Evaluating Equity and Diversity Initiatives: Tools and Approaches

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of the "innocence to excellence" framework as a tool to evaluate, how equality and diversity initiatives have worked. Universities have adopted different approaches to meeting their equity objectives and there is no consistency across the system in terms of policy, structures or personnel. The nature of reporting requirements has lead to similarities in some areas but local imperatives have determined the design of EEO initiatives and procedures at each University. The framework was originally used as a management tool and its appropriateness for this task is discussed.

Recent discussion has again raised issues around the role of external or internal evaluator and the effect this can have on stakeholder interests. In the university environment where equity is key consideration for staff, systems are often set up to monitor and evaluate specific programmes. However, using a framework to look at the effectiveness of an organisation's equity initiatives thematically provides an innovative approach and a good basis for comparison across different institutions and different countries.

Introduction

This paper describes the use of the "innocence to excellence" framework as a tool to evaluate, through case studies of selected Australasian universities, how equality and diversity initiatives have worked. The framework was originally used as a management tool and its appropriateness for this task is discussed as well as its place in the 'toolbox' of evaluation strategies. The implications of the standpoint of those making the judgments on effectiveness and the position of the evaluator as both insider and outsider are explored.

The Equity Credo - 'What Gets Measured Gets Managed'

The importance of monitoring and evaluating actual progress in changing the people profile of an organisation cannot be underestimated (Brooks et al 2003). Besides keeping up to date data bases of relevant variables and systematically reviewing these, EEO monitoring involves asking individuals in a workplace about themselves and then analysing the information to see whether a policy, and any programmes associated with it, is working to counter discrimination and achieve its objectives. Thus for monitoring and evaluation to work, everyone needs to be clear why specific information is being collected. The collection of some information can be regarded as sensitive because it identifies a member of an invisible minority such as those who do not publicly disclose their sexual identity or those with certain types of hidden disability. Issues may arise around disclosing information which may then impact negatively on the target group members particularly when there is not a will to support or progress EEO. Research suggests that relying on proxy measures such as having an EEO plan or developing a culture or organisational climate supportive of EEO may be insufficient

to achieve equity goals. The climate can change rapidly when personnel change (Chesterman 2004). Therefore more systematic approaches are required both in terms of implementation and evaluation as well as the monitoring of initiatives.

Evaluation has become one of the keys tools used at all stages of programme provision; planning, implementation, measuring outputs and outcomes. As Owen (1999) points out

> …evaluation is complementary to, and supportive of, the development and provision of effective and responsive social, educational and other like interventions. (p22)

According to Michael Scriven (1996), evaluations are the outcome of the process of determining the worth, merit, or significance of programmes or policies. In this case the aim of the research was to evaluate initiatives that have successfully mainstreamed equality and diversity with a view to subsequent benchmarking (PWC Tender Document). Australia and New Zealand were seen to have a strong emphasis on gender and ethnicity initiatives and in Australia in particular these are underpinned by legislation and its accompanying sanctions and monitoring regimes.

If an objectives approach to evaluation is taken then the key question for the work is to establish whether and to what extent the objectives have been achieved. The inherent strength of such an approach is its emphasis on outcomes and the subsequent information provided for programme staff to assist with their future planning and programme delivery as well as for others interested in similar approaches. However, Caulley (1996) cautions that the more general an objective is the less likely it is to provide a guide to action which makes evaluation more difficult. On the other hand, the more specific objectives are the less possibility there is for misunderstandings and misdirection. A high level of specificity generates its own problems. Objectives can differ in importance as well as change over time; they may not be measurable and operationalising them does not necessarily give an appropriate substitute for the desired outcome, as is mentioned above. Contextual issues also influence whether objectives are partially or fully or not achieved and the subsequent value attributed to the outcomes.

Using evaluation to explore how equity and diversity initiatives have worked to meet the goals of treating all groups fairly, encouraging individuals to access available opportunities, ensuring compliance with the appropriate legislation and to ensure that any policy, system or practice does not impact adversely on specific groups follows a well established trend.

Stakeholder Involvement

The value-laden nature of evaluation has already been alluded to. As well, evaluation is a highly political activity and control of the information that has a direct bearing on people's lives creates issues for those involved (McTaggart 1990). As McIvor (1995:210) indicates for involvement in evaluation by stakeholders 'the starting point is the belief that practitioners should be encouraged to engage in the evaluation of their own practice'. However, Conley-Tyler (2005) suggests that in terms of 'formal' evaluations the literature she reviewed espouses two divergent positions premised on the broader question of how evaluation is perceived more generally. Either 'evaluation is something that should be carried out primarily by professionals (external evaluators)…[or] evaluation skills should be spread as widely as possible (such as to management and other staff)" (p10). The literature suggests that there are different dilemmas that face internal versus external evaluators. Internal evaluators are part of the workplace and have a commitment to make things work and how they conceptualise evaluation is driven by this underlying imperative. They may thus be perceived to downplay negative and emphasise positive aspects (Mathison 1999). This perception can be countered by researchers seeking evidence for claims made, as was

the case in our research. The collection of comparable data is important to attain a high level of validity, often an issue for those who commission or use evaluations. While the involvement of stakeholders is seen to be a mechanism to get ”buy-in” for the evaluation, not involving stakeholders can be seen as one way of ensuring validity (Brandon 1998). Brandon argues that if methods are selected and developed to collect the information in a rigorous manner from the appropriate stakeholder groups then validity can be enhanced. Awareness of where the evaluator is placed in relation to the programme/policy being evaluated and how this is accounted for can then be factored in to the final outcome.

In the PwC research there were several possible layers of insider. In both New Zealand and Australia the principal researcher was in a senior position in their own university, which in each case was one of the participating universities, and further more each had equity responsibilities. The key informants were chosen because of their expertise in implementing their university's equity policies and programmes. As will be discussed later, ways of countering what could be seen to be a favourable bias toward presenting initiatives in the best possible light were put in place. These countermeasures moderated the final ratings of the organisations and thus a robust evaluation was possible.

Background to Study

Australia and New Zealand were two of five countries invited to participate in a cross-national study of equality and diversity for staff in higher education initiated by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs),UK, in 2004.[i] Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP (PwC) was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to carry out the comparative study to investigate how equality and diversity initiatives in other countries have led, or failed to lead, to significant change, and to establish any lessons that could be effectively applied to higher education in the UK. PwC worked with five partners in all, in Australia, Belgium, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States. These countries were selected for a variety of reasons, from differences in population profiles to geographic location.[ii]

For the purposes of this comparative study equality and diversity were viewed in a fully integrated way ie. to improve equality of opportunity and fairness for all employees regardless of ethnicity, disability or gender. With this in mind the following definition of equality and diversity activity was used:

> *A framework of policies, strategies and initiatives aimed at: treating people fairly; encouraging individuals to access available opportunities; ensuring compliance with the appropriate legislation, and that any policy, system or practice does not impact adversely on any particular group; with the ultimate aim of every individual contributing towards the achievement of the organisation's aims and objectives.*
> *(PwC, 03/04 Data Collection Document)*

Case studies were carried out in a total of 18 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which involved interviews with staff who ran/ played a central role in embedding equality and diversity in their HEI. These interviews were supplemented by focus groups with a cross-section of the institution's staff, data collected through a pre-interview questionnaire, and other relevant documentation collected at the interview such as copies of equality policies, reports of initiatives. This approach was designed to ensure triangulation of findings as far as possible.

The PwC 'Innocence to Excellence' Framework

One of the principal instruments used to collect the information from the key informants was the Innocence to Excellence Framework. This framework adopted by PwC for the study[iii] is an adaptation of the maturity frameworks common to computer software development and increasingly applied to other areas of organisational development.

The staged structure that underlies the maturity framework was first elaborated in 1980 by Crosby in *Quality is Free*. Crosby's management maturity grid describes five evolutionary stages involved in adopting quality practices in an organisation: Uncertainty, Awakening, Enlightenment, Wisdom, and Certainty. Crosby recognised the potential to use the Maturity Grid as a comparison measurement:

> The company, division, or whatever should be rated by three individuals: the quality manager of the operation, the general manager of the operation, and a staff member who is not assigned to that location…If you handle the Grid right, you can use the comparison between the three individual raters to provide a motivation for becoming involved in improvement. (Crosby 31)

This framework was adapted to the software process and popularised by Watts Humphrey and his colleagues at IBM in the late 1980s. Humphrey had observed that the quality of a software product was directly related to the quality of the process used to develop it. Humphrey realised that organisations were not succeeding in long-term adoption of improved software development when they applied this maturity framework to individual practices or technologies.[iv] Rather an approach needed to be formulated that addressed the organisation, not just individual processes. Consequently, he designed the process maturity framework, following Crosby's five stages, to enable an organisation to achieve a state of continuous process improvement. Because of this staging, the process maturity framework is more than a process standard comprising a list of best practices. Rather, it integrates improved practices into a staged model that guides an organisation through a series of cultural transformations, each of which supports the deployment of a more sophisticated and mature development process. More recently, with the development of knowledge intense industries, the value of the model is seen to be applicable to improvement programs that focus on people, rather than process.

PwC's use of the maturity model as a component of a questionnaire based self-assessment assisted in the standardisation of data by providing consistent (in this case cross-national) points of reference. It is also useful in that it allows the organisation to engage in gap analysis. Gap analysis is done to map the gap that exists between implied and specified requirements and existing processes, identifying strengths, opportunities and improvement priorities.

Case Study Methodology

Intensive study of multiple sites can give information that is not obtainable by other methods (Sadler 1995). The focus then can be on the policy and practice rather than the organisation itself. Organisations are selected to meet the objectives of the study rather than for some ideal of statistical representativeness. It has to be remembered that there can be risks involved in evaluation for the participants and the evaluators, and issues around being involved subsequently as advocates (Scriven & Kramer 1994). Therefore, use of multiple sites can moderate concerns around the perceived risks associated with participation.

There was a two stage approach for the case studies carried out within the HEIs. The first stage was an in depth interview with an individual in each HEI who played a central role in equality and diversity within the institution. This interview was then followed up by a focus group, aiming to capture the views of a broad range of employees from the HEI.

For the in depth interview a standardised research tool, the Data Collection Document (DCD) was developed through a process of consultation with the partner countries and HEFCE, so that there was a common framework with which to capture the information. The DCD was sent to interviewees in advance in order that they could complete the information sought and prepare fully for the interview, consulting colleagues as was

appropriate. The key individual within the organisation was asked to provide organisation details, staffing numbers and costs and details of equality and diversity activity and they were also asked to provide any supporting documents such as copies of appropriate policies and procedures, examples of monitoring reports, the outline of any training programmes and general communication information. The final part of the DCD aimed to capture the level to which the HEI had embedded equality and diversity within its culture and structure (from innocence to excellence) against nine criteria in three categories:

Strategy and Organisation
- Top level commitment
- Management systems and organisational culture
- Business aims and strategy

Implementation
- Communication and awareness
- Training
- Accountability and ownership
- Equality/diversity action planning

Evaluation
- Monitoring and adjustment, and
- Problem solving.

The interviewee was asked to score each criterion and to provide evidence to support the score against each of the ratings, to identify obstacles which the organisation had encountered in arriving at its current score, and to provide information on any initiatives or activities which had enabled it to reach this level.

Focus groups were set up to reflect a diverse mix of employees, particularly in terms of hierarchy and where the individual sat within the organisation, as well as ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation.[v].The focus group was facilitated by the researcher and aimed to capture the views of the participants as regards the organisation's performance against the nine criteria set out in the maturity profile. Each of the criteria was defined by the researcher and the group was invited to discuss the organisation's progress against it. At the end of each of the discussions, the group were invited to score the organisation's performance on a scale of 1-5 against the criterion. The group were not informed of the outcomes of the DCD which had been filled in or the scorings that the key person interviewed had given for the organisation. Thus the focus group provided an independent score which could be used as a point of triangulation against the information and scoring in the DCD.

How Did It Work

In Australia, Higher Education commenced with the founding of the University of Sydney in 1850.[vi] Higher Education in Australia is now delivered nationally to Australia's population of 20 million through 38 public universities and 2 private universities. The universities are situated in all states and territories of Australia[vii] in both urban and regional centres. The number of universities per state reflects the historical development of the sector but approximates the population of the state or territory.

For Australian, selection of case study participants took into account the vast distances between States and Territories, and the inherent differences between the 38 public universities. The urban universities chosen for the case studies (Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, Griffith University in Brisbane, Queensland, and the University of Technology Sydney, in New South Wales) were selected because they were of similar size, showed comparative statistics in relation to women and Indigenous Australians on the national Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) data base, and had a 'track record' of outcomes in relation to equity and diversity. The last criterion was taken from knowledge gained through a highly effective

and interactive Equity Practitioners' Network. The regional university (University of Wollongong in New South Wales) was selected on the basis of its history of programs in equity and to explore potential differences between urban and regional universities.

New Zealand, with a population just under 4 million, currently has eight universities and 18 Polytechnics in its tertiary sector. The establishment of universities has been limited by statute and there has only been one significant change of status in the last 40 years: in 2000 the Auckland Institute of Technology was transformed into the Auckland University of Technology. There is now a moratorium on the creation of new universities.[viii]

Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) was selected because it is a conventional New Zealand academic university without a medical or engineering school and with a particular strength in the humanities and social sciences. Significant and constant structural change over the past decade has sat alongside an EEO history characterised by fluctuation and discontinuations. However, the University has recently begun to make coordinated headway with the adoption of an Equity Plan in 2003. The University of Auckland (UA) was selected because it is the largest university in New Zealand. It has 5,000 staff members and 33,000 students. In contrast to VUW the University includes both a medical school and an engineering school. The student profile includes a high proportion of Maori, Pacific and Asian students. The University is known for having had a long-term and coordinated commitment to both EEO and EeDO, and has a full-time dedicated EEO position.

The major difference between Australia and New Zealand in relation to the legislative environment is that Australian universities operate in a compliance driven framework at both the state and federal levels, whereas compliance in New Zealand is driven by more generic rather than equity specific legislation eg relevant international ILO and UN conventions, and NZ Human Rights (1993) and Employment Relations (2000) legislation.

Top level Commitment/Leadership

The Australian Case

One university in Australia ranked 'Top-level commitment' as Excellent:

> *Senior management pro-actively supports and promotes equality/diversity inside and outside the organisation and believes it makes a positive contribution to overall organisation success.*

Supporting this university's self-assessment of excellence was the level of "embeddedness" around equity – an external perception held, for example, by unions and the sector generally. It has had a long, consistent and well-articulated position on equity. There is an expectation by University Council and the Executive Group that the university is a leader in the equity field, and when it appears that another university in the sector is being recognised as such, eg in media articles, the university's highest governance seeks a response about the university's position. Equity is explicitly embedded in every strategic planning document. However, it was emphasised in the focus group interviews that the university still struggles to embed equity into performance indicators at operational levels, particularly at levels below the top level of strategic planning so it is "not perfect". The evidence to support a rating of excellence is also acknowledged by focus group members to be largely subjective – equity initiatives and positions per se are not met with resistance, but usually with support for an idea, and there is often a keenness to take an initial idea and enhance it to make it even more embedded than the original proposal.

Nonetheless, the University has a strong formal leadership framework supporting equity. This university has had a well-supported Pro Vice Chancellor Equity position for over ten years, a position that has been held by three different, but equally committed

women leaders. It has also had active support and commitment from the Vice Chancellor. A female Chancellor actively committed to equity leads the University Council.

The impact of this leadership is illustrated in the recent growth in the percentage of women in senior academic positions. This has resulted from the active endorsement of the Vice Chancellor, and executive members, of recommendations from a task group report that considered the factors that impacted on women aspiring to, and achieving, academic seniority and management positions.

Three other Australian universities ranked 'top level commitment/leadership' as competent:

> *Consistent senior management support is given to equality/diversity issues which are introduced and managed in a planned and coordinated way and the link to organisation performance is recognised*

All three referred to the champions that have shaped and sustained their equity and diversity programs. At one of these universities the previous Vice Chancellor was not only a strong supporter of equity, but made a strategic appointment to the Deputy Vice Chancellor's position, appointing a woman who strongly and actively supports equity programs and initiatives, and who then became the Vice Chancellor. She has continued to be visibly and actively committed to equity and diversity. The Vice Chancellor has devolved responsibility for equity planning and reporting to managers, and expects them to manage, within the policy and planning framework established, or to seek assistance to advance equity agendas. Since her appointment to Vice Chancellor she has put in place structures that clearly locate the responsibility for equity with managers:

- The Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee is chaired by the Vice Chancellor.
- The Equity Unit is an independent unit, which reports directly to the Vice Chancellor.
- Equity issues are referred to the Vice Chancellor, who in turn refers them back through the executive deans and Pro-Vice Chancellors as the main decision-makers in the university.
- Within each of the four key activity areas of the university's strategic plan there is an expectation that equity and diversity will be a factored in, and that managers will take responsibility for ensuring that issues are handled effectively.

At another the championing of equity has been most visible through the Deputy Vice Chancellor role, the most influential of whom, holding the position for over ten years, prompted the comment, "…he is one of the few men of his age who had a good understanding of systemic discrimination". Subsequent to his retirement several women, with equally strong commitments to equity, held the position. The Vice Chancellor is quietly supportive, and received commendation of his understanding and support for the initiatives being taken as part of Indigenous Australian staff and student programs. The Equity and Diversity Unit has also benefited from strong and visible leadership over the past decade. The seniority of the Director's position was seen to be an important factor in the ability to influence change.

The New Zealand Case

At both New Zealand universities the key people interviewed considered that EEO has finally been absorbed into Senior Management Team's (SMT) core concerns. Both felt that this has been the result of changing the personalities involved, particularly the makeup of the Senior Management Team and the Vice Chancellors themselves. They both believed that in the past senior managers with equity concerns have been marginalised and isolated. However, while in one university the key person interviewed believed that excellence had been achieved in the other university they considered that the level of competence had been reached.

The evidence of top-level commitment provided by the universities included high-level documents (such as strategic plans and equity plans)[1]. Both Universities have an Equity Committee as well as an Equity Policy[2]. Both Universities belong to the New Zealand's EEO Trust and are within the Good Employers Group (see www.eeotrust.org.nz). The University of Auckland enters the Trust's EEO competitions, where as VUW aspires to do so in the future. An Academic Women's Leadership programme at Auckland receives some money (indicating commitment) and there is a Vice Chancellor's Women and Leadership programme at VUW as well as the Vice Chancellor's Leadership programme.

Auckland University spoke of briefings *to* the SMT where as VUW spoke of reports *by* the SMT. This may be because Auckland has an EO Office, separate from both the PVC Equity and Human Resources. The major benefit of having full-time EEO dedicated staff is there are fewer conflict of interests. Reporting to both HR and PVC Equity gives a broad overview which is seen to be impartial and convincing.

Both focus groups considered that the top level commitment to equity had reached a level of competence though in one case they thought it was on the margins between understanding and competence.

> *Equality/diversity…activities are not necessarily viewed as having a major impact on the organisation's performance*

They believed that although there is a lot of 'lip service' to EEO, such as in high-level documents, this is not backed up by action, resources, staff communication or adequate modelling. They were also frustrated that an EEO Officer position had been disestablished.

On the other hand the positive manifestations of top-level commitment were that the union and the association of women at the university have representation on the academic promotions committee; the provision of a crèche for staff - however, this was referred to as the result of years of fighting; and the mentoring scheme was also understood to have some top-level support and has had modest success (for academic staff).

Involvement of the union, the association of women at the university, the university teaching and development centre, and disability support services were generally seen as beneficial to increasing equality/diversity. Specific current activities commended included: the staff crèche; the academic mentoring programme; beginning Maori networks and established Pacific networks; subsidised IT training for general staff; the content of basic level equity training; PVC(Equity) and PVC(Maori) positions; and the initiative and commitment of certain individuals.

Both focus groups commented that there is more commitment to EEdO for students than EEO for staff. This also reflects legislative demands in the New Zealand situation.

Conclusion

It is clear from these Australasian case studies that even a demanding legislative and sophisticated policy environment, such as that in Australia where equity, is historically dominated by compliance, does not ensure appropriate implementation. it is crucial to have champions for the equality agenda to be successful. The above examples show that it is particularly helpful when there is dedicated commitment from the Vice

[1] For Victoria see (a) Charter2004 – 2009 (b) Strategic Plan 2001-2011(c) Interim Profile 2004-2006 (d) Treaty of Waitangi Obligations and Responsibilities 2002 (e) Equity Plan 20 May 2003. For Auckland see (a) 2a-Equal Opportunities Action Plan 2003 and Strategic Priorities 2003 – 2005 (b) 2b-Equal Opportunities Annual Reports Summary 2002.

[2] For Victoria see Policy on Equal Employment Opportunity, HR Group, Approved Feb 2002. For Auckland see 3- The University of Auckland Equal Employment Opportunities Policy.

Chancellor and/or Deputy Vice Chancellors. However, if the head of the unit responsible for embedding the equality agenda has sufficient seniority, is well-positioned structurally within the institution and has appropriate personal qualities, this can be effective in bringing about change. (PwC 2004, 10)

The value of the Organisational Maturity Framework as adapted by PwC is that it exposed differences in perception of organisational performance throughout the organisation. These are differences that may not always be obvious to senior staff, especially those with responsibility for equity. This is particularly evident in complex organisations such as universities, which also tend to operate on a high degree of internal organisational autonomy. The matrix also facilitated 'gap' analysis revealing discrepancies that may be critical to an organisation achieving its equity goals. It provided a framework for analysing equity performance that accommodates the multi-faceted nature of equity giving weight to policy and process, and highlighting those variables that may be critical to success. One of the underlying advantages of the model is its capacity to disentangle equity performance, which we generally capture in quantitative KPIs, and which may appear very fragile, from an underlying robust (or otherwise) quality framework.

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[i] The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable input of the researchers who assisted with the data collection and analysis in the original project, Josie Roberts in New Zealand and Heather Cameron in Australia.

[ii] In the case of Australia and New Zealand 'PwC worked with academics that have an international reputation for their research into equality and diversity issues. South Africa was included because of its unique position in regard to the transformation process that is happening at every level of its society and because its minority culture is the majority culture. The United States was selected because of its long history of grappling with the equality and diversity agenda. Belgium was selected to ensure there was coverage of the European dimension and the partner institution has worked closely with a British academic who is well known in the field of equality and diversity research.' (*Overview Report for Cross-National Study,* Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2004,1)

[iv] The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) is the world's largest software customer, spending over $30 billion annually on software during the 1980s. At that time software projects constantly seemed to be in crisis mode and were frequently responsible for large delays and overruns in defence systems. To address this software crisis on a national scale, the DoD funded the development of the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, P.A. Watts Humphrey brought his process maturity concepts to the SEI in 1986, where he founded its Software Process Program. Various versions of the program have been developed in subsequent years. Although originally adopted by aerospace firms, the programme is now used in commercial software and information systems organisations and its success has generated an interest in applying maturity principles to other activities within an organisation.(Carnegie Mellon Software Engineering Institute *Capability Maturity Model,* http://www.sei.cmu.edu/cmm/cmm.html)

[v] The research was carried out, in the majority of instances, in institutions to which the researcher did not belong. The researcher was therefore dependent on the senior equity officer to select the participants who would attend the focus group, and thus there was little control from the researcher's perspective of this process. Whilst it was requested that the group reflect the diversity of the institution, because of lack of control in selection the focus group may not have been fully reflective of diversity. (PwC Overview Report for Cross-National Study, July 2004, 4)

[vi] Teaching commenced in 1852, followed closely by the University of Melbourne (borne of the Victorian Gold rush) in 1854.

[vii] Australia is a federation of six States (Queensland, NSW, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia) and two Territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory).

[viii] A distinctive component of the tertiary system are Wananga, or Maori institutions of learning that are managed by the indigenous people and are almost entirely attended by Maori students. The Education Amendment Act 1990 states that "A Wananga is characterised by teaching and research that maintains, advances and disseminates knowledge and develops intellectual independence, and assists the application of knowledge regarding *ahuatanga* Maori (Maori tradition) according to *tikanga* Maori (Maori custom).