

Benefits of a PhD for Māori and Pacific Graduates

This impact brief is part of the Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga: New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence (NPM) Te Arotahi policy paper series. This peer-reviewed brief summarises insights from a 2025 study that documents the outcomes of Māori and Pacific Peoples who completed PhDs between 2003 and 2022 (Kokaua et al., 2025). This research provides important insight into Māori and Pacific PhD graduates' employment, earnings, health, and community engagement up to 15 years following graduation, and helps us better understand the benefits of reaching the highest levels of academic achievement.

*All findings in this research brief are from Kokaua et al. (2025)
unless referenced otherwise.*

Context

Māori and Pacific Peoples are under-represented within Aotearoa New Zealand universities and experience persistent and entrenched inequities across education, health, justice, and other domains. This results from the widespread and ongoing impacts of colonisation and discrimination (Human Rights Commission, 2012), and the specific impacts of historical exclusion and marginalisation in higher education (Naepi et al., 2019; Theodore et al., 2017). International studies show that gaining a higher education qualification can reduce employment and earning inequities. Increasing participation in higher education has therefore been a key New Zealand government strategy for improving Māori and Pacific Peoples' wellbeing (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2024). This strategy has been successful: over 12 years from 2006 to 2018, the

percentage of Māori adults with a bachelor's degree (or higher) rose from 6.4% to 11.5%, and for Pacific Peoples from 5.0% to 9.5% (Stats NZ, 2018).

About this research

The 2025 study by Kokaua et al. provides the first in-depth, population-level analysis of highly qualified Māori and Pacific graduates. It documents the outcomes of 996 Māori and 438 Pacific PhD graduates from 2003 to 2022, at the time of graduation and at subsequent five-year intervals.

It considers these outcomes relative to a matched group of 1386 PhD graduates who are non-Māori and non-Pacific (nMnP), and to matched groups of 3210 Māori and 1374 Pacific Peoples without a PhD. The comparison groups were created using propensity score matching for age, gender and deprivation using

the New Zealand Deprivation Index 2018 (Atkinson et al., 2019) in each year that a Māori or Pacific PhD graduated.

Benefits of a PhD for Māori and Pacific graduates

This study found that a PhD qualification is associated with a broad range of benefits for Māori and Pacific graduates and their whānau in Aotearoa. Outcomes for Māori and Pacific PhD graduates were similar, and in some cases better than outcomes for nMnP PhD graduates. This suggests that higher education, and in particular a doctoral qualification, reduces ethnic disparities.

Increased employment

Graduating with a PhD greatly increased the chances of employment for Māori and Pacific graduates, and this advantage persisted 10–15 years after graduation.

Pacific PhD graduates had 5-fold greater odds of employment than Pacific Peoples without a PhD.

Māori PhD graduates had 11-fold greater odds of employment compared with Māori without a PhD,

and 2-fold greater odds than nMnP PhD graduates. Four out of five Māori PhD graduates were employed before their studies had been fully completed, largely in education (35%) or public administration (24%).

Higher earnings

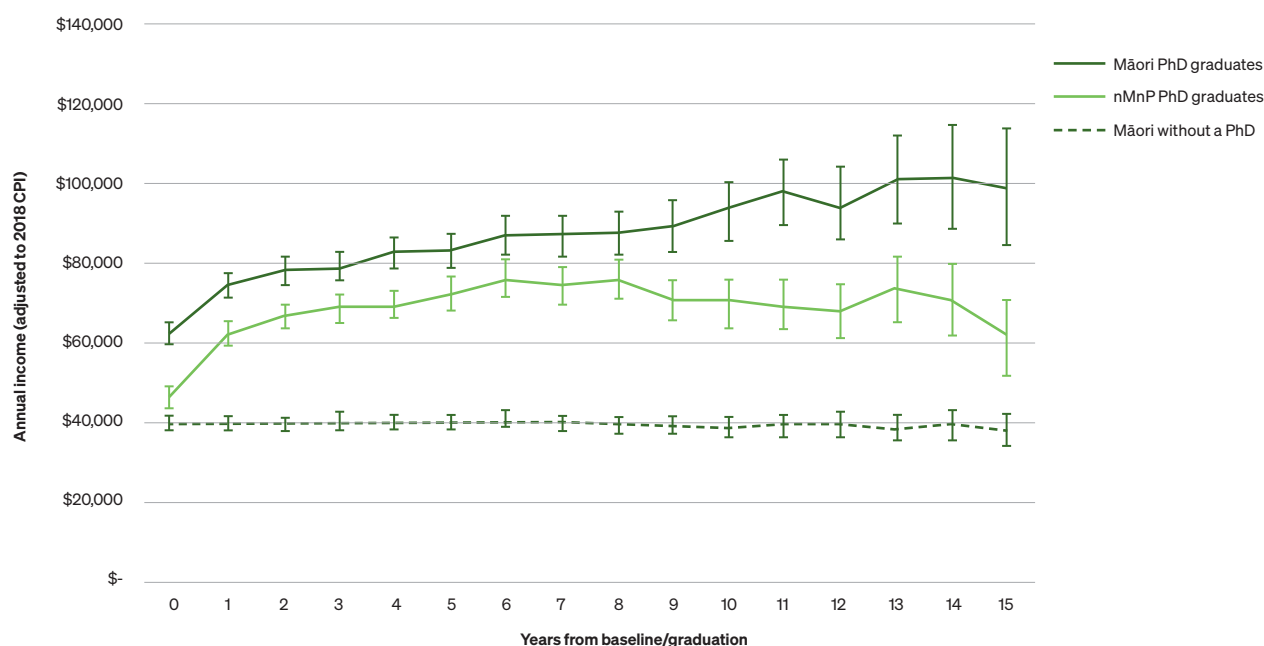
Earnings at graduation were nearly 50% higher for Māori PhD graduates compared with nMnP PhD graduates, and were almost double that of Māori without a PhD. Fifteen years after graduating, incomes of Māori PhD graduates remained 50% higher than those of nMnP with PhDs.

At graduation, Pacific PhD graduate earnings were about 10% higher than the earnings of nMnP PhD graduates, and 25% higher than those of the matched group without a PhD. Ten years after graduation, Pacific PhD graduates' incomes had risen to 50% higher than those of nMnP PhD graduates and more than double the earnings of those without a PhD.

More home ownership

Having a PhD increased the chances of home ownership for Māori graduates by 70% compared with Māori without a PhD, to a level similar to that of nMnP PhD graduates. Three-quarters of Māori

FIGURE 1. Mean incomes for Māori PhD graduates, Māori without a PhD, and non-Māori non-Pacific (nMnP) PhD graduates since baseline/graduation (2003–2022)



PhD graduates lived in homes they owned outright (with or without a mortgage) or as part of a family trust.

Māori PhD graduates were twice as likely to live in the least deprived areas, compared with Māori without a PhD, again similar to the situation of nMnP PhD graduates.

Pacific PhD graduates doubled their chances of home ownership and were more likely to live in a higher socioeconomic area, though this remained below the rate for nMnP graduates.

Greater contribution to communities

Gaining a PhD benefits graduates' whānau and communities, and society in general. Māori and Pacific graduates are significantly more likely than nMnP graduates to report helping their families, friends, and acquaintances, and participating in community organisations (Theodore et al., 2017, 2019).

The study shows that the culture of service, participation, and shared responsibility among Māori and Pacific graduates has flow-on effects for the communities they serve. Māori and Pacific PhD graduates were much more likely to have multiple voluntary jobs than those without a PhD, and nearly three times more likely to volunteer than nMnP PhD graduates.

Additionally, international research shows that Indigenous and ethnic-minority students generally undertake research that is transformational for the communities they belong to (Barney, 2013; DiGregorio et al., 2000).

Fewer serious health issues

Māori and Pacific PhD graduates were more likely to live in healthier neighbourhoods (with parks and access to healthy food, for example) and less likely to have serious health issues requiring hospital-level treatment than Māori and Pacific Peoples without a PhD. This protective effect is likely due to several factors, including financial advantages.

Compared with nMnP PhD graduates, however, both Māori and Pacific PhD graduates had higher rates of hospital admission (inpatient and emergency department).

Success factors and systemic barriers

This study quantifies how much can be gained by increasing the numbers of Māori and Pacific Peoples completing doctoral education. Below, we share examples of successful initiatives and systemic barriers to be overcome in the Aotearoa tertiary education system so this potential can be fully realised.

Successful initiatives provide mentoring, support, and set targets

The increase in Māori PhD graduates over the past two decades is connected to the success of the programme Te Kupenga o MAI (Māori and Indigenous) (Pihama et al., 2018). This programme provides mentoring and support for postgraduate students, and a support network across institutions. With 14 sites strategically located geographically across the country, Te Kupenga o MAI collectively supports more than 210 Māori PhD candidates annually.

Te Kupenga o MAI was formalised with the establishment of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga as a Centre of Research Excellence in 2002, which set a goal of graduating 500 Māori PhDs. This goal was achieved by 2015 (Tertiary Education Commission, 2022).

Systemic barriers need to be addressed

To increase Māori and Pacific PhD graduate numbers, the tertiary system must provide appropriate support and resources. This may include targeted scholarships, and valuing research that serves whānau and communities.

Flexible study arrangements should recognise whānau and community responsibilities. The study found that Māori and Pacific PhD graduates were more likely to be living in households with more children than nMnP PhD graduates. Additionally, Māori graduates often have “a parallel set of priorities” outside academia, and may carry significant community responsibilities (Kidman et al., 2015).

Universities must also build and retain a critical mass of Māori and Pacific academics to mentor and supervise PhD candidates. Recent studies show that the pipeline from doctoral study to an academic job is pakaru (broken) for Māori (Naepi et al., 2019) and Pacific Peoples (Naepi, 2025). Fixing this broken pipeline requires hiring Māori and Pacific staff on



permanent rather than casual contracts; reducing disproportionate demands for excess labour on Māori and Pacific academics; and addressing systemic inequities in processes, promotion, and pay.

Ko te manu e kai ana i te miro, nōna te ngahere.
Ko te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga, nōna te ao.

*The bird that eats the miro berry, theirs is the forest.
The bird that feasts on knowledge, theirs is the world.*

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ABOUT NGĀ PAE O TE MĀRAMATANGA

Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPM) is Aotearoa New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE). Funded by the Tertiary Education Commission and hosted by Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, NPM has 21 partner research entities and a national network of Māori researchers spanning all major disciplinary fields.

NPM research is driven by a vision of creating the foundations for flourishing Māori futures and bringing about transformative change for our communities, our environs and Aotearoa. NPM is an important vehicle by which Aotearoa continues to be a key player in global Indigenous research and affairs.

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