

Imposed Ideologies and the Future of New Zealand Universities

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Critical Social Justice Ideology in Western World Universities

Sir Niall Ferguson's article, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* [1], and his related Hoover Institution interview in January 2024 [2], were a sobering reminder that in 1924 in the German Weimar Republic,

university academics (with lawyers and doctors) were contributing to the development of extreme antisemitic policy used later by the Nazi regime. The politicisation of German universities such as Heidelberg and Tübingen during this period led eventually to their losing their standing as the world's very best. Niall Ferguson describes how we have now seen a new politicisation of universities throughout the Western World.

An ideological shift has occurred away from institutional political neutrality, and away from a primary focus on excellence in teaching and research, towards the imposition of the Critical Social Justice (CSJ) politics of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), but including a new race-based oppressor ranking where whites, Asians and Jews are the oppressors. CSJ ideology denies the existence of objective truths, is intolerant of dissenting views and tends to be anti-science.

Pluckrose and Lindsay, in "Cynical Theories" [3] p. 208 state regarding CSJ,

Social Justice Scholarship does not merely present the postmodern knowledge principle – that objective truth does not exist and knowledge is socially constructed and a product of culture – and the postmodern political principle – society is constructed through knowledge by language and discourses, designed to keep the dominant in power over the oppressed. It treats them as The Truth, tolerates no dissent and expects everyone to agree or be "cancelled."

and on pp210-211:

It is therefore no exaggeration to observe that Social Justice Theorists have created a new religion, a tradition of faith that is actively hostile to reason, falsification, disconfirmation and disagreement of any kind. Indeed, the

whole postmodernist project now seems, in retrospect, like an unwitting attempt to have deconstructed the old metanarratives of Western thought – science and reason along with religion and capitalist economic systems – to make room for a wholly new religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysterious worldly forces in systems of power and privilege and which sanctifies victimhood.

The characteristics and worldwide adverse effects of CSJ in our public institutions and businesses have also been well summed up in the opening chapters of Helen Pluckrose’s latest book [4], *The Counterweight Handbook*, in which she provides advice for those needing to argue against imposed CSJ ideology in the workplace.

The ironically oppressive and exclusionary DEI politics in Western universities are more sinister and less easily overcome than an isolated movement because of their very pervasiveness. CSJ activists have a messianic belief in the rightness of their cause, and there have now been numerous instances of academic staff being “cancelled” (loss of advancement and funding, even employment) for refusing to undergo DEI training or otherwise align with their institution’s DEI policies. Repression of academic freedom and freedom of speech is now widespread. Russian mathematics professor, Alexander Barvinok [5], has likened the new DEI regime to the oppressive environment he experienced in communist Russia before emigrating to the USA.

A notable example among many is that of Professor Eric Kaufmann, who resigned from Birkbeck College, University of London late 2023 and moved to the University of Buckingham because of the hostile “cancel culture” at Birkbeck regarding his non-alignment with his University’s DEI policies. Kaufmann has

reported in detail [6] on loss of university academic freedom caused by onerous CSJ/DEI policies in universities in Canada, the UK, and the USA.

In the USA, pressures to pull back on oppressive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies in businesses and universities have gathered modest and patchy momentum. Not so elsewhere, it seems. The UK Labour Government has said that it will not support the Freedom of Speech Act 2023 legislation that could see universities and student unions fined for failing to uphold freedom of speech. Even in the USA, Niall Ferguson is so pessimistic about academia shaking off the weighty shackles of CSJ in the foreseeable future that he has co-founded the new university of Austin in Texas this year, based on a constitution that aims to ensure the institution is steadfastly secular, apolitical and free of CSJ ideology.

New Zealand Academia - Universities or Culturally Based Education Institutions?

What is happening to New Zealand Universities?

CSJ/DEI agendas internationally have typically focused on issues such as race, gender and climate change. In New Zealand, universities have been undergoing a cultural reshaping where CSJ ideology has manifested itself most strongly around Treaty of Waitangi politics and efforts by some to indigenise the country’s senior academic institutions.

Articles by Raine, Lillis and Schwerdtfeger [e.g. 7,8] have commented on this issue. This activism has been strongest in areas such as Education, Law and Social Sciences, but is now occurring in the in STEMM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine), particularly in the Biological Sciences.

Decolonisation activists seek to impose Māori culture as the defining culture of New Zealand's universities. New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Annual Reports from 2011 and 2022 [9] indicate that this cannot be justified on the grounds of increasing Māori enrolments at university, as the barriers to entry mostly relate to the low proportion of Māori completing secondary school education with a University Entrance qualification. Once enrolled at university their success is a little lower than but similar to that of other students. Research findings by Marie et al. [10] further suggest that educational underachievement amongst Māori can be largely explained by disparities in socio-economic status during childhood.

Nonetheless, activist academics such as Hoskins & Jones [11] have a clear wish or agenda to completely change the cultural character of the university. For example, Hoskins & Jones say:

Indigenisation refers not to the inclusion of indigenous people, values and knowledge within a largely unchanged or superficially-changed institutional structure, but to the normalisation of indigenous ways of being and knowing.

and,

Indigenisation keeps a firm eye on institutional change; the university (or the school) becomes 'more Māori'. Success on this model is evidence that the university has more (permanent, high status) Māori staff, and students, teaches more Māori knowledge in more Māori ways, is a place where Māori assumptions and priorities are supported and resourced, where people at all levels engage with each other on the basis of friendship and individual care (whanaungatanga and manaakitanga).

These authors, like other decolonisation advocates, argue for institutional change that will take the university away from being a home of culturally neutral academic discourse. (This issue is addressed later in this essay.)

Decolonisation agendas involve the introduction of courses, taught by Māori staff, that are intended to be mandatory, introducing students to the Māori worldview (Te Ao Māori), elements of Māori traditional knowledge (matauranga Māori), tikanga (protocols and processes), kawa (rules), together with particular interpretations of the Treaty of Waitangi and New Zealand colonial history. The presence of such courses per se is not problematic if they are optional, but any course content which cannot be questioned by students or other staff becomes indoctrination, which should have no place in a university.

The imposition of Te Ao Māori as the dominant culture by the University, placing expectations on staff to support this cultural overlay and dictating administrative, meeting and hosted event protocols, effectively politicises the university. This is even more the case given that the interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi and its constitutional role in New Zealand's future are currently major political issues.

An immediate question is why the Country's universities should be indigenised for other than purely political reasons? New Zealand has three wānanga as publicly owned tertiary education institutions, providing tertiary education in a Māori cultural context, and creating these institutions was positive for young Māori. They are: Te Wānanga o Raukawa (1981), Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (1984), and Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiarangi (1991). Why then, should our universities appear to be on a determined march

towards indigenisation that could leave them looking like wānanga and no longer recognisable as universities in the internationally understood sense?

An education institution may, of course, be based around the knowledge and belief system of a particular culture but, like adherents to a religious movement, those attending such an institution must accept, as doctrine, aspects of cultural lore that require an act of faith, as they cannot be verified through modern science. An example is the attribution of spiritual properties to water by Māori, as discussed by Gary Judd [12].

The academic community has welcomed greater engagement with Māori culture over the past 25 years, and efforts to bring more Māori students into university. This was liberal social justice in action, with real efforts to deliver more equitable outcomes for one population group. Similar efforts have been made with Pasifika. However, the more recent declarations of being “*Te Tiriti-led*”, and activism to decolonise or indigenise the culture of our universities, has put universities increasingly at risk of being seen internationally as ethno-institutions, whose primary focus on teaching and research excellence has fallen before the juggernaut of CSJ ideology. Doug Stokes [13] states in this respect:

..the historical telos of universities as depositories of our collective cultural wisdom and knowledge is thus changed from forms of debate and free speech to those of multiple truths and power plays to impose dominance. In this way, the universities and those academics within them are transformed from fallible but authoritative judges and teachers of the sum of human knowledge to being part of a broader political struggle between a binary of oppressed versus the oppressors. (*Against Decolonisation*, pp. 81-82)

The assertion that all human knowledge is equally valid and the university is a site of power contestation makes it easier to understand the abandonment of fundamental academic principles, not least that of academic freedom. (*Against Decolonisation*, pp. 83-84)

Effects on the Research Funding System

The infusion of CSJ ideology into the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), sits behind their declaring equal standing (mana orite) between matauranga Māori and modern science, now reflected in the public funding of research, most notably in the social sciences but also for “science” projects that seek to position Māori traditional knowledge on an equal footing, or to fuse it with modern science.

MBIE, the Royal Society Te Aparangi (The Royal Society of New Zealand), and the Health Research Council, as major funding agencies, have undergone a significant shift towards CSJ thinking in their funding of research. An example is the resurgence of work in Rongoa Māori (Māori traditional system of healing) such as the use of whale oil treatments and karakia (prayers or incantations) in the management of Kauri tree dieback [14] in Government funded research under the Biological Heritage National Science Challenge.

MBIE advice to grant applicants and assessors for the Endeavour Fund (echoed in the University of Otago MBIE grant advice to staff, for example) makes it clear that success is unlikely unless applicants have a strong section on *Vision Matauranga*, Māori research programme participants (preferably a co-lead) and iwi (tribe) engagement. This is highly prejudicial to success for many Science and Engineering grant applicants. For

example, *Vision Matauranga* is extremely unlikely to be relevant in a nuclear physics research project. Moreover, such restrictions are diverting some research funding away from excellent science and will deter international scholars from applying for positions in New Zealand.

The Defining Characteristics of Universities

In this changed environment, we must remind ourselves of the defining characteristics of a university and how these conflict with aims to transform the university into an organisation dominated by a single culture and where indoctrination occurs.

Robert Anderson, in *The Idea of a University Today* [15] states:

The idea of a university in which teaching and research were combined in the search for impartial truth reached classic form in nineteenth-century Germany, and eventually became the dominant model. Other features of the model were intellectual freedom in research and teaching, university autonomy, the growth of independent disciplines with their own standards and priorities, and internationalism.

The 1967 University of Chicago *Kalven Committee Report* [16] reaffirmed the role and functions of the university in the modern world. The Kalven Report states, in particular:

To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures.

The imperative for universities to maintain a secular, politically neutral position is also emphasised in the first of four fundamental principles that are articulated in the 1988 European Bologna Accord on

the role of universities [17]. This affirms that:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises, and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the need of the world around it, **its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.**

In an interview with Yasha Mounk, Larry Summers [18], former Harvard University President, states

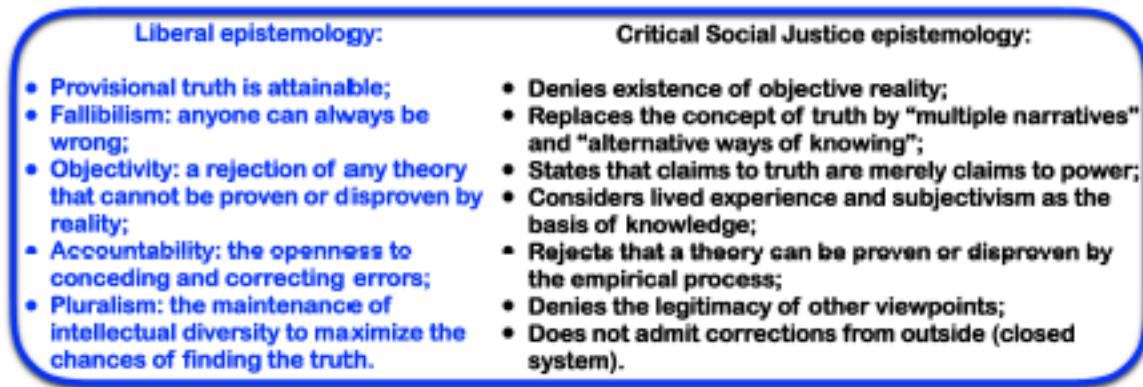
I think the values that animated me to spend my life in universities were **values of excellence in thought, in pursuit of truth.** We're never going to find some ultimate perfect truth, but through argument, analysis, discussion, and study we can get closer to truth. And a world that is better understood is a world that is made better.

And later:

I think there is a widespread sense—and it is, I think, unfortunately, with considerable validity—that many of our leading universities have lost their way; that values that one associated as central to universities—excellence, truth, integrity, opportunity—have come to seem like secondary values relative to the pursuit of certain concepts of social justice, the veneration of certain concepts of identity, the primacy of feeling over analysis, and the elevation of subjective perspective. And that has led to clashes within universities and, more importantly, an enormous estrangement between universities and the broader society.

This focus on a quest for truth and free discussion of ideas means that universities should be defined by liberal epistemology. Abbot et al. [18], in “*In Defense of Merit in Science*” compare in the following diagram liberal epistemology, under which

the scientific method falls, with critical social justice theory, which increasingly dominates university discourse in some disciplines, and where traditional or indigenous knowledge is generally positioned.



Academic Freedom Compromised

Universities should thus be characterised by a politically neutral environment of open enquiry and criticism, where ideas on any subject can be debated, in an open-ended quest for truth, and where modern science is underpinned by method: hypothesis, test, verification or falsification, and always the possibility of new evidence or knowledge reshaping our understanding of a particular phenomenon. In such an environment, the requirement that a particular culture that must be treated as sacrosanct, and the indoctrination or the mandated teaching of unquestionable traditional knowledge, have no valid place. As noted earlier, if these things occur, and if the institution itself imposes a particular cultural rule set on the academic community, then it has been directly or indirectly politicised. The impositions of indigenisation thus conflict with the very nature of a university.

In New Zealand, CSJ and related DEI activism have, if anything, gathered momentum in our universities since 2020, with increasing intolerance shown towards academics whose views do not align with universities’ policies, particularly around the Treaty of Waitangi.

As I noted in an earlier article [19]:

Under the Education and Training Act 2020 281(1)(b), university Councils are required to acknowledge the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, but also to preserve academic freedom. This has led to a conflicted situation in which giving of expression to Treaty principles has begun to trump academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Imposition of Te Ao Māori and its Effect on the Character of New Zealand Universities

Dr James Kierstead has given excellent interviews on New Zealand’s Reality Check Radio (RCR) and The Platform following the publication of his recent substantial New Zealand Initiative report, *Unpopular Opinions*, presenting 72

testimonies of suppression of academic freedom in New Zealand universities [20].

Such instances, which most probably comprise a fraction of those that have occurred, are of course related to all academic matters - not only the Treaty of Waitangi. The report of the recent Auckland University of Technology Law School Staff Survey (NZ Herald 8th September 2024) indicated that 20% experienced discrimination and 35% faced bullying in recent years. While it is only one example, this suggests an environment which is not conducive to academic freedom.

Universities Adopting Māori Culture and the Teaching of Mātauranga Māori

While the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi (between Queen Victoria and Māori tribal chiefs) is frequently called the founding document for New Zealand, it is brief, and “principles” related to the Treaty have been created only in the last 40 years. The Maori version, “Te Tiriti”, is silent on education (as is the English Translation), and the “values” that might be inferred from Te Tiriti are simply that Māori should benefit from education, along with other subjects of the Crown. Nonetheless, the eight Treaty principles of Victoria University of Wellington [21, 22], make very general statements around, in particular, **rangatiratanga** (autonomy and self-determination), **whai wāhi** (participation).

While these principles appear reasonable in general terms, any imposition of tenets of Māori culture, or any other culture, puts academic freedom at risk. And, while the principle of **kawanatanga** (governance) ensures Māori representation on the University Council, which must discharge appropriately its obligations to Māori, there is no requirement that the Council discharges its obligations to all other ethnicities present on campus.

Mātauranga Māori involves wide knowledge from observation of nature, including flora and fauna, a phenomenological understanding of ecosystems, local geology and geography, the weather, and celestial navigation. However, without written language, metal smelting, the wheel, mathematics, all of the physics, chemistry and biology, and advances of modern science, in technological terms, mātauranga Māori corresponds to knowledge in other societies predating 3000 BC.

Philosophical and scientific advances of the liberal Enlightenment, from about the mid-17th century to the present day, have delivered huge benefits in health, nutrition, domestic comfort, quality of life, life expectancy, education and a codified legal system that were not available from traditional and indigenous knowledge systems. Modern science evolved with contributions from Europe, the Middle and Far East, as well as North America, and should not be pejoratively labelled “Western Science”.

Its advances have been described as tools of colonial oppression, but they are not, as science itself is universal and apolitical. Certainly, the technology developed from science has sometimes been used for political ends and not all scientists have behaved with integrity or compassion, but, for example, the New Zealand Ministry of Education should not be inviting our young people to believe that mathematics is neither benign, neutral nor culture-free [24].

Massey University Provost, Professor Giselle Byrnes, in mid-2024 made the following comment that illustrates the conflicted position in which Massey and other universities now find themselves, having declared that they are Te-Tiriti-led:

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its core principles are values that serve to guide the mission and purpose of the university, underpinning teaching, research and the core operations of the university in a way that is appropriate for our historical, geographical, and social context.

Given Massey's commitment to being Te Tiriti-led and its support for increasing Māori cultural content despite the concerns of many esteemed academics, the risk of indoctrination and loss of academic freedom is significant.

In this context, Massey University has closed Engineering at all its campuses and has also closed Food Technology and most of its Sciences at the Albany campus, ostensibly for financial reasons. This is astonishing at a campus surrounded by high-performing secondary schools, and in the Auckland region where there is a high demand for degree studies in the Sciences and Engineering. It is unsurprising in this situation that Massey's latest staff survey shows an extraordinarily low 6% of staff feel positively motivated by the University's present leadership and only 5% positive that there was open and honest two-way communication.

A recent advertisement for positions of Dean of Science and Head of School of Physical and Chemical Sciences at the **University of Canterbury** stated, in the list of "Experience and skills" for the two advertised positions, "*Active commitment to upholding the values, tikanga (protocols and processes), kawa (rules) of cultural practice and traditions as guided by mana whenua, Ngāi Tūāhuriri.*" Why in an institution that should be secular and not subject to cultural protocols from any external cultural or political group, should staff be required to uphold tribal tikanga and kawa?

The daughter of a colleague this year undertook a mandatory University of Otago full-year 300 level Jurisprudence course where one semester was focused mostly on Māori concepts of justice. Surely such a course should concentrate on the New Zealand legal system which is based on British Common Law.

The foregoing are just a few examples of current or recent developments and illustrate the nature of changes occurring within New Zealand universities.

Remedial Action by Government?

So, where does all of this leave us? New Zealand University Councils and Vice Chancellors may have chosen that their institutions should be Te Tiriti-led simply in order to acknowledge Treaty principles (as unclear as these may be in practice), but they appear reluctant to push back against indigenisation and decolonisation activism. While it is completely appropriate to include Māori cultural content optionally in taught courses, it is paramount that our universities continue to meet the Bologna Accord definition of a university, and demonstrate clear political and cultural neutrality, free of any indoctrination. Otherwise, we will see an ongoing loss of international standing, lower international student enrolments, and less international teaching and research collaboration.

What can Governments do when a country's universities are becoming politicised through imposed ideologies? Recognising that Universities normally have a high degree of autonomy, I suggest the following as valid actions:

- (1) Enshrine stronger and more explicit provisions in the Parliamentary Act relating to universities for protection of academic freedom and freedom of speech.
- (2) Decline to provide Government funding subsidies for university courses

that contain incontestable content: i.e. indoctrination, whether in relation to traditional cultural knowledge, or to identity politics, for example.

(3) Require universities to demonstrate through their annual reporting that they are maintaining secularity, political neutrality, curriculum currency, international relevance, and an overarching focus on excellence in their teaching and research.

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