

# Remembering our Future: Higher Education Quality Assurance and Indigenous Epistemology

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*Uniformity in us...deadens the essence of the infinite.*  
-Rabindranath Tagore

## **Abstract**

This article introduces the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium – WINHEC – a multi-nation effort to accredit, empower and thus affirm native control of indigenous higher learning. The unfixed meaning of *quality* and *assurance* with regard to higher education systems is deconstructed and reconstructed within an indigenous paradigm. Three WINHEC ideals, *Language*, *Culture* and *Spiritual Beliefs*, are outlined and contextualized within WINHEC's initial accreditation efforts in Aotearoa. Finally, a discussion of the Triangulation of Meaning, an ancient way to exhibit an embodied epistemology extending into spiritual acumen is brought forth to invigorate indigeneity and its role in world awakening.

## **World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium: WINHEC**

Welcome to the remembering of our future. This article begins to frame questions and offer solutions within a philosophical context of a world-wide movement to re-think and thus expand what *higher* education means. It is timely as environmental ethics accelerates into decay, blatant disregard for a balanced economy turns mainstream, and new ways to engender violence and ignorance are the outcomes of policy think tanks. The time has arrived to stand up for specific ways to encourage minds back into ancient expressions of rigor and intelligence found in rhythms, dialectic understanding and proper relationship to all beings and to all of life.

Enter the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium – WINHEC – a multi-nation effort to accredit, empower and thus affirm native control of indigenous higher learning. We are here to detail our epistemological right to exist in ways specific to place and people. It is linked with the tide of courage rising throughout the globe made arid with unconsciousness, greed and disregard. It is a reclaiming of right relationship to self, others, land, sky and ocean. It signals a return to the logic of wholeness.

This paper begins with political hermeneutics pausing to shed light on the unfixed meaning of *quality* and *assurance*. It then outlines three main ideas WINHEC is empowered to affirm as the mainstay of indigenous identity found in spaces of practice and knowing: *Language, Culture* and *Spiritual Beliefs*. Finally, we will close with a discussion of the Triangulation of Meaning. Detailing ways to dimension reality back into a frequency of *truth that recognizes itself* allows for the expansion of consciousness, the ultimate field of study now entering world awareness. It serves as a template to invigorate renewal and right relationship we have had and will have again with information, facts and reason on its way to understanding, wisdom and right action.

### **Quality Assurance: Doorway to Hermeneutics**

The very language we use is now in question. Every word, it turns out, is a symbol of another's consciousness. A statement of culture, objectified subjectivity, a belief structure—all there in black strokes on paper. Here is the point of hermeneutics and the illuminating epiphany of this *philosophy of interpretation*: all ideas, all text book renditions of history, all laws and expressions of reason, even objectivity itself, are simply *interpretations*. The fact that all interpretations are not given equal authority brings politics into philosophy and validates the inevitability of this discussion.

What then is *quality assurance*? What do these words really mean? To whom? How do we reconcile the hermeneutic paradox that sees all facts, theories, and words as distinct interpretations in a world slated for standardization? A different rendition of truth left uncritically examined becomes our own. As we bring an indigenous interpretation to ideas of quality and assurance, we begin to notice something unique. *We differ*. It is the nature of humanity to live in specific ways. With this living comes distinctness. Human beings with unique ideas will often differ, especially from mainstream society caught in a worldly cosmology heralding money and accumulation as the pinnacle of life's goals. Here is the point of tension. Here is the place of liberation. To be clear about what it is we value is to be truthful about how we differ. And yes, odd as it sounds, living and honoring difference inevitably leads us into Great Sameness, a deep goal and personal experience for myself and for my twin sister.

*Land is not a metaphor of our mother. Land is our mother.*

-Leroy Little Bear, Blackfoot

For example, indigenous thoughts on land are not simply places for disagreement or satisfying anthropologic curiosities. They are now becoming hotbeds of scientific redefinitions, places for meaning-making and inter-connective ethics for *all* peoples on this planet. The lesson here can become a dialectic one that honors what distinctness is as it inevitably becomes the pathway to universal principles that have endured the test of time. The seeming contradiction of collective excellence flowering as individual expression is an ancient way of developing unity. When quality is expressed in this manner it is distinct to place, people, and culture.

**We are All Cultural People**

*Kia eke ki tōna taumata*  
That it may attain to the excellence of its being  
-Māori Expression

In this process to affirm quality in indigenous higher institutions we must begin to focus the conversation on how quality sees and thus defines *itself*. It is the nature of quality to recognize its own expression and it is the nature of culture to develop how that quality is exhibited. Contrary to the idea that expressions of quality are found in what is mostly measurable, indigeneity posits a wider evaluation methodology that extends from what is seen to what is also not seen but felt, experienced, and understood. Sir Karl Popper (Wilbur, 2000) writes of this process as objectivity advancing toward subjectivity and inevitably toward *culture*. The process of quality and excellence, then, advances toward *cultural* standards unique by their very nature.

*Abstract rational thought and empirical methods cannot grasp the concrete act  
of existing which is fragmentary, paradoxical and incomplete.  
The only way lies through a passionate, inward subjective approach.*  
- Rev. Māori Marsden

Although cultural standards of excellence shape themselves through space/time, we have been taught that advancement in this modern era is found in standardized mechanisms. This is often found in templates of measurement set up to gauge the quality of a program: graduation rates, aggregated data, test scores, student grades, alignment of conceptual framework with syllabi, etc. These data points do not begin to debate real issues of improving teacher quality and student learning within a context of real-world needs. Written summaries and data charts assume uncritical reflection of such fundamental ideas as success, excellence and meaning. It is at these sites of reflection where indigenous epistemology is activated.

A potential battle ground exists when multiple cosmologies square-off on how one views knowledge and excellence. The question then becomes: *How does culture alter our gaze?* Are we *looking* or *seeing* because when you see another in the way they wish to see themselves, the difference between the two is clear. This was evident during the first accreditation visit WINHEC reviewers did of three programs in Māori centers of higher learning (Wānanga) in Aotearoa New Zealand in the summer of 2004.

### **Accreditation experience**

*A rangatira carries the people, not the other way around.*  
Te Wānanga-O-Raukawa belief on leadership  
-Ani Mikaere, Instructor of Māori Law and Philosophy

It was clear to WINHEC and to those hosting us that the very first accreditation experience in Aotearoa was not simply a red carpet affair. It was our waewae-tapu, our first sacred walking on the idea that we can now be of service to each other and to the world that asks for our awakening. It was an event that was *culturally* driven and as we

were all from unique nations, the experience enriched, educated and inspired. Because indigenous epistemology recognizes the value of what is specific to place, all seasoned evaluators breathed into an older way of “seeing” programs, ideas and graduates. We did not offer templates of comparison or review aggregated data, rather questions probed into understanding how language, culture and belief systems were strengthened with course-work, community and collaborations with global cousins.

Indigenous accreditation then is no longer about overseeing well-intentioned ideals, but rather it became a way to *bear witness*. Seeing infers recognition of what is present, a value-conscious discernment of a moment that cherishes distinctness and questions for understanding. It was this way because evaluators knew that quality which encourages itself to reflect will continue to evolve. Here-in lies the difference between intrinsic/enduring value systems that engage in being and meaning, and extrinsic/temporary value systems that engage with comparison and judgment. Here is the frequency of indigeneity fined tuned into WINHEC.

### **WINHEC Triangulation of Meaning: Language, Culture, Spiritual Beliefs**

*A’ohe pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho’okahi*  
All knowledge is not taught in one school  
-Hawaiian Proverb

Every person experiences quality differently. We are radical empiricists who rely on body, mind *and* spirit to locate our place in this world. This *triangulation of meaning* evolves when we include our *own* interpretation of the world. It is evident in the *mauri* or life force of the Hawaiian word *na`auao* or daylight mind. *Na`auao* is also the word for science, feeling, and wisdom. *Na`auao* reflects the triangulation as one word often holds multiple meanings that extend beyond fundamental empiricism. Our knowing is like that. It is placed in contextual continuity that encompasses three elements WINHEC is prepared to protect and enhance: *Language, Culture and Spiritual beliefs*.

#### **Language**

*My language thrusts me into the thought world of my ancestors.*  
-Oscar Kwagley, Yup’iuk

Our many ways to describe an object or idea matters. As if our breath shapes how the world is understood. Meaning-making ritualized through oracy and literacy both formal and informal has been a garden of rejuvenation for indigenous peoples world-wide. It is how we are defining our freedom, with sounds that hold distinct ideals shaped by scores of generations living in a specific place. The WINHEC priority of language is itself a reminder that what has birthed our world view is held in ancient symbols, codes and energies that we are returning to for meaning and joy.

*‘ike*  
to see; to know; to be given revelations  
-Hawaiian inference to body, mind, spirit

WINHEC encourages the use of indigenous language in all facets of programming. Language that describes a program's mission, goals, or purpose need not be translated into English. We experience the vision of a program in the descriptions of what students learned, we feel it in the songs, we witness it in the projects discussed and its impact in the community. Such is the difference between ho'olohe (listening) and ho'olono (hearing). We want to *hear* what has inspired students, in whatever language they choose because we know that hearing changes us. This is an indigenous ideal, to honor deep culture as it is expressed in language and song.

## **Culture**

*Diversity strengthens a tribe. Homogeneity kills it.*  
-Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Culture can be described as best practices defined by a group of people. WINHEC exists to bring these best practices to light in relation to systems of higher learning. It is a significant and enduring principle to not impose one culture on another. Our indigenous cultures have survived the on-going impact of the belief that one way of thinking will rule the day. This is why WINHEC began and why it must be clear specific to issues of culture.

*Hoa`e ka `ike he`enalu i ka hokua o ka ale*  
Show your knowledge of surfing on the back of a wave  
-Hawaiian proverb

Indigeneity, a way to describe the qualities of ancient culture, by its very structure works toward strengthening the people it embodies. This can be found in how education responds to the community's quest for wellness, quality leadership, restorative justice, land stewardship or economic sustainability. Culture defines what excellence looks like in these five areas. Quality assurance is guaranteed when culture *specific to place clarifies how they wish to be seen*. Cultural beliefs and practices clean the lenses in which we gaze. Critique then becomes witnessing that offers guidance, solidarity and encouragement. WINHEC exists to uphold, clarify and honor the many distinct cultures alive on this planet.

## **Spiritual Beliefs**

*The great consciousness exists in my mind.*  
-Oscar Kwageley, Yup'iuk

This third point in the triangulation of meaning within indigenous communities is the animating principle of the first two. To honor spiritual beliefs is to first be lead by them. Indigeneity is based on this one clear principle. Spiritual beliefs are not confused with religion. They may be embodied in religious rituals but they are not bound to them.

*Ulu a`e ke welina a ke aloha*

The growth of aloha is the essence within the soul  
-Hawaiian Proverb

WINHEC supports spiritual beliefs and practices found in indigenous centers of higher learning. This is accomplished by the very nature of WINHEC's vision: *Indigenous people of the world united in the collective synergy of self determination through control of their higher education.* Spirituality exists as the collective synergy of self determination. It is an ancient ideal that distinctness of life-forces---self determination---linked with other life-forces endures and is heightened and advanced by positive interconnection. We cannot predict the outcome until it is expressed but know it will be greater---collective synergy---than our initial dreams. This idea is spirituality in action. It is a trusting of enduring principles that keeps us awakened, connected to our elders, and grateful for the work at hand. WINHEC encourages both process and product of accreditation efforts that are accomplished and supported within a framework that honors all spiritual beliefs, practices and expressions.

### **Triangulation of Meaning**

*If knowledge is power then understanding is liberation*  
- Manulani Aluli Meyer

Indigenous people have endured a “Quiet Title” effort for the lands of our imagination. What is becoming clearer in the world is a need to exemplify systems of imagination and culture that bring meaning to our lives. There is recognition that interdependence, care and compassion heighten our understanding of why we exist. These simple ideas are embedded in the truth that knowledge must be developed in a way that helps us find meaning, usually to benefit others and to uplift our communities.

Wilderness education teaches that if you wish to find your location on a topographical map, one needs only to locate two geographical distinctions on land and with the use of a compass and pencil, the third and final spot, your location, can be found. The use of three points to discover ones location in both two and three dimensions is the art and science of “triangulation” and I have always thrilled to its utility and implication. Thus the metaphor of *triangulating our way to meaning* with the use of three points: Body, Mind and Spirit.

The idea that three points combined bring us to a meaningful life is more than simply a poetic stretch: it is an example of fact, logic *and* metaphor. In every ancient system that has endured and flourished throughout the world there is a recognition and use of these three categories to describe the complexity of life in a fluid and beautiful manner. They exemplify the outside world of data, the inside world of thought, and the trans-spatial world of being: empiricism, rationalism, transcendentalism. They are found in *every* philosophy in the world and can be summarized in the following fashion—

Body	Mind	Spirit
Facts	Logic	Metaphor
Exterior	Interior	Transpatial
Empiricism	Rationalism	Transcendentalism

The triangulation does not ignore the fullness of what it means to exist in the world. It does not blindly assume that a perfect score on a national standardized exam means the test-taker is intelligent in the ways that make us fully human. Nor does it posit that those who use metaphor in art or poetry are more intelligent. All three points on the body, mind, spirit continuum are vital within an enduring epistemology that brings us deeper into the ideals of quality assurance found in institutions of higher learning. The following is an example of an epistemological triangulation as found in the Māori tradition—

Mātauranga	Mohio	Māramatanga
Knowledge	Knowing	Enlightenment

Here is the idea that knowledge/fact/information is only one third the process of knowing that leads to enlightenment, a goal for education within an indigenous world-view. This idea is eloquently expressed by Hawaiian elder and healer, Halemakua—

The whole goal of the future and of the present effort is to bring humanity to the point where it, occultly speaking, “enters into the light.” The entire trend of the present forward, which can be noted so distinctly in the race to acquire knowledge, to transmute it into wisdom by the aid of the understanding, and thus to become “fully enlightened.” Enlightenment is the major goal of education.

Thus clarifies a Hawaiian ideal for why higher learning is attempted: knowledge *begins* the process of enlightenment. Higher learning is more than simply gaining qualifications for a job---it is a way to become that which we are. The triangulation of meaning and consciousness is best described in ancient traditions in the following ways:

True	Good	Beautiful	(Plato)
Information	Knowledge	Understanding	(Aluli)
Emotion	Feeling	Awareness	(Spinoza)
Instinct	Intelligence	Intuition	(Halemakua)
Objective	Subjective	Cultural	(Sir Karl Popper)
Life	Mind	Joy	(Upanishads)
Perception	Conceptualization	Remembering	(Patanjali)
Truth	Sincerity	Rightness	(Habermas)

Here is a comprehensive and wider listing of what quality assurance looks like. Facts then become one-third of the process of evaluation. They point us to the journey toward subjectivity which leads us into the world of understanding. Here is how we differ, here is how we enter the world of Great Sameness, a place where specificity leads to universality. It is of course, a place of excellence.

**Ha’ina ia mai ana ka puana: The Story is Told**

*Universality is found in the specifics.*  
-Leesa Robertson

Vedic mystic/scholar Patanjali described the hermeneutic triangulation as: *word, meaning, interpretation*. Knowing the difference between the three deepens the potential of *quality assurance* in relation to self-reflection and external evaluation. He offers us a stunning view of why WINHEC began: *Indigenous peoples must interpret our systems of higher education embedded in our own triangulation of meaning*. We must shape our own qualities of excellence found in our languages, our cultures and in all expressions of spirit. We must help each other by helping each other. We must bring to bear what is unique about cultural beliefs that synergize *and* completely differ from mainstream society. We must remember the excellence of our being through literacy, oracy *and* silence.

It is vital to voice indigenous qualities of higher learning as mainstream knowledge no longer guarantees care for land or other. This is fundamentally not an exclusive movement, it is a *necessary* one as we believe it is essential to be educated by beauty once again. Beauty after all is harmony inspiring itself through interpretation, specificity, and the One that is many. Language. Culture. Spirituality. These must have expressions at all levels of life if we are to evolve together on this planet.

The world indigenous nation's higher education consortium are people who honor knowing that ultimately leads us all into understanding, liberation and joy. We encourage the transformation of chaos into coherence, justice into healing, and individuation into interdependence. A tall order indeed. A task worth beginning.

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