

Honorary Doctorate for Te Reo Work

Ruatoria woman Iritana Tawhiwhirangi will receive an honorary doctorate from Victoria University for the key role she has played in establishing the kohanga reo movement and reversing the decline in the Maori language.

Mrs Tawhiwhirangi, who is of Ngati Porou, Ngati Kahungunu, Ngapuhi, Canadian, English descent, received a Doctor of Literature degree at the University's marae-based graduation ceremony, Te Hui Whakapumau, on December 8.

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pat Walsh, said Mrs Tawhiwhirangi was one of the cornerstones of the kohanga reo movement.

"While initially designed as a means to revitalize the Maori language, kohanga reo achieved much, much more by mobilizing thousands of Maori parents to become involved in the education of their children. "Picking up on the playcentre philosophy of community ownership and management, she helped create a whanau development model that is not only underpinned by cultural and administrative sovereignty, but has also created new opportunities in education and employment for Maori women.

"Internationally, the kohanga reo model is now the established benchmark for the regeneration of indigenous languages. The excellence seen today in the annual national Te Korimako oratory competitions for Maori secondary students, is derived from the foundations laid by kohanga reo.

"While she works from a Maori philosophy, she is one of those rare people who can move effectively in both the Maori and Pakeha worlds and be respected in both. She is politically astute and has shown outstanding leadership in lobbying members of parliament of all political hues to provide funding for the kohanga reo movement, without which it probably would not have survived."

Mrs Tawhiwhirangi began teaching on the East Coast after graduating in 1948, before joining the Department of Maori Affairs as a Welfare Officer in Ruatoria. It was in this role that she worked to develop a network of playcentres on the East Coast, the first network of early childhood education for Maori in the regions.

Her involvement with early childhood education continued when she moved to Lower Hutt in 1972, and in 1980 she became the first Maori woman to be appointed as one of the department's district officers, rising to be chief executive of the department's community services section the following year.

Following on from policy work she did on the establishment of language nests, in 1982 she was appointed as an inaugural trustee and first general manager of the Te Kohanga Reo National Trust Board, a position she held for two years.

The first kohanga reo, Pukeatua, was opened in Wainuiomata, one of about 100 established in 1982. By 1994, there were more than 800 catering for about 14,000 children.



Victoria University Chancellor Tim Beaglehole caps Iritana Tawhiwhirangi

Photography by Woolf

She returned to work for the department full-time in 1984 as national director of community services and was appointed assistant secretary of Maori Affairs in 1986.

Retiring from the Department in 1989, in 1990 she returned to the trust board, where she served as chief executive officer until 2003. She remains a trustee of the board.

Mrs Tawhiwhirangi has served on a host of government and official committees and working parties involved in the development of education policy.

She was a member of the ministerial working group for the development of a strategic plan for early childhood education in 2001, and facilitated the collaborative bicultural project that resulted in the development of Te Whariki, the Ministry of Education early childhood curriculum for all New Zealanders.

She has been involved with a wide variety of community organizations, including the Maori Women's Welfare League, of which she is a life member, and the Maori Education Trust.

She has been a guest lecturer at the former Wellington College of Education, Victoria University, University of Alaska at Fairbanks, the University of British Columbia and the University of Utah. She received an MBE in 1992, a Women's Suffrage Medal in 1993 and was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2001.