



TAHU KUKUTAI

Tahu is one of New Zealand's leading demographers. She is currently working at the University of Waikato on Ethnicity Counts? (eCounts?), a project that tracks how governments across the world count and classify their populations by ethnicity. Tahu provides an international perspective on skills and the future of talent.

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

See that's a hard one because being a demographer, we don't think about talent, we think about skills. Talented people are skilled, but they can elevate skills in ways that can make things happen and in ways that reverberate beyond themselves.

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

I think there's a bunch of people who have this kind of talent but it's never really realised in a way that allows that quality of talent to reach its full potential.

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

The way universities are structured is that we have these scholarships and we want to attract the best students, either back to New Zealand or to

New Zealand from an Ivy League type school. It's a hard sell. At the University of Waikato, we don't have Nobel Prize winners, whereas at Stanford, you had around fifteen floating around the

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campus. You can't compete with that, but we've got these really great universities just across the gap. You've got ANU [Australian National University], which is one of the best universities in the world. We can enable students to

come and have a more fluid arrangement between say Waikato and ANU, and that's what I'm trying to do in my indigenous demography space – to get students to come over and basically be co-supervised and co-funded between ANU and Waikato.

We've got some great opportunities for doing academic work, but we don't have the status and we don't have the money and we don't have the big names. If you can leverage relationships with those who do and who are nearby, it's actually easier. If you can travel between them reasonably well, then it makes sense to do that. We tend to see Australia as competition, but actually that makes no sense in a global system.

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

In somewhere like the Bay Area you feel like you kind of are the world. Once a place starts developing depth in a niche, then it will become recognised, but probably only in that niche market, not generally. There are exceptions like Finland. Finland didn't use to be the hot place but now people associate it

with Nokia. I think one of the advantages there is that they are part of the Scandinavian bloc, so they can leverage off all of that and all the benefits that you have across that region. I'm trying to think more extensively in terms of New Zealand's alliance with Australia because it doesn't make sense to operate in an isolated way.

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

I think people have quite a positive perception of New Zealand in terms of it being a democratic country, a clean country, and a safe country, but they just don't know much about it. Maybe we haven't done a good job of promoting Brand New Zealand in ways that don't fit that traditional model of being green and having sheep.

New Zealanders more than others connect up with the world. In the OECD, after Ireland, we've got the largest proportion of our population that's living outside our national boundaries. Are we connecting them well? I think KEA is doing a pretty good job. I actually think there's a lot of goodwill from New Zealanders overseas. There is a love for New Zealand, an emotional connection that maybe hasn't been fully tapped. You need to track the clear pathway that enables people to translate that into something tangible and make people feel that they're being valued.

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

I think it's the realisation that you've got this particular model of talent in mind and the great stuff that they do influences in direct and indirect ways the economy or productivity or

attracting investment, all of that kind of stuff. But at the other end there's this talent that hasn't been realised. We don't look for talent in places we don't expect. I think we need a dual strategy – you've got to have different models of talent at different stages and they need to be nurtured and attracted at different levels. So in terms of a national good, I don't think you can focus purely on one end of the talent spectrum without providing something that's going to come up through that.

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We talk about this at a national level, but actually one of the big issues facing New Zealand is our regional diversification. So if you're thinking about New Zealand's future as a whole, I think we need to grow regional leaders who have a vision for what that region could look like and how that's going to contribute to New Zealand. The other one is population ageing and the context of populations ageing where your proportion of those in the young ages starts shrinking and a lot of them are leaving and going other places. Then you've got a disproportionate number of Māori and Pacific Island kids in those young ages whose potential is not anywhere close to being realised.

I suppose you have to ask why do we care about talent? There's this underlying assumption that if we keep the talent or grow the talent or attract the talent, that's going to be a key mechanism for realising a greater good and economic value and that's going to have some sort of trickle-down effect to the masses. There's an implicit assumption that only a certain number of exceptional people can be talented. To me, that is a top-down model and I'm not entirely persuaded that it works. Attracting talent might be a way to realise a narrow strategic goal but if it's a broader, greater vision of where we want New Zealand to be – then I think a focus on talent, whatever that means, is only part of what's needed. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

Surround yourself with people who believe in themselves and who believe in you. Seize all opportunities – even if it truly scares you. Work hard, block out any negative korero, and trust that you'll figure it out.

Interviewed by Charlotte Greenfield at the Guinness Institute in Wellington, on 2 May 2013. Photograph provided by the Guinness Institute.