are evident in our design processes, the course artefacts we create and use in our teaching, and on our pedagogical practices. To write this 800-word piece, we first independently considered and reflected on our lived experience in the teaching and learning environments we design for. The next step was then to read the others' contributions, and to participate in a series of discussions to identify common themes. Key emerging themes were identified and agreed upon after three rounds of discussions. We then synthesised our reflections, highlighting common elements about the ways the integration of Māori principles in learning design and teaching appear in our practice. We discussed common themes and insights and the practical application of indigenous knowledge through learning design in educational settings more broadly.

Findings and Discussion

Throughout our discussions, we all acknowledged that Māori principles offer unique ways to enrich educational design, and foster deeper connections between students, educators, and across institutions. In this section, we present key findings based on our research questions. The first part of the discussion addresses our first research question which was about the integration of Māori principles by migrant learning designers/teachers. Here we explore ways to foreground Māori principles through the use of te reo Māori (the Māori language) and cultural symbolism. Beyond visual and linguistic representation, our findings also illustrate how Māori principles can shape learning design, and in doing so contribute to influence broader educational practices in higher education. In the second part of this section, we extend these discussions to address our second research question which was about the challenges and opportunities at micro and macro levels faced by non-indigenous educators in integrating indigenous knowledge into learning design. These findings are underpinned by our learning journeys and our positionality outlined in the previous section.

Integration of Māori Principles: Bringing Māori Elements into Learning Design

Language is a powerful vehicle for cultural transmission and identity (Rameka & Peterson, 2021). The integration of te reo Māori (the Māori language) into educational practices in higher education can reinforce the visibility and legitimacy of Māori knowledge systems. Universities in Aotearoa New Zealand have been increasingly embracing te reo Māori through communication, signage, and course materials, which reflects a commitment to linguistic inclusivity.

In our analysis, we identified how te reo Māori was incorporated in greetings, instructions, and discussions to acknowledge its significance and encourage students to engage with the language. An example included having an audio artefact in a course website, with the lecturer reciting their Pepeha, which is a traditional Māori introduction where a person traces their connection to the land and ancestors. The concepts such as ako (the reciprocal relation between teaching and learning) and manaaki (welcoming) were taught in a way that engages students cognitively and emotionally. Another example was the use of whakataukī (Māori proverbs) in lectures and written materials to integrate Māori ways of knowing into the academic discourse. These practices arguably enrich learning for all students. A key element in our discussions was finding ways to strive for the presence of te reo Māori in academic spaces, beyond its tokenistic use.

Figure 1

Māori Carving



Note. Pou (1987) by Dr Pakariki Harrison. Māori carving displayed at School of Humanities, Waipapa Taumata Rau (University of Auckland)

The visual representation of Māori culture within universities plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging for Māori students and reinforces the importance of indigenous knowledge in higher education. Māori design elements such as kōwhaiwhai (painted patterns), tukutuku (woven panels), and wharenui (meeting houses) serve as powerful cultural markers that affirm Māori identity within educational institutions. Māori symbolism can be incorporated in universities' architecture, campus design, and digital platforms. In our analysis, we noted the presence of Māori carvings and artworks displayed in central learning spaces, as ways of expressing a connection to indigenous heritage (Figure 1). The presence of these cultural symbols extends to digital learning environments, where Māori imagery (Pou, Toki) can bring new meanings to be woven into virtual classrooms, e-learning resources, and institutional branding. These visual representations not only validate Māori perspectives but also encourage all students to engage with and respect the meanings imbued in indigenous knowledge traditions.

Integration of Māori Principles: Bringing Māori Concepts as Values into Learning Design and Extending Western Views

To us, Māori principles offer valuable perspectives that enrich and transform learning design by fostering inclusivity, relational learning, and holistic well-being. While Western educational paradigms often focus on individual achievement and cognitive development, Māori knowledge systems tend to emphasise collective responsibility, the interconnectedness of learners, and a holistic understanding of personal growth. By integrating Māori principles into learning design, educators can create more culturally responsive and meaningful learning environments that benefit all students. Here, we explore our findings related to manaakitanga (support and care), whanaungatanga (social connectedness), and holistic learning perspectives in educational design.

In an educational context, manaakitanga extends beyond conventional student support; it is fostering an environment where students and staff feel valued, respected, and nurtured. By embedding manaakitanga into educational design, educators prioritise student well-being and academic success through support. In our findings we discussed practices that reflected manaakitanga, such as those that include the design of student-centred curricula, in ways that acknowledge learners' diverse needs, creating safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue, and implementing teaching strategies that are responsive to individual and collective well-being. In our analysis, examples of integrating manaakitanga into educational design included embedding culturally affirming practices in everyday interactions with students, such as personalised greetings in te reo Māori, and encouraging students to explore and share their identities through the development of pepeha (traditional self-introductions). Manaakitanga was also reflected in the design of learning tasks and assessments that foster peer mentoring and discussion, as well as in scaffolded activities that enable students to share knowledge and ideas, learn from one another, and build collective understanding. These approaches provide richer opportunities for engagement and support students in successfully completing assessment tasks.

We understand that education, from a Māori perspective, is inherently relational. Whanaungatanga plays a crucial role in learning and teaching. Strong relationships between students, educators, and the wider community foster engagement, trust, and shared responsibility for learning. In our findings, ways of incorporating whanaungatanga into learning design seemed

to be reflected in prioritising collaborative and interactive learning experiences. This approach aligns with social constructivist theories, which emphasise that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and interaction (Nguyen & Williams, 2016; Wenger, 1998). Group work, peer feedback, and community-based learning initiatives reflect the essence of whanaungatanga, enabling students to develop a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

The principle of whanaungatanga also extends to learning environments where the relations are mediated through digital technologies (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021). Asynchronous online courses can be especially important to notice here, where fostering social presence is critical for student engagement. Educators facilitate whanaungatanga in digital spaces through intentional design choices such as interactive discussion forums, peer-led activities, and real-time engagement with students. But some of these elements also often require extra planning. For example, just having a forum for discussion will not necessarily translate into participation. Modelling and careful scaffolding of the process is more likely to ensure that learners feel connected, and it may contribute to enhancing motivation and persistence, particularly for those studying in culturally diverse or in virtual settings.

We learn that Māori worldviews embrace a holistic understanding of learners and acknowledge that education is not solely an intellectual endeavour but one that encompasses emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Te Whare Tapa Whā model presents a holistic approach that recognises interconnected aspects of a human being: whenua (a place of belonging), taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha whānau (social well-being), taha tinana (physical well-being), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional well-being) (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2025). By integrating a holistic perspective into learning design, educators move beyond a narrower focus on academic achievement and instead cultivate learning environments that nurture students as whole individuals. This can be achieved by incorporating indigenous storytelling and oral traditions, personal narratives, cultural references, and designing assessments that encourage students to acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and expressing understanding.

Overall, Māori principles can deeply influence the ways in which students and educators interact, shaping teaching and learning practices that prioritise relationships, reciprocity, and collective knowledge-building. Whanaungatanga (building relationships), manaakitanga (care and respect), and ako (the reciprocal relation between teaching and learning) are particularly impactful in fostering inclusive educational experiences. Whanaungatanga emphasises the importance of relationships in learning environments. Teaching practices that encourage collaboration, group discussions, and shared knowledge creation reflect this principle by fostering strong connections between students and educators. Manaakitanga promotes a culture of care and support, ensuring that students feel valued and respected. Educators who adopt manaakitanga create safe spaces for learners, provide holistic support, and acknowledge diverse perspectives within the classroom. Ako recognises that teaching and learning are reciprocal processes. By integrating Māori concepts as part of educational philosophy, educators will challenge traditional hierarchical teacher-student dynamics and promote an interactive approach where educators and students learn from one another. By embedding these relational approaches at the core of teaching and learning practices, educators can create learning environments that prioritise student well-being, engagement, and success. These principles also encourage educators to adopt culturally

responsive teaching strategies, such as storytelling, collaborative learning, and strengths-based assessment practices.

Integration of Māori Principles: Other Ways That Māori Principles Inform Educational Practices in Higher Education

Māori principles can play a fundamental role in shaping higher education practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, influencing not only pedagogy but also policies, language use, visual representation, curriculum content, and interpersonal relationships. These principles extend beyond cultural symbolism, offering a framework for embedding tikanga Māori in institutional and teaching practices to foster inclusivity, equity, and student success. By integrating tikanga Māori into higher education, universities are contributing to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi commitments while creating more meaningful and culturally responsive learning environments for all students. In our findings, we identified examples of how Māori principles inform institutional policies and curriculum content, beyond the relational approaches to learning and teaching described in the previous section.

From our perspectives, Māori principles seem embedded in the governance structures and strategic directions of many universities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Institutional policies seem increasingly searching ways to align with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, with Māori perspectives being more recognised and valued within academic and administrative decision-making. This commitment is reflected in policies that promote Māori leadership, advance Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), and support the inclusion of Māori students and staff. In our analysis, we noted that all three institutions we worked for had developed and implemented frameworks. One example is Te Aronui Framework (Auckland University of Technology, 2023), a strategic model that guides decision-making processes, institutional policies (including assessment principles, policy and procedure), and teaching practices. By embedding Māori principles within governance structures, this framework fosters culturally safe learning environments where Māori students and staff feel acknowledged, valued, and supported. Te Aronui Framework promotes Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and nurtures spaces where indigenous perspectives are integral to curriculum design, assessment approaches, and pedagogical strategies. This initiative demonstrates a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi obligations. It exemplifies how higher education institutions can move beyond symbolic recognition towards a more genuine and sustained integration of Māori values into university teaching and learning.

We believe that another significant way Māori principles inform higher education is through the integration of Mātauranga Māori into curriculum content. This approach goes beyond the inclusion of Māori history or culture as an isolated topic; it involves embedding Māori epistemologies and methodologies across various disciplines, including science, health, business, and education. In our analysis, an example emerged through discussions of environmental science courses, where Māori perspectives on sustainability (kaitiakitanga) are incorporated alongside Western scientific frameworks. In health education, Māori models of well-being, such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (a holistic health model mentioned earlier), are being taught alongside biomedical approaches. In business studies, the Māori concept of whakapapa (genealogy and relationships) is applied to discussions on leadership and organisational structures. These interdisciplinary applications

demonstrate the relevance of Māori knowledge beyond traditional cultural studies, positioning it as a valuable and legitimate form of knowledge in various disciplines of higher education.

Challenges and Opportunities for Non-indigenous Learning Designers

We now turn to our second research question and to a more specific discussion about the challenges and opportunities at micro and macro levels faced by non-indigenous educators in integrating indigenous knowledge into learning design. The integration of Māori principles into higher education can present both significant opportunities and complex challenges for educators, particularly non-indigenous and migrant educators navigating this space. Opportunities for embedding Māori principles in learning design emerge from the growing recognition of Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and te reo Māori within universities. However, challenges persist at both micro (course and individual) and macro (institutional) levels. These range from personal positionality to structural barriers within the higher education system. In our experience, some of these opportunities and challenges seemed situated across the relations between Māori knowledge systems and the mainstream higher education system. Māori elements, concepts, and principles as part of Māori knowledge systems are part of our work as educators (at micro and macro levels) at each of the institutions that we are affiliated with.

One of the most significant opportunities lies in the ability to foster more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. On a course (micro level), and at an individual level we continue to develop our understanding of various aspects/components of indigenous knowledge systems and of how to integrate those aspects into courses and curricula, as recommended by Rātima et al. (2022), Green et al. (2023) and Schwenger (2024). We also support other non-indigenous teachers who want to grow their understanding of indigenising curricula and pedagogy in higher education (Schwenger, 2024). In fact, 42.9% of Auckland's population is born overseas (Statistics New Zealand, 2025) which is reflected in the staff profile of higher education institutions.

At both micro and macro levels, the increasing visibility of te reo Māori and Māori pedagogical principles in higher education offers educators new avenues to enhance student engagement and cultural identity. We have worked with students who experienced not being allowed to speak te reo Māori in school and publicly. From the 1970s onwards, driven by community activism and the resistance against oppression and ongoing effects of colonisation, the richness and diversity of Māori culture have started to become more visible in mainstream society (Te Kāhui Tika Tangata/Human Rights Commission, 2022). Alongside this is an evolving understanding among Māori, together with unpacking of intergenerational trauma, and differentiation between individual tribes which can be regarded as challenging to understand for non-Māori.

In our discussions, we saw opportunities for leveraging digital technologies to support Māori principles. With the growing reliance on virtual education, online platforms can be designed to reinforce whanaungatanga through discussion forums, collaborative activities, and culturally responsive assessment strategies, as previously discussed. We see this as an opportunity, where technologies can assist in providing timely feedback, student-led discussions, and interactive learning tasks, supporting the facilitation of relational learning, enacting Māori values of connection and shared learning.

Collaboration with Māori colleagues and communities also presents a valuable opportunity for professional development and deeper engagement with indigenous knowledge systems. By fostering partnerships with Māori scholars, educators can gain a more nuanced understanding of Mātauranga Māori and apply it authentically within their teaching and learning design practices. Such collaborations contribute to decolonising curricula and ensuring that Māori voices are visible in higher education discourse.

However, we also noted how opportunities and challenges can often be tightly related. At the course level, and taking an individual perspective, there is the ongoing responsibility of developing cultural competence and understanding Māori principles in an authentic and respectful manner. For non-indigenous educators, this requires continuous learning, self-reflection, and an openness to questioning assumptions about pedagogy and curriculum design. The complexity of Tikanga Māori and the diversity of Māori perspectives, both between and within iwi (tribes), can make this learning journey challenging. Developing the capacity to understand and embody Tikanga Māori is a long-term process that involves significant professional learning and development. It requires not only knowledge but also dispositions that allow educators to engage authentically rather than translating these principles into Western constructs. Another challenge faced by non-indigenous educators, even those with deep expertise in learning design and culturally responsive pedagogy, is being outsiders when engaging with indigenous knowledge systems. Despite genuine intentions and sustained efforts to act as allies, they may be seen as encroaching on spaces that are not theirs to lead, particularly when working with frameworks grounded in Mātauranga Māori. The concern is not unfounded. As Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori), we acknowledge that we are not custodians of Māori knowledge, and our role is to support, not to speak on behalf of, Māori communities. Navigating this space requires careful reflexivity, humility, and an unwavering commitment to working in partnership with Māori colleagues, ensuring that indigenous voices remain central and that our contributions are grounded in respect, accountability, and transparency.

The growing expectation for non-indigenous educators in Aotearoa New Zealand is to design and deliver courses for international contexts, such as those developed for networks in the Asia Pacific Rim. While these opportunities offer exciting avenues for global engagement, they also present tensions between local and global cultural values and international student expectations. Courses designed in alignment with Māori principles may not always resonate with students from different cultural or educational backgrounds.

Like other educators, we explore how new technological innovations can support and expand pedagogical practices. These innovations must be evaluated through the lens of Māori principles (Green et al., 2023; Schwenger, 2019). One example is research on potential new opportunities for supporting whanaungatanga online through mechanisms such as timely feedback, online postings, and contact with and between students (Kahu, n.d.) to foster relationships and social presence.

Another emerging challenge arises from the increased institutional drive to increase online courses, and the ability to cater for increased student numbers. Many educators need to learn about how to design and support Māori concepts online (Rood & Barbour, 2024). There is an increased demand for educational practices to address culturally inclusive practices online, which

might be slightly different to pedagogical approaches in physical settings. This is in addition to taking into account the disciplinary knowledge, and course and institutional contexts.

As migrant educators, we have experienced challenges implementing institutional Māori policy frameworks. One example discussed above is the implementation of assessment principles, policy and procedures of Te Aronui. Another example is implementing an institutional education framework at a local polytechnic with integrated aspects of Mātauranga Māori. These challenges are related to interpreting the frameworks, institutional implementation processes, evaluation, and ongoing support. Additionally, at times our work might not be understood as supporting the implementation of Te Tiriti principles, but instead be regarded as an institutional short-term strategy.

On a macro level, institutions, similar to the work of individuals, have ‘spiky profiles’, with various areas being less developed than others. In our analysis, we noticed that the integration of te reo Māori (language) and tikanga Māori at higher education institutions appears to be recognised as a vital tool. At Te Tiriti lead institutions increased use of te reo Māori can be found in bi-lingual references to names, roles and titles, of institutions, research centres and physical buildings. At our three universities, there are also certain institutional efforts to integrate Mātauranga Māori into policies and processes. Questions are asked, though about ongoing institutional commitment to foster the underpinning understanding of staff that goes beyond the use of language. Supporting staff to learn about Māori knowledge systems and how to integrate those aspects into courses requires sustained resources and time, a multi-pronged approach beyond short-term initiatives.

A persistent challenge at a macro level that institutions seem to face is the limited number of Māori experts available to lead and guide the integration of Mātauranga Māori across higher education. While there is growing recognition of the importance of embedding Māori knowledge in curricula, governance, and policy, the small pool of Māori academics and cultural advisors often bears a disproportionate burden in fulfilling institutional expectations. These individuals are frequently called upon to provide cultural guidance, develop policy, contribute to curriculum design, and support staff development, in addition to their core academic responsibilities. This over-reliance risks burnout. This reflects a structural issue connected to the need for sustained investment in building Māori academic capacity and leadership across all levels of an institution. Without a broader, institution-wide commitment to shared responsibility and meaningful partnership with Māori communities, the integration of indigenous knowledge risks becoming fragmented, tokenistic, or overly dependent on a few individuals rather than being embedded as a collective institutional value and practice.

Conclusion

This article has explored the experiences of migrant educators integrating Māori principles into learning design in Aotearoa New Zealand. By drawing on our practices and experiences of higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand, we discussed Māori concepts such as manaakitanga (care and support), whanaungatanga (relationships), and ako (reciprocal learning). Our reflections highlight how these concepts have enriched our own educational practices to foster culturally inclusive and responsive learning environments.

We see these discussions about the integration of Māori principles into higher education as a crucial step towards creating more culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments. Incorporating te reo Māori into university settings not only reinforces the legitimacy of Māori knowledge systems but also strengthens cultural identity and inclusivity. The presence of te reo Māori in greetings, instructions, course materials, and institutional communications signifies a commitment to linguistic and cultural diversity. Similarly, the integration of Māori visual elements such as wharenui (meeting houses), tukutuku (woven panels), and kōwhaiwhai (painted patterns) creates a sense of belonging for Māori students and staff and ensures that their cultural heritage is acknowledged within the academic landscape. Concepts such as manaakitanga (care and support), whanaungatanga (relationships), and ako (reciprocal learning) play a fundamental role in fostering inclusive and community driven education. These values influence curriculum design, relational approaches to learning, and institutional policies, and act to reinforce the significance of indigenous perspectives in higher education. By embedding Māori knowledge and practices into both policy and pedagogy, universities can move beyond symbolic gestures towards more meaningful integration of indigenous ways of knowing and being.

While the integration of Māori principles offers significant opportunities for decolonising curricula (Smith, 2012), it also presents challenges, particularly in terms of creating better understanding of institutional implementation, educator positionality, and the complexities of authentically engaging with indigenous knowledge as non-indigenous allies. Building awareness of decolonising and supporting plurality and differences offer a starting point for ongoing engagement (Bhambra et al., 2018). As migrant educators, we acknowledge the ongoing nature of this learning journey. Recognising that cultural responsiveness requires a critical lens on power relations, continuous reflection, dialogue, and partnership, we advocate for a collaborative approach that ensures Māori voices and perspectives that remain central to curriculum design and policy development. Institutions must move beyond symbolic inclusion towards genuine and sustained commitment and provide professional development, institutional support, and resources to embed Māori knowledge at both micro (at a course level and personally for individual educators) and macro (institutional policy) levels.

Our reflections reveal that indigenising curricula is not a technical exercise but a deeply relational and ethical commitment. It requires educators to move beyond symbolic gestures toward authentic engagement with Māori knowledge systems, values, and practices. While progress has been made in embedding Māori principles in higher education, our experiences highlight that this journey is complex, ongoing, and deeply transformative.

A key learning is the importance of positionality and reflexivity. Migrant educators must begin by acknowledging their identity as Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori) and recognising the cultural lens through which they view education. This awareness fosters humility and openness, which are critical dispositions for engaging respectfully with Māori principles. Understanding Tikanga Māori cannot be achieved through short-term initiatives; it demands sustained professional learning, critical reflection, and a willingness to challenge Western-centric assumptions about teaching and learning.

Another significant insight is the centrality of relationships. Māori concepts such as whanaungatanga (relationships), manaakitanga (care and support), and ako (reciprocal learning) are not abstract ideals but lived practices that shape how educators interact with students,

colleagues, and communities. For migrant educators, building genuine partnerships with Māori colleagues and communities ensures that Māori voices remain central and helps avoid tokenistic approaches. These relationships also provide opportunities for co-designing curricula that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments and reflect Māori worldviews.

Our experiences also highlight the need to embrace Māori principles in both physical and digital learning environments. As technology becomes increasingly embedded in education, educators should evaluate innovations through the lens of Māori values to ensure that digital platforms foster relationality, equity, and cultural safety rather than replicating Western models of individualism. This requires creativity and a commitment to designing for learning experiences that prioritise connection and collective responsibility.

Finally, we have learned that institutional support is essential. Indigenising curricula cannot rest solely on individual educators; it requires systemic change, including policy alignment with Te Tiriti, resources for professional development, and frameworks that embed Māori principles across governance and teaching. Migrant educators can play a vital role by advocating for these changes while accepting their position as outsiders to Māori knowledge systems. Our role is to act as allies who work in partnership, demonstrate respect, and ensure that indigenous voices remain at the centre of decision-making.

This journey is not linear and has no endpoint. It is a process of learning, unlearning, and re-learning – one that requires intellectual rigor, emotional openness, and ethical responsibility. By embracing these principles, migrant educators can contribute meaningfully to creating culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments, supporting a future where Māori principles are recognised, valued, and woven into the fabric of higher education.

This research also contributes to the broader discourse on decolonisation and indigenisation in higher education. It calls for universities to embrace indigenous frameworks as fundamental components of a more equitable, holistic, and relational approach to education. Higher education can move towards a more inclusive and culturally rich future, where indigenous knowledge is recognised, valued, and actively woven into the fabric of teaching, learning, and institutional practice.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resources for academic time at their respective university. The authors have not used artificial intelligence in the ideation, design, or write-up of this research as per Crawford et al. (2023). The authors list the following CRediT contributions: Dr Nhung Nguyen (Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing), Dr Bettina Schwenger (Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing), and Professor Lucila Carvalho (Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing).

References

Auckland University of Technology (2023). *Te Aronui AUT Te Tiriti framework.* https://www.aut.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/802925/Te-Aronui-v9.pdf

Barnes, A. (2013). *What can Pākehā learn from engaging in kaupapa Māori educational research?* New Zealand Council for Educational Research. https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/what-can-pakeha-learn-engaging-kaupapa-maori-educational-research

Bhambra, G. K., Gebrial, D., & Nişancıoğlu, K. (2018). Introduction: Decolonising the university? In G. K. Bhambra, D. Gebrial, & K. Nişancıoğlu (Eds.), *Decolonising the University* (1st ed., pp. 1–16). Pluto Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4ncntg.3

Darling-Hammond, L., and Bransford, J. (2012). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. Jossey-Bass.

Durie, E. T. (1994). *Custom Law*. https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/stout-centre/research-and-publications2/research-units/towru/publications/Custom-Law.pdf

Freire, P. (1972*). Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope*. Bloomsbury.

Garner, R., & Rouse, E. (2016). Social presence: Connecting pre-service teachers as learners using a blended learning model. *Student Success*, *7*(1), 25–36. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v7i1.299

Goodyear, P., Carvalho, L., & Yeoman, P. (2021). Activity-centred analysis and design (ACAD): Core purposes, distinctive qualities and current developments. *Educational Technology Research & Development*. 69, 445–464. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09926-7

Green, J., Ruwhiu, P., Carvalho, L., & Sheridan, N. (2023). Indigenous learning practices: Creating reflective spaces for growth and transformation. In T. Jaffer, SC. Govender, & L. Czerniewicz (Eds.) *Learning design voices*. Online - Ed Tech Books: EdTech Books. https://doi.org/10.59668/279.9898

Hutchinson, C.B. (Ed.) (2016). *Experiences of immigrant professors: Cross-cultural differences, challenges, and lessons for success*. Routledge.

Kahu, E. (n.d.). *The importance of whanaungatanga: Building relationships with first-year online students*. https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/The-importance-of-Whanaungatanga-online_Massey-Uni.pdf

Liu, T., & Willis, K. (2021). Cut and paste pedagogy? Academic mobility, teaching practices and the circulation of knowledge. *Geoforum*, 119, 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.12.025

Macfarlane, S., & Derby, M. (2022). Whanaungatanga: Relationships. In M.T. Ratima, J.P. Smith, A.H. Macfarlane, N.M. Riki, K-L. Jones, & L.K. Davies, (Eds.), *Ngā hau e whā o Tāwhirimātea: Culturally responsive teaching and learning for the tertiary sector* (pp. 28-33). Canterbury University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/11870

Mead, H. (2016). Tikanga Maori (revised edition): *Living by Māori values*. Huia Publishers.

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand. (2025). *Te Whare Tapa Whā*. https://mentalhealth.org.nz/te-whare-tapa-wha

Moorfield, J. C. (2024). *Tikanga*. In Te Aka Māori dictionary. https://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/

Network Waitangi Otautahi. (2023). *Who are tangata Tiriti?* https://nwo.org.nz/resources/who-are-tangata-tiriti/

Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC). (2021). Networked learning: Inviting redefinition. *Postdigital Science and Education 3,* 312–325. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00167-8

Nguyen, N. (2024). Designing for cultural responsiveness. In Heggart, K. & Fatayer, M. (Eds), *Designing Learning Experiences for Inclusivity and Diversity: Advice for Learning Designers*. UTS ePRESS. https://doi.org/10.5130/aal.g

Nguyen, N., & Williams, P. J. (2016). An ICT supported sociocultural approach to improve the teaching of physics. *Asia-Pacific Science Education*, *2*(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41029-016-0008-2

Pihama, L., Smith, K., Taki, M., & Lee, J. (2004). A literature review of Kaupapa Māori and Māori education pedagogy. *The International Research Institute for Māori and Indigenous Education*.

Rātima, M.P., Smith, J.P., Macfarlane, A.H., Riki, N.M., Jones, K-L., & Davies, L. K. (2022) (Eds.). Ngā hau e whā o Tāwhirimātea: Culturally responsive teaching and learning for the tertiary sector. Canterbury University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/11870

Rameka, L. and Peterson, S. S. (2021), Sustaining Indigenous languages and cultures: Māori medium education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Aboriginal Head Start in Canada. Kōtuitui: *New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, *3*(16), 307–323. https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2021.1922466

Resource Management Act 1991 (NZ), Pub. L. No. 1991 No 69 (1991). https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1991/0069/latest/DLM230272.html

Reed-Danahay, D. E. (1997*). Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Berg.

Roberts, P. (2017). Paulo Freire. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.10

Rood, C., & Barbour, M. (2024). Virtual learning for Māori students: Examining culturally responsive pedagogies and equity. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, *28*(1), 8–27. https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v28i1.643

Schwenger, B. (2019). *Navigating new terrain: Designing blended learning to develop digital literacies for students in a tertiary institution* [Doctoral thesis, University of Auckland]. http://hdl.handle.net/2292/49253

Schwenger, B (2024). Building back better? Exposing enduring challenges of curriculum and learning design. (2024). *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, *21*(10). https://doi.org/10.53761/cc44dq48

Statistics New Zealand (2025). *Our region: Auckland*. https://www.stats.govt.nz/infographics/detailed-regional-infographics-from-2023-census/our-region-auckland/

Smith, G. H. (1997). *The development of Kaupapa Māori: Theory and praxis* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

Smith, L.T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

Taylor, S. V., & Sobel, D. M. (2011). *Culturally responsive pedagogy: Teaching like our students' lives matter*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781780520315

Te Kāhui Tika Tangata/Human Rights Commission (2023). *Maranga mai!* https://tikatangata.org.nz/our-work/maranga-mai

Te Kete Ipurangi. (2018). *Ako*. https://seniorsecondary.tki.org.nz/The-arts/Pedagogy/Culturally-responsive-learning-environments/Ako

Theodore, R., Tustin, K., Kiro, C., Gollop, M., Taumoepeau, M., Taylor, N., & Poulton, R. (2015). Māori university graduates: Indigenous participation in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *35*(3), 604–618. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1107883

Uusimaki, L., & Garvis, S. (2017). Travelling academics: The lived experience of academics moving across countries. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *36*(1), 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1178217

Waitoki, W., Tan, K., Roy, R., Hamley, L., & Collins, F. L. (2024). A critical race analysis of Māori representation in university strategic documents in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *27*(4), 538–558. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2024.2306379

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge University Press.