scope
Contemporary Research Topics

work-based learning 8
November 2026

Article
https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6008007

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Michelle Te Koeti

INTRODUCTION

For many ākonga Māori, education is intertwined with mahi, whānau responsibilities, cultural commitments, and the realities of everyday living (Durie, 2003; Sciascia, 2017). As tertiary education evolves in Aotearoa New Zealand, work-based learning provides opportunities for people to gain qualifications without stepping away from the environments that shape their lives.

Previous research has consistently shown that Māori learner success is influenced by more than academic achievement alone. Relationships, cultural identity, whānau support, belonging, and flexible learning environments all contribute to positive educational outcomes. Success is strengthened when learning environments recognise Māori identity, uphold kaupapa Māori values, foster whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, and acknowledge the realities of adult learners (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Knowles, 1978; Te Pūkenga, 2022). However, less is known about how these principles are experienced within work-based learning environments, particularly from the perspectives of both ākonga Māori and Māori facilitators.

This article draws on my Master of Professional Practice research within Capable New Zealand's Bachelor of Applied Business Management programme (Te Koeti, 2025). Drawing on interviews with six ākonga Māori and two Māori facilitators, it explores what supports ākonga Māori success in work-based learning. The findings reveal that success extends well beyond gaining a qualification. Participants described learning as a process of reclaiming confidence, strengthening identity, and creating opportunities for whānau and future generations. Together, these themes highlight the importance of culturally grounded, relational, and flexible approaches that enable ākonga Māori to thrive.

What, then, makes the greatest difference for ākonga Māori in work-based learning? The following sections explore the voices, experiences, and themes that emerged from this research.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This research adopted a qualitative kaupapa Māori methodology, Te Tūhono, grounded in te ao Māori and guided by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, placing Māori knowledge, values, and voice at the centre of the research (Walker et al., 2006). Shaped by the principles of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, rangatiratanga, and reciprocity (Bishop, 1995), the methodology prioritised relationships, cultural

safety, and collective benefit. Through whakawhanaungatanga and tikanga, participants shared their experiences in informal kaikōrero, creating trusted spaces for authentic conversations (Te Maihāroa et al., 2022).

An autoethnographic approach also guided the study. As a mature wāhine Māori, facilitator, assessor, and neurodiverse learner within the work-based learning context, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research to critically examine my assumptions, experiences, and learning. This approach enabled me to interrogate my dual role as researcher and facilitator while keeping my reflections analytically distinct from the participant data. Rather than assuming that my experiences reflected those of participants, I used journalling to identify where my own assumptions aligned with, or differed from, the kōrero being shared. This process often challenged my thinking, strengthened the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, and provided a deeper understanding of the programme and the lived realities of ākonga Māori (Riwai-Couch, 2021).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit six ākonga Māori and two Māori facilitators with direct experience of undertaking or supporting work-based learning. The ākonga represented a range of learning journeys, including those who completed the programme, completed with extensions, or discontinued their studies, providing diverse perspectives on success and challenge. Data were gathered through online and kanohi ki te kanohi kaikōrero interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for checking. Data were then analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis framework, allowing close engagement with the data while maintaining the integrity of mātauranga Māori and tikanga.

Ethics approval was granted by the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee (Ethics A approval 985). Full details of the study can be found in my Master of Professional Practice thesis available through the Otago Polytechnic Research Bank (Te Koeti, 2025).

MORE THAN A QUALIFICATION

For the ākonga involved in this research, returning to study was rarely about gaining a qualification alone. It was about something deeper. As one participant reflected, "The real highlight was discovering who I was, ko wai au, who am I."

Participants described their learning journeys as opportunities to reclaim confidence, strengthen their identity, and create new possibilities for themselves and their whānau. Many spoke about wanting their tamariki to see that it is never too late to learn, while others described choosing themselves for the first time after years of putting everyone else first. As one ākonga explained, "I've always looked after everyone else. This time I chose me."

Learning became an act of self-belief and empowerment. Success was rarely viewed as an individual achievement but as something shared with whānau, grounded in legacy, identity, and the aspirations of future generations. One participant captured this collective perspective, saying, "I wanted my kids to see that it's never too late. I wanted them to be proud of me and know they can do anything too."

These findings reflect previous literature suggesting that Māori understandings of educational success extend beyond qualifications to include cultural identity, collective wellbeing, and whānau aspirations (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Martin, 2012). Participants also spoke about gaining the

confidence to step into spaces where they had previously felt uncertain. One participant explained, "I want to walk into those rooms knowing I belong there and that my knowledge matters."

Researcher reflection

Listening to participants prompted me to reflect on my own journey as a mature Māori learner. Like many of the research participants, I did not return to study simply to gain another qualification. My master's journey became one of rediscovering confidence, strengthening my cultural identity, and recognising that success is measured not only by academic achievement but also by the positive impact we have on our whānau and future generations. These shared experiences deepened my understanding of why participants consistently described success as something collective rather than individual.

WHEN LIFE DOES NOT PAUSE FOR STUDY

A consistent theme across the research was the complexity of everyday life. Ākonga described juggling full-time work, caregiving, financial pressure, and cultural obligations while studying (Sciascia, 2017). Rather than simply being students, they moved constantly between multiple roles, often carrying a significant emotional and practical load. As one participant explained, "There's no such thing as just being a student. You're everything at the same time."

For some, past experiences of education added another layer. Feelings of whakamā, fear of failure, and self-doubt were common and did not disappear with age. Instead, they travelled with ākonga into new educational spaces. Financial pressure also played a significant role, with decisions about study often weighed against basic needs such as groceries, childcare, and time away from paid work. Despite these challenges, ākonga persisted. What made the difference was not reduced expectations but increased understanding, flexibility, and compassion within the learning environment.

Several participants described study as the "guilty luxury of learning," feeling torn between investing time in themselves and meeting the demands of whānau, work, and community obligations. Others spoke of burnout, exhaustion, and the emotional weight of trying to fulfil multiple roles simultaneously. These experiences highlight the importance of educational models that recognise ākonga as whole people rather than isolated students. They also reinforce Knowles' (1978) principles of andragogy, which recognise that adult learners benefit from flexible learning experiences that acknowledge the realities of balancing study alongside employment, whānau responsibilities, and competing life demands.

Researcher reflection

Reflecting on participants' experiences prompted me to consider whether our learning environments are designed around the realities of ākonga lives or the convenience of institutional systems. During my own master's journey, there came a time when my full attention needed to be on supporting my whāngai children. Without hesitation, I put their needs before my own studies, and I would make the same decision every time. Reflecting alongside the participants' stories helped me recognise that institutional definitions of barriers do not always align with the lived realities of Māori. For many of us, whānau is not competing with education. Whānau comes first because it is simply who we are.

HOLDING ONTO CULTURE WHILE NAVIGATING SYSTEMS

Being Māori in tertiary education can be both a source of strength and a challenge. Participants spoke with pride about their identity while also acknowledging the tension of navigating systems that were not designed with them in mind. Some described feeling as though they had to leave parts of themselves at the door in order to succeed.

Participants frequently described wanting learning environments where they did not have to choose between being Māori and being successful. Wānanga and noho marae were identified as powerful examples of culturally grounded learning spaces where trust, belonging, and confidence flourished. These experiences demonstrate the importance of educational approaches that value Māori ways of knowing, being, and doing. They are also consistent with the *Te Piko* and *Te Pae Tawhiti* strategies of Te Pūkenga, which position ākonga and their whānau at the centre of educational practice while upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori aspirations (Te Pūkenga, 2022).

Whānau also sat at the centre of participants' experiences of success. Learning journeys were rarely individual. Instead, they were collective, with encouragement, sacrifice, and shared pride extending across wider whānau networks. When culture is recognised, respected, and embedded within learning, ākonga are far more likely to participate as their authentic selves.

Researcher reflection

Working alongside participants prompted me to reflect on my own cultural journey. As they spoke about wondering whether they were "Māori enough," I recognised similar moments in my own experience. Their stories reinforced my belief that culturally responsive education is not about expecting learners to arrive with complete cultural confidence. Rather, it is about creating learning environments where identity is nurtured, strengthened, and able to grow safely.

The most powerful learning environments are those where ākonga Māori are welcomed to bring their whole selves into learning. When culture, identity, and whānau are recognised as strengths, ākonga are empowered to learn with confidence, belong with authenticity, and thrive as Māori.

THE POWER OF THE FACILITATOR RELATIONSHIP

One of the strongest messages to emerge from this research was the importance of the facilitator relationship. Participants consistently described facilitators as far more than teachers. As one participant explained, "The facilitator role in this Bachelor of Applied Management is vital. It's a key part of achieving." Facilitators walked alongside ākonga, supporting them to navigate not only their studies but also the many responsibilities they carried beyond the classroom. For many, this relationship was the difference between continuing their studies and withdrawing.

Participants' experiences revealed that facilitators often became mentors, advocates, confidants, and trusted sources of support. They listened to life stories, provided encouragement during times of crisis, and created spaces where ākonga felt seen, heard, and valued. Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga were not simply aspirational values but were lived through genuine care, trust, and belief in each learner's potential. One facilitator captured the heart of this relationship, reflecting, "I'm so privileged to get them to see their worth, and their contribution to the whānau, to the world, to their career… It's amazing."

Through these relationships, ākonga rebuilt confidence, found their voice, and recognised their own capability. One participant described the facilitator relationship as a "partnership of understanding." These findings reinforce kaupapa Māori approaches that position whanaungatanga and manaakitanga as central to meaningful educational relationships. Previous research similarly identifies these values as fundamental to strengthening learning outcomes for ākonga Māori (Bishop, 1995; Te Maihāroa et al., 2022).

The findings suggest that the most powerful learning relationships are those grounded in trust, authenticity, and genuine care. When facilitators create spaces where ākonga feel seen, heard, and valued, learning becomes more than the achievement of a qualification. It becomes a relationship in which both ākonga and facilitators learn, grow, and flourish together.

Researcher reflection

Repeatedly listening to the interview recordings became one of the most significant learning experiences of my research journey. I realised that I often finished participants' sentences because I believed I was demonstrating understanding. Instead, I discovered that genuine listening required me to slow down, remain silent, and create space for ākonga to fully express their own stories. This fundamentally changed my facilitation practice. I came to understand that meaningful relationships are built not through having the answers, but through listening with patience, presence, and genuine curiosity.

The participants also deepened my understanding of authenticity as a facilitator. Sharing aspects of my own experience as a dyslexic learner and Māori educator often reduced the distance between facilitator and learner. Rather than diminishing my credibility, this openness strengthened trust and reinforced my understanding that whanaungatanga is built not through professional expertise alone, but through genuine human connection.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTICE

This research reinforces a simple but often overlooked truth: for Māori, learning does not sit outside of life. Supporting success is not about lowering expectations. It is about designing learning in ways that move with the realities of ākonga lives. This includes building flexibility into programmes, recognising the central role of whānau and identity, and treating relationships as a core part of teaching rather than an added extra. These implications align with previous research advocating flexible programme design, culturally responsive teaching, and learner-centred approaches for adult Māori learners (Allen, 2016; Knowles, 1978; Te Pūkenga, 2022).

For educators, this means creating learning environments that recognise the complexity of ākonga lives. It requires flexibility when life demands it, genuine investment in relationships that extend beyond academic support, and a willingness to see learners as whole people rather than simply students. Work-based learning provides a strong foundation for this approach because it is grounded in real mahi, lived experience, and learning that is immediately relevant. When combined with kaupapa Māori principles and relational teaching, it creates opportunities for ākonga to thrive as Māori.

When learning is grounded in authentic relationships, culture, and compassion, ākonga are free to bring their whole selves into learning. Education becomes more than a qualification. It becomes a shared journey where ākonga and facilitators grow together.

Researcher reflection

This research has transformed my own practice as a facilitator and educator. I now spend more time listening before responding, I am more deliberate about checking my assumptions against the voices of ākonga, and I place greater importance on designing learning around people's lives rather than expecting people to fit institutional systems. Perhaps the most significant outcome of this research has been the recognition that meaningful learning begins with genuine relationships. That lesson will continue to shape both my practice and the way I walk alongside future ākonga.

THE POWER TO CHOOSE A DIFFERENT FUTURE

This research demonstrates that work-based learning is about far more than achieving a qualification. At the heart of work-based learning are authentic, culturally grounded relationships that enable ākonga Māori to bring their whole selves into learning. These relationships strengthen confidence, affirm identity, reconnect learning with whānau, and create opportunities that extend well beyond the individual learner.

Perhaps the most significant insight from this research is that these relationships are reciprocal. They do not transform only the learner. They also challenge, shape, and strengthen the facilitator. Through listening, reflection, authenticity, and genuine partnership, learning becomes a shared journey in which everyone involved continues to grow.

Taken together, these findings suggest that it is not any one strategy that supports ākonga Māori success. Rather, it is the way culturally grounded relationships, flexible learning, authentic facilitation, and a strong sense of identity work together to create environments where both ākonga and facilitators flourish. This interconnectedness is what gives work-based learning its transformative potential.

These findings reinforce previous research demonstrating that culturally responsive, relational, and flexible approaches support Māori learner success (Durie, 2003; Te Maihāroa et al., 2022). This study extends that understanding by showing how work-based learning brings those principles to life in practice. Rather than separating learning from work, whānau, and community, it creates opportunities for ākonga to learn within the realities of their own lives while remaining connected to their identity, values, and aspirations.

The approaches described throughout this research are neither new nor untested. They are already changing lives. The challenge is no longer to discover whether these approaches work, but whether tertiary education is prepared to move beyond isolated examples of good practice and intentionally design learning environments where culturally grounded, relational approaches become the norm rather than the exception.

This requires more than flexible programmes or responsive teaching practices. It calls for a shift in how success is understood, how relationships are valued, and how educational systems are designed. When ākonga Māori are welcomed to bring their whole selves into learning, success is no longer something they must achieve despite the system. It becomes something the system is intentionally designed to support. The greatest legacy of work-based learning is not the qualification itself. It is the authentic relationships that enable ākonga and facilitators to learn, grow, and flourish together, creating lasting change for whānau, communities, and future generations.

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