WAYFINDING AT THE INTERFACE: PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH WITH MOANA OCEANIA INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS



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Wednesday 18 February 2026

Attending the HERDSA 2025 conference as a presenter and a recipient of the HERDSA Student Travel Grant was both a privilege and a responsibility. As an emerging researcher working in Moana Oceania, I came to HERDSA with a simple question that has become increasingly complex in practice:

How do we design higher education research that genuinely honours Indigenous knowledge systems, while also navigating institutions that have historically privileged Euro-Western norms of 'good' research?

At the conference, I facilitated a short "Birds of a Feather" roundtable titled *Higher Education Research at the Interface of Diverse Knowledge Systems in Moana Oceania*. The purpose was not to offer a single model to follow, but to create a shared space for sensemaking, where researchers could reflect on their positionality, compare ethical commitments, and explore what cultural responsiveness can look like within research decisions.

WHY THE INTERFACE MATTERS

Many researchers today find themselves working at the *interface* of diverse knowledge systems. In Moana Oceania, this is not an abstract concept. It is a lived reality, shaped by colonial histories, inequitable research relationships, and ongoing struggles for epistemic justice within higher education. As I noted in my session materials, the interface is not simply about epistemic integration; it is about recognising power, ethics, and the consequences of what we choose to value as knowledge.

This interface is also *relational*. Our researcher positionalities are shaped by who we are in relation to participants, communities, place, and institution, and by how others position us within those spaces.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH AT THE INTERFACE

In the roundtable, I shared seven principles that guided me through the doctoral research journey and wider research engagements in the region. These are not intended as a checklist. Rather, they are interconnected commitments that can support researchers to act with integrity in complex, layered settings:

1. Responsibility
2. Responsiveness
3. Relationality
4. Reflexivity
5. Respectfulness
6. Relevance
7. Reciprocity

What I appreciate about these principles is that they *travel* across the entire research journey. They are just as important in research design and ethics as they are in analysis, writing, and dissemination.

FROM 'GOOD INTENTIONS' TO RESEARCH PRACTICE

One of the strongest reminders from facilitating this session was that ethical research is not primarily demonstrated through our intentions; it is demonstrated through our decisions. During the roundtable, participants worked through a simple reflection tool: choose one principle (for example, *reciprocity*) and apply it to one phase of the research journey (for example, *dissemination*). This seemingly small exercise often surfaces the practical questions we avoid when we stay at the level of values-talk:

- If I claim reciprocity, who benefits from this work and *how*?
- If I claim relevance, who defines the research problem?
- If I claim respect, what do I do when institutional processes pressure me to move faster than relationships allow?

For me, this is where interface research becomes real…in the everyday negotiations between institutional expectations and relational accountability.

POSITIONALITY AS AN ONGOING PRACTICE (NOT A PARAGRAPH)

Another theme that emerged strongly was the need to treat positionality not as a required statement, but as an active practice of relational accountability. In my HERDSA conference roundtable, I posed a few questions to participants, for example:

- Do you have a positionality statement?
- Does it shift as your relationships and context shift?
- Do you treat it as part of your *method*, not just your *writing*?

In Moana Oceania contexts, especially, positionality is inseparable from relationships. It is shaped by time-place-space connections, by histories of research exploitation, and by the responsibilities we take on when we are trusted with the narratives and knowledges gifted to us by participants.

WHAT I TOOK AWAY FROM HERDSA

Receiving the HERDSA student grant made conference participation possible at a time when it otherwise would not have been. That matters materially, of course, but it also mattered intellectually and ethically.

HERDSA created an opportunity to test emerging ideas with colleagues who were willing to engage generously, challenge constructively, and share their own uncertainties. In other words, it was a

reminder that the scholarship of higher education is at its best when it is collaborative, reflexive, and practice-facing.

Since the conference, I have completed the collaborative sensemaking of the doctoral research inquiry with participants, compiled the full thesis, and submitted for external examination. Additionally, I have continued to engaged with the research participants, their institutions and beyond, on related and secondary lines of inquiry and a co-designed research dissemination plan.

A SMALL INVITATION

If you are working in higher education research, particularly in cross-cultural, Indigenous, or post/anti-colonial contexts, I invite you to try a simple reflective prompt in your next research planning meeting (or supervision conversation):

1. ***Choose one principle*** *(e.g., reciprocity).*
2. ***Choose one research phase*** *(e.g., analysis).*
3. ***What would change in your decisions if you embedded that principle as a research obligation?***

It is a small shift, but it can open a surprisingly meaningful conversation.

And if you have your own principles, frameworks, or metaphors for working at the interface, I would love to hear them. HERDSA is exactly the kind of scholarly community where these exchanges can continue to expand across roles, disciplines, and regions.



Handout activity: Sensemaking the Principles Along the Resource Journey

Topics Indigenous knowledges Research

About the author



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