

The Open Mind and the Closed University*

ROGER PARTRIDGE

Editor's Introduction

In recent years New Zealand has become a well-recognised reference point in international debates about the appropriate recognition of Indigenous beliefs about nature (sometimes called 'indigenous science') in national and provincial education, and in wider government health, economic, social and cultural policies. In numerous countries, states and provinces these debates have been strongly contested. They encompass a wide range of common, educational, philosophical and political issues on each of which there is divergent opinion. Each of Decolonisation, Western Science, Diverse Knowledge Systems, Traditional Knowledge, Sovereignty—are frequently appealed to.

One recurrent issue, dealt with below by Roger Partridge, is the universality of scientific truth claims and methodology. A question faced by all science teachers and curriculum writers.

The debates antedated the 2007 United Nations [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP) but this Declaration well-focussed the attention of all participants and interest groups. The UN said that the Declaration's 46 Articles would be applicable to around 370 million people in about 5,000 identifiable groups. Of particular note for the HPS&ST community is Article 31 on the Preservation of Indigenous Culture and Knowledge. So, attention to the Declaration, and consequent disentangling of political from philosophical justifications for educational policies and practices is important.

Different aspects of the New Zealand debate have been addressed in earlier Opinion Pages of this newsletter:

Robert Bartholomew (2025), 'Moonstruck in New Zealand: Identity Politics and Promotion of the Māori Lunar Calendar', [HERE](#)

John Raine (2024), 'Imposed Ideologies and the Future of New Zealand Universities' [HERE](#)

Elizabeth Rata, Peter Schwerdtfeger, David Lilis, and Raymond Richards (2023), 'Open Letter to New Zealand Prime Minister Opposing the

Inclusion of Mātauranga Māori as Science in the School Curriculum' [HERE](#)

Michael R. Matthews (2022) 'Indigenous Science and the Science Curriculum: The New Zealand Debate' [HERE](#)

Michael Corballis, Elizabeth Rata, and Robert Nola (2019), 'The Defence of Science and the Status of Māori Knowledge' [HERE](#)

The New Zealand debate has been, since the 1990s, prompted by the government's formal and legislated positions on the incorporation of Māori Indigenous Knowledge ([Mātauranga Māori](#)) in education, law, health and social practices and policies.

The NZ debate garnered national and international attention with the publication in July 2021 in *The Listener* magazine of a [400 word letter](#) signed by seven University of Auckland professors (subsequently labelled 'defenders of science') who maintained:

Indigenous knowledge is critical for the preservation and perpetuation of culture and local practices, and plays key roles in management and policy. However, in the discovery of empirical, universal truths, it falls far short of what we can define as science itself. To accept it as the equivalent of science is to patronise and fail indigenous populations; better to ensure that everyone participates in the world's scientific enterprises. Indigenous knowledge may indeed help advance scientific knowledge in some ways, but it is not science. (Nola et al 2021)

Within ten days, an 'Against the Professors' petition was circulated and signed by 2,000+ academics, school principals, teachers and graduate students [HERE](#). The signatories included 250 professors and associate professors. They maintained, among other things, that:

However, Mātauranga is far more than just equivalent to or equal to 'Western' science. It offers ways of viewing the world that are

unique and complementary to other knowledge systems.

The above Opinion Pieces, and the following one, all elaborate on different details of this particular New Zealand debate. The core political, educational, cultural and philosophical issues raised by the appropriate curriculum recognition of Indigenous knowledge have universal application.

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He has written extensively on education policy in NZ, writing in support of the NZI's education research programme on topics such as charter schools, curriculum content, literacy and teacher remuneration. A recent column is [Heretics in the Temple of Educational Orthodoxy](#).

Introduction

In November 2025, [Dame Anne Salmond issued](#) a public challenge to the very idea of reason; to the commitment to shared standards of inquiry that has delivered unprecedented human flourishing over the past three centuries – a reality well documented by Steven Pinker in his [Enlightenment Now](#) (2019).

[Anne Salmond](#) is one of New Zealand's most celebrated public intellectuals. [She was writing](#) in Newsroom on 18 November – the same day legislation requiring universities to protect open debate and remain “institutionally neutral” received royal assent. Salmond opposes the reform. For her, neutrality is a fiction: there is no common ground – only competing worldviews.

Salmond's argument is stark: what she calls “universal reason” – the idea that claims can be judged using common standards of evidence and logic – does not exist. Different cultures, she says, see the world through incompatible lenses – all with their own “ways of knowing.” And anyone who claims otherwise is exhibiting closed-minded arrogance masquerading as openness.

Salmond's is an attractive position. It sounds inclusive, modest and humane. It invokes cultural openness and rejects intellectual arrogance. But it is also profoundly wrong. – as [Peter Munz argued](#) in ‘The Two Worlds of Anne Salmond in Postmodern Fancy-Dress’, his long, informed, and critical 1994 review of her celebrated history of early New Zealand. Yet when such ideas gain

institutional power, the consequences are serious – as the functioning of New Zealand's universities has demonstrated.

How New Zealand's universities drifted from openness

The ideas Salmond champions – that knowledge is inseparable from identity, that marginalised perspectives have privileged access to truth, and that neutrality is oppressive – have reshaped Western universities over the past three decades.

Starting in America during the 1990s and 2000s, the ideas became institutionalised practices. Curricula shifted toward “lived experience,” diversity statements became hiring prerequisites, and an expanding bureaucracy began policing speech. What began as an argument in universities soon enough became policy. And what became policy shaped careers.

The shift accelerated after 2020. Following George Floyd's death, DEI bureaucracies expanded across many American campuses, enforcing new orthodoxies on race, gender, and colonialism.

The bubble burst in late 2023. After Hamas's October 7 attack, [Harvard President Claudine Gay's](#) congressional testimony about students' calls for genocide against Jews drew bipartisan condemnation. Gay's testimony was judged “legalistic” in that she declined to say unequivocally that students calling for genocide of Jews violated Harvard's conduct code, offering lawyerly hedging about “context” instead.

When Gay resigned on 2 January 2024 – brought down by the very dynamics her administration had fostered – the costs of institutional capture had become undeniable.

By May, Harvard adopted institutional neutrality policies based on the [University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report](#). This holds that a university's mission is knowledge, not political advocacy. Over 100 institutions followed their lead.

Trump's election initially appeared to reinforce this voluntary reform movement. But, as [I argued in Quadrant](#) earlier this year, his administration simply replaced one form of institutional capture with another.

Trump aside, New Zealand's experience has followed a similar pattern – perhaps without the furore, but with the same logic. In 2018, Massey

University Vice-Chancellor Jan Thomas cancelled a student event featuring former National leader Don Brash. In [leaked emails](#), Thomas called Brash's views “dangerously close to hate speech.” In 2019, [AUT cancelled](#) a Tiananmen Square commemoration following a complaint from the Chinese Vice-Consul-General.

But the consequences run deeper than deplatformed speakers. In 2021, [the Royal Society investigated](#) seven University of Auckland professors, including philosopher [Robert Nola](#), over a [letter to The Listener](#) defending science against being treated as “just another way of knowing,” retreating only after international backlash.

In 2025, [Auckland University made](#) courses including Te Ao Māori compulsory for all first-year students. Staff and students objected that the courses were politically loaded and irrelevant to their disciplines. After one semester, the Senate recommended that they be made voluntary, but the courses [remain compulsory](#) for all professional degrees.

The New Zealand Initiative's 2024 report [Unpopular Opinions](#) shows how pervasive the chill has become. Half of academic respondents felt unfree to discuss colonialism; more than forty percent felt unable to question accepted views on sex and gender. At the University of Auckland, only 49 percent of staff agreed they could “respectfully voice their views without fear of any negative impact.”

As one respondent put it: “The strategy for many academics is to voice no position unless it is conformist.” When this becomes normal, a university stops being a place where arguments are tested – and becomes a place where they are managed.

New Zealand's legislative response

The National-led coalition government responded with legislation. Section 267 of the Education and Training Act 2020 already guaranteed individual academics “the freedom... to question, and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas, and to state controversial or unpopular opinions.”

However, universities had been ignoring these obligations. [The Education and Training Amendment Act 2025 \(No. 2\)](#) [tries to address](#) this gap between law and practice. Passed in November 2025, it requires university councils to

adopt explicit freedom-of-expression statements ([s 281A](#)), establish complaints procedures for breaches of academic freedom ([s 281B](#)), and, crucially, to refrain from taking institutional positions “on matters that do not directly concern their role or functions” ([s 281A\(2\)\(d\)](#)). In other words, the Act supplements the existing protections in section 267 by adding institutional neutrality and procedural accountability.

In legislating for institutional neutrality, New Zealand has chosen a middle path between voluntary reform – which has proved toothless – and the risk of executive government overreach.

Just how effective this prohibition will prove remains to be tested – the proviso allowing positions on matters that “directly concern their role or functions” leaves considerable room for interpretation. But the provision sends a clear signal: universities are to be forums for contested ideas, not advocates for them.

The debate surrounding the Act’s passage was fierce. The [Free Speech Union welcomed](#) the Act’s requirements for institutional neutrality and explicit protection for dissenting scholars.

Salmond disagreed. In her Newsroom column, she argued that these reforms rested on a narrow, culturally specific idea of “universal reason” and risked suppressing alternative ways of knowing. Her critique gave philosophical voice to the resistance, casting the defence of academic freedom itself as an attempt to impose a dominant worldview.

What Salmond is really arguing

Salmond’s case rests on three explicit claims.

First, she denies there is any such thing as universal reason. As she puts it, “there is no such thing as a single ‘universal reason’ to be accepted into education or society.” From this perspective, every culture views the world through its own irreconcilable lens, rendering it impossible to establish shared standards for evaluating knowledge.

Second, she argues that appeals to neutrality mask the dominance of a particular worldview. “Universal reason,” she writes, “suggests there is only one right way to think.” Claims about universal reason, she argues, shut down inquiry into how different cultures understand the world.

Third, she claims that defenders of academic freedom apply free speech selectively. The FSU and “fellow travellers,” she writes, show a “fixed belief in the virtue of their own convictions,” while claiming to defend open inquiry. This, she suggests, forecloses the very humility they demand of others.

Her position draws on three strands of contemporary philosophy.

The first is critical theory, developed by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. Thinkers like [Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno](#) argued that Enlightenment reason had been corrupted into a tool of domination. The second is postmodernism, associated with [Michel Foucault](#) and [Jacques Derrida](#), which goes further, claiming there are no neutral, universal standards – only competing cultural discourses.

The third strand is standpoint epistemology, developed by feminist theorists such as [Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins](#). They claim that marginalised groups have privileged access to truth through lived experience, and that their knowledge cannot be grasped by outsiders.

Salmond blends all three. From critical theory, she inherits the suspicion that free speech is domination. From postmodernism, the denial of shared standards. From standpoint epistemology, the idea that cultural perspectives produce truths inaccessible to outsiders.

The outcome of these strands is Salmond condemning closed minds while insisting that universities adopt her epistemological framework as orthodoxy. The irony is perfect: she demands intellectual openness through philosophical closure.

But there is a more fundamental problem with these ideas. And it is not that they are ironic. It is that they collapse when applied.

Why Salmond’s epistemology collapses

When defenders of academic freedom invoke what Salmond calls “universal reason,” they are not claiming a single worldview holds across all cultures. They are defending shared standards of evidence and argument – including the scientific method – that allow any culture to test its claims and learn from others.

When physicist [Alan Sokal hoaxed](#) a postmodernist journal in 1996 with a paper of

deliberate nonsense, he demonstrated that without such standards, discourse cannot distinguish sense from gibberish. The point is easiest to see through everyday examples.

Consider aircraft maintenance. A jet engine obeys the same physical laws regardless of who designed it or services it. When engineers inspect a turbine blade, they are not practising a “Western way of knowing.” They are applying universal principles of physics and materials science.

The same applies in medicine. Cardiologists reading an ECG are not relying on a cultural worldview. They are interpreting electrical signals produced by the human heart – signals which behave the same in Oslo, Lagos or Wellington. The cultural meaning of illness varies, but the biochemistry does not.

In engineering, bridges remain standing due to their tensile strength and effective load distribution, not due to any cosmological belief.

In law, courts evaluate evidence according to standards of logic and credibility, as justice requires stable criteria.

None of this denies cultural insight. It simply shows that the world pushes back. Some claims can be tested. Some explanations outperform others. The tools we use to discover those differences – reason, evidence, criticism – are not cultural impositions. Rather, they are the means by which cultures exchange knowledge and learn from one another.

This is why Salmond’s postmodern relativism collapses under its own weight. If all knowledge is culturally bounded, then her argument has no authority outside her cultural frame. If reasoning is merely constructed, then her invitation to “openness” offers no reason to accept it. And if disagreement is arrogance, she is doing what she condemns.

Salmond attempts to soften her position by affirming that “knowledge claims should be based on rigorous research and tested against evidence by those with relevant expertise.”

This sounds reasonable. But it contradicts her central claim that no shared standards for evaluating knowledge exist. Terms like “rigorous,” “evidence,” and “expertise” presuppose precisely the universal criteria she rejects. Her argument relies on the very evaluative framework it denies. If evidence and rigour

matter, then there are shared standards. And if there are shared standards, her critique of “universal reason” collapses.

These contradictions might be harmless in a philosophy seminar. But when they shape university governance, the consequences are real.

Consider again Auckland University’s now partially abandoned compulsory course. If all frameworks are equally valid “ways of knowing,” on what grounds could one be mandated over others?

The claimed answer draws on standpoint epistemology. Because Western knowledge has historically dominated, proponents argue that mandating indigenous perspectives is not imposing a worldview but correcting an imbalance. Marginalised ways of knowing deserve institutional priority precisely because they have been marginalised.

But this deepens the contradiction. Claims about historical injustice and the need for correction are themselves knowledge claims. They require the very evaluative standards – evidence, argument, shared criteria – that Salmond’s framework denies to critics. The justification for compulsion relies on tools the framework has delegitimised.

The result is a framework that disarms resistance while enabling imposition. Critics who appeal to shared standards are dismissed as culturally arrogant. Yet those same standards are quietly invoked to mandate a particular worldview.

Salmond’s epistemology does not restrain institutional power. It immunises it from challenge.

This matters far beyond campus. A society relies on its universities for the knowledge that informs public decisions: how (and what) we teach children, treat illness, build bridges, assess risk, or respond to crises.

When universities no longer believe in shared standards of evidence and argument, the boundary between expertise and ideology collapses. Citizens lose any reliable way to judge competing claims. Organisations lose the capacity to correct error. Governments lose trustworthy sources of analysis.

What disappears is not just academic freedom, but the public’s ability to know anything with confidence.

The open university: A moral duty

Academic freedom is not a courtesy extended to scholars. It is a duty the institution owes to society. It is the principle that allows universities to function as critics and consciences. Without it, scholarship becomes performance.

Salmond's critique is not merely a philosophical mistake. It is an invitation to intellectual retreat. The result would be a university where cultural narratives cannot be questioned, scientific claims cannot be challenged, and academic inquiry becomes a performance of approved truths. This is not openness. It is conformity.

An open-minded university requires three commitments. First, academic freedom – the right of scholars to question and test received wisdom. Second, institutional neutrality – the refusal of universities to declare official truths on contested matters. Third, shared standards of evidence and argument – a method, not a worldview, that allows cultures to learn from one another.

What makes universities open is not agreement on conclusions but commitment to these shared standards – the willingness to test any claim, from any tradition, against evidence and argument.

Salmond calls for open minds. On this point she is right. But an open mind is not one that refuses to evaluate claims. It is one that is willing to have its own claims evaluated. It is not one that protects ideas from criticism, but one that welcomes criticism as the price of progress.

If we want universities capable of genuine openness, we must defend the principles that make openness possible. Without them, we may have polite campuses, harmonious campuses, even orderly campuses. But they will no longer be open.

And a closed university cannot teach anyone to think.

* From Roger Partridge's substack [Plain Thinking](#).