



# OCEAN MERCIER

*Ocean is a lecturer in the School of Māori Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. She has a PhD in physics, and a special interest in the interface between Māori and Western science. Ocean presents Project Mātauranga on Māori Television, which investigates Māori worldviews and methodologies within the scientific community.*

## 1. In the context of your professional background, what does 'talent' mean to you?

I think that to me, talent is a different perspective from the norm that brings a really important dimension. Talent encompasses lots of different skills and attributes and one of those attributes, especially now that I'm working in the School of Māori Studies, is that different perspective that, for instance, the Māori world brings, giving a whole other way of looking at issues and potentially resolving them.

There's also something about talent that's really undefinable, the X-factor. It goes beyond the sum of its parts, and that is really difficult to put your finger on. It's that stuff that we need to retain, I think – the people or the groups that have the X-factor – however that manifests itself.

## 2. Are you aware of any talent gaps that exist or might arise within the next ten years?

It's certainly helps to get overseas perspectives through collaborations

overseas, and I work quite closely with someone in Alaska who gives me a perspective that I need. That's certainly one thing about our geographical isolation. But students, I find, are actually really amazing collaborators. I've written a couple of papers with students because their ideas have been very fresh and have taken my own thinking beyond what I expected. In saying that, I do travel overseas quite a bit and to some extent it is just an excuse to go overseas and get the OE out of my system, because I'm very committed to New Zealand, I love being here, I love working here and I belong here.

## 3. How do successful organisations attract, keep and grow talent?

We do a great job here in New Zealand of educating and training people, so we've got a lot of talent here really. Talent communities are important to skilled, highly educated people. Freedom, flexibility, I think are really very important in my job, the freedom and flexibility to be able to do my job with flair, do it in a way that expands my own thinking as well as the thinking of others.

Very important is that organisations create the space for talent to grow because talented people want to push themselves; they want to know more, to learn more, to be more. And so how

*One thing we need to guard against is siloing talent.*

do organisations attract, keep and grow that sort of person? By giving them the freedom to explore their own capabilities and to push beyond what they might see as their own limitations.

## 4. Think about talent hubs around the world, what is cool and why?

I like the idea of bringing a whole group of talented people together in a deliberate way. Just because I've seen, by being around talented people here, how your thinking can be refined just by being around people who truly understand, who get where you're coming

from whether it's a perspective or an argument.

One thing we need to guard against is siloing talent. I was part of a talent hub of emerging researchers from universities and CRIs. There was a spark that we wanted to capture that we were able to fan and work into a flame as a group. But then you'd come away and almost miss the camaraderie and what was created in that talent hub. I think we just need to be careful that we don't draw talented people into a talent hub in order to turn them into the next vice-chancellor or CEO, because that I think is a sure recipe for extinguishing the spark. Talent is spontaneous. Leadership should be more of an organic thing that arises in response to a problem or an issue.

## 5. Can you assess New Zealand's performance in attracting talent on a global scale?

Generally speaking, New Zealand is good at attracting talent from overseas. I mean, the number of academics here at Victoria University of Wellington who were originally from overseas is testament to that fact. In terms of Māori talent, it's a really big issue that one in six Māori are moving to Australia, because that reflects on New Zealand's ability to keep Māori talent here.

When it comes to teaching in the classroom, many students can't engage intellectually if they are not first engaged socially. Thinking of my own aunts and cousins who are in Australia, the fact that they don't have to engage with issues of race and cultural difference in Australia is very freeing for them. It enables their talent to flourish, to express itself without any of the baggage. I get a sense that Australia may be an easier place for talent to blossom for a Māori person who is away from what they may perceive to be

challenges to their social engagement, which then challenges their intellectual engagement.

## 6. What does New Zealand need to do in order to attract, keep and grow talent?

A creative centre like Weta Digital is obviously a shining example of how you build a talent hub and attract and keep it all there. What's really neat about that as an example is that it capitalises on a strength that Aotearoa has if we just do things that we're really good at. As a society we need to make sure we foster passion as much as any-

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thing else, and we have mechanisms that can support talent in the different areas that it might arise – who would have thought that when Peter Jackson made *Bad Taste*, 20 or more years down the line we would have a film industry here in Wellington? That we really grew from that whakapapa.

I think it's so needful that people coming through here don't just get pushed into these silos straight away, but they get an opportunity to learn another perspective that they can bring to bear on another discipline they specialise in. For me it was so valuable to come over to Māori Studies. I really

believe that our universities need to do that. In the States, they have a more general first year and many of the universities require, say, you enrol in Native American Studies, say this, maths and something else before you specialise.

## 7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Young people are amazing because they tolerate a high level of insecurity and risk and even seek that out. So to a young person, I would say don't be afraid of that. If you feel like the way you're thinking is not gelling with the way the lecturer is teaching in the course, then put your flag in the ground and explore that area, build a house there and make it your own. Because you're really in the perfect position to think outside the box and to do something that society hasn't done before and probably really needs.

Besides that, it's a cliché but follow your dreams and your passions because they're really amazing guides into the unknown. Why would you want to do something that's already been done before? Make sure you work hard, learn from others, be a sponge. But then you'll get to a point where it's like, 'You know what? I don't think the world can teach me anything anymore.' It's fine to feel that way because perhaps it can't, and that's setting an opportunity to do something new, to do something the world hasn't seen.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang at Victoria University in Wellington, on 11 July 2013. Photograph provided by the McGuinness Institute.