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POWER, PRACTICE, AND PURPOSE IN TRANSFORMATION: TWENTY YEARS OF PEOPLE-CENTRED CHANGE AT OPEN POLYTECHNIC

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POWER, PRACTICE, AND PURPOSE IN TRANSFORMATION: TWENTY YEARS OF PEOPLE-CENTRED CHANGE AT OPEN POLYTECHNIC

Amanda Cossham and Mary-Liz Broadley

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!
What is the most important thing in the world? It is people! It is people! It is people!

This whakataukī affirms the central importance of human connection and relationships in creating community and enabling people to flourish. It values people as the basis of meaningful work and collective wellbeing, above material measures of success. Therefore, we dedicate our research findings to all kaimahi (staff) at Open Polytechnic. We thank our participants for contributing their time, reflections, and insights which enable a rich perspective of the lived experience of academic staff over time. This is missing from organisational documentation which focuses more on changes to systems and processes.

INTRODUCTION

Open Polytechnic has delivered open, distance, and flexible learning (ODFL) since 1946 (Seelig & Nichols, 2019). As a national provider, it supports tens of thousands of learners who balance study with work, whānau, and community commitments. Over the past two decades, the organisation has experienced substantial transformation, shaped by internal change and in response to changes to higher education.

We argue that educational transformation at Open Polytechnic is not primarily technological, but human, relational, and values-driven. While digital platforms, policies, and systems have significantly reshaped educational delivery, long-serving kaimahi have sustained the organisation's mission through ongoing adaptation. Their work has prioritised learner-centred practice, professional judgement, and relational engagement despite changing structures, roles, and power relations.

Open Polytechnic has significantly developed its approaches to open, distance, and flexible learning within an explicitly Aotearoa New Zealand context under the leadership of several CEOs. Transformations small and large have contributed to a more genuinely bicultural organisation, increased responsiveness to learner needs, and stronger alignment with workplace and vocational learning. Teaching and learner support are now enacted through specialist roles, including academics, student mentors, librarians, learning designers, assessment specialists, and advisors, reflecting a redistribution of responsibilities and expertise across the institution.

This research explores how long-serving kaimahi who have worked in teaching or learner support roles for two decades or more have experienced these transformations. As long-serving kaimahi ourselves, we sought to elicit participant voices and perspectives on organisational change, present-day kaupapa, and aspirations for the future. The study does not evaluate organisational strategy or specific reforms; instead, it centres lived experience and professional practice over time.

Participants' accounts illustrate how Open Polytechnic has evolved in response to learners, technology, and social change while remaining anchored to its core purpose: making vocational education flexible and learner-centred. Rather than describing a simple erosion of academic influence, kaimahi experiences reveal a redistribution of agency across technologies, policies, and specialist roles, reshaping how professional judgement is exercised in practice. We explore issues that impact the changing roles of academic kaimahi: shifts in power and agency (largely from academic kaimahi to other kaimahi groups) and changes in practice (as teachers, educators, course leaders, and facilitators).

Using a work-based learning lens, we situate organisational transformation as a practice-based learning process. Teaching and learner support kaimahi learn through their work, adapting their professional identities, practices, and forms of agency in response to changing organisational structures, technologies, and learner needs. This grounding in practice allows us to examine transformation not as discrete organisational change, but as sustained work-based learning that reconfigures power relations, reshapes educational practice, and rearticulates professional purpose in contemporary online, distance, and flexible education.

CHANGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND ONLINE, DISTANCE, AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Given the extent of changes over the past two decades, a brief overview only is provided here. Fuller discussion of the nature of changes to higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand can be found elsewhere (see, for example, Brownie et al., 2025; Marshall, 2024; Maurice-Takerei & Anderson, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2025; Sutherland & Marshall, 2023; and Tertiary Education Commission annual reports).

The challenges associated with full implementation of online, distance, and flexible learning include the dearth of well-defined national distance education policies; the lack of a trained cadre of professionals to support the implementation of ODFL; development of technology platforms and working with environmental constraints (such as Internet access or consistent power supply); establishing collaborative partnerships with industry; and the recruitment and retention of quality staff to engage in this collaborative effort of transformation action. In exploring the transformational role of digital distance education, Nichols (2020) notes that this transforms both the institutions of higher learning (including their kaimahi) and the individuals who study with them:

> Tempting though it often is for advocates of digital change to promote the trinity of technology, online, and learning, this is to mistake means for ends. Engaged, enlightened and empowered are the three terms that define education in this book, as it is these three things that education is uniquely concerned with. (p. 5)

Seelig et al. (2019) noted that within the changing tertiary education landscape, the message was clear that single-mode ODFL institutions such as Open Polytechnic could not rest on their

laurels and needed to make swift, affordable transformational changes to drive learner and industry responsiveness, experiences, and outcomes. Angolia and Pagliari (2016) consider that "responsibility for sustainability of quality DE [distance education] should be driven at a higher hierarchical level and be supported through well-structured infrastructure"; this has been the case at Open Polytechnic.

Research around the response of academic staff in the movement from traditional delivery (teacher-centred, face-to face) to non-traditional delivery (student-centred, technology-enhanced) generally agrees on the trends (for example, Abuhussein & Badah, 2024; McKee, 2010; Olcotte & Wright, 1995; Schifter, 2009). An unbundling of the academic staff role can be difficult for an organisation to manage and changing roles require academics to be facilitators, innovators, and collaborators, while developing greater competence with digital technologies as these technologies are comprehensively integrated into higher education institutions (Chodzko-Zajko, 2023; Khajoueinejad & Scott, 2026). Adaptability, student-centred teaching, and continuous learning are features of such roles and the institutions in which they occur (Abuhussein & Badah, 2024; Khajoueinejad & Scott, 2026).

Although technological change drives a lot of teaching practice change in ODFL, this short article is not directly concerned with technology. Consequently, the extensive literature on technology in higher education is not explored here. Transformation over time at Open Polytechnic has not just been about technology, important though this has been as a means to organisational ends.

Transformation at Open Polytechnic has involved redesigning our teaching, learning, and delivery model, and supporting academic staff members with organisational changes in pedagogy, culture, and working conditions (Seelig et al., 2019). Brice et al. (2023) discuss a three-tiered model for enabling learning support (non-academic) staff to provide a scalable blend of human and technology-enabled interventions and services to support learner experience and engagement. Teaching roles have also changed, and those in other roles have taken on some of the tasks formerly done by academic staff. The ongoing commitment to and incorporation of Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles at all levels of the organisation has had a positive impact on teaching, course and content creation, and student support.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is qualitative research designed to provide and reflect on the perspectives of kaimahi and the ways their teaching practices or learner support approaches have changed over 20 years. The researchers have had many conversations with colleagues about changes in pedagogy, teaching and learner support practices, roles, and approaches. To avoid bias and a narrow focus, we adopted a formal data collection and analysis process to support a retrospective perspective recreated from participant memories rather than documented over time, and to ensure that the voices of colleagues were clear and presented in their own words.

The 11 participants have worked in teaching and learner support roles at Open Polytechnic for more than 20 years. They include the authors (two); current academic staff (five); former academic staff now in middle management roles responsible for academics (two); and learner support staff (two). The other four eligible kaimahi did not participate. Given the small numbers, we are not providing further details to ensure anonymity. Participants represented gender and ethnic diversity and included Māori.

Participants were identified from the researchers' knowledge and organisational data available to them, and were recruited by email or phone calls. The timeframe of 20 years enables a broad perspective over many changes and significant developments in educational technologies and pedagogy, student support, and course content development.

We excluded professional staff who were not involved in teaching or learning support (for instance, Registry or Contact Centre staff). We also excluded senior management because we wanted the perspectives of those at the grassroots rather than those who had led change. Management perspectives can be found in publications such as Seelig (2018), Seelig et al. (2019), Seelig and Nichols (2019), Cadwallader and Seelig (2019), Seelig and Holm (2018), and Brice et al. (2023). *Open Learning for an Open World* (Barrett, 2011) reviews developments in open and distance learning and teaching across the organisation for the previous 10 years.

Open Polytechnic Ethics Committee granted ethics approval (EC-202506-09). Informal endorsement for the project was received from the Executive Directors of Strategy and of Learning Delivery. This was sought by the researchers prior to presenting initial findings at a conference to ensure a no-surprises approach for management.

Data were collected through unstructured conversations based around four key themes, so kaimahi could speak in their own voices without being constrained by a formal approach. The themes were identified by the researchers when they developed their original proposal and the interview questions arose from those. Conversations lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted via Microsoft Teams (which the organisation uses extensively) since participants were distributed across the country. The researchers interviewed each other. Interviews were conducted in mid-2025 by one or both researchers. Participants were asked to reflect on:

- How their roles and practices (teaching or learning support) have changed over time.
- The most significant organisational and technological shifts.
- How Te Tiriti o Waitangi is reflected in everyday practice.
- What teaching and learner support might look like in the future.

Transcripts were automatically generated by Microsoft Teams and manual data cleanup was done by the researchers to correct te reo Māori or add words Teams had missed. Analysis was conducted by each researcher independently: this involved identifying the scope of aspects related to each of the key themes (questions). Copilot (enterprise version) was used to summarise transcripts to identify the key points of an interview, especially where both researchers were not able to be present, and to help the researchers avoid inherent bias due to their expertise. That is, it functioned as a double-check, rather than a key part of the analysis. Final analysis on all data was then done by the researchers jointly.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Viewed through a work-based learning lens, these findings highlight how long-serving kaimahi have continually learned through their work, negotiating shifting power relations, evolving professional practices and a sustained sense of purpose within the everyday realities of organisational transformation in higher education. Across all conversations, there was strong pride in the

organisation, deep commitment to learners, and a shared sense of purpose to support the organisation to improved online, distance, and flexible learning.

Roles and practices

> *I orea te tuatara ka patu ki waho.*
> *A problem is solved by continuing to find solutions.*

This whakataukī refers to the need for creative thinking, adaptability, and perseverance.

There have been many innovative changes in the last 20 years. Kaimahi focused on the extent to which academic and support roles have evolved. In the past, a single academic did everything: pastoral care, course writing, assessment creation and marking, and learner communication and support. Today, that work is distributed across specialised roles in several teams, in line with ODFL practices internationally.

This change has brought both benefits and challenges. On the positive side, specialisation has improved consistency, quality, and collaboration. Kaimahi now work closely with colleagues across different teams, bringing a wider range of expertise into course design and delivery, learner support, and assessment writing and marking.

At the same time, some kaimahi expressed a loss of autonomy and a sense that the "voice of the course leader" has become quieter among so many other voices. The loss of agency that they had prior to a major restructuring in 2018 was also mentioned, and it is this loss that seemed key, rather than a loss of power *per se*. There is increasingly a sense of being a cog in a large machine, with a corresponding decline of teaching or academic 'craft.'

A reduction in kaimahi presence within the e-teaching environment—including asynchronous, mediated ODFL contexts—raises questions about the perceived value, authenticity, and relational quality of teaching, as well as the depth of engagement with learners. Importantly, kaimahi noted that learners still want connection with a real person, even in highly structured online environments: learners still look to their course leaders for support in all aspects of their study. Yet face-to-face engagement has been progressively removed: Open Polytechnic no longer has roadshows, community hubs, workshops, or in-person exams. It has become increasingly difficult to organise noho marae (required by some degrees), although early childcare education and teacher education academic staff still conduct in-person workplace visits. Balancing human connection with efficiency and teaching at scale remains an ongoing tension. Kaimahi call for "waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toiroa"; that is, being close together, not wide apart, when working within the e-learning space. This is a core aspect of teaching where power, practice, and purpose come together and where kaimahi must balance the efficiency of teaching-at-scale with human connection.

Kaimahi highlighted a positive shift toward more responsive, holistic learner support. Student mentors, librarians, and learning support staff now work closely with course leaders, often embedded directly within programmes and courses. Our experience also suggests that better access to learner data helps kaimahi respond earlier and more effectively to learner needs, a significant benefit for large courses and with changing kaimahi roles (see also Seelig, 2018). This positive change in practice reduces demand on academic staff, and enables active, rather than reactive, engagement with learners.

Compared to 20 years ago, participants said they had greater awareness of learning differences such as neurodiversity, ADHD, and dyslexia, leading to more inclusive course design, assessment, and support practices. This inclusivity empowers learners by aligning teaching, support, and course materials with their needs, rather than asking them to adapt to a neurotypical framework. Kaimahi said they enjoyed the professional development offered by Open Polytechnic to upskill in these areas, illustrating their adaptability to change.

Teaching pedagogies and approaches have also shifted significantly. There is now less focus on delivering content and more emphasis on actively supporting learners to make sense of their learning, build confidence, and develop capability. In practice, this involves creating a mediated learning environment where kaimahi guide, scaffold, and respond to learners' needs, rather than simply transmitting information. This reflects wider trends identified in the literature (Khajoueinejad & Scott, 2026).

Organisational and technological shifts

One of the most visible drivers of transformation is the creation of the online community. Participants recalled the days of printed course materials (sent in what were known as 'the pizza boxes') and physical assessments posted to us, marked by hand, and returned by post. Communication with learners was by phone, physical newsletters, and email listservs. Today, learning is delivered fully through an online platform (iQualify) designed to support flexible, anytime learning, and responsive teaching. According to participants, this digital delivery allows courseware to be updated quickly, and enhanced with multimedia and external resources embedded in the educational software. Communication with learners is now mostly written and online (including online chat), enabling clearer, more thoughtful responses but often taking more time to ensure logical explanations compared to a phone call, since there is no opportunity for the learner to ask questions as the explanation proceeds (with chat being the exception). One participant noted that text-focused communication may be harder for some who prefer oral communication. Participants also identified faster access through the learner portal to support services such as the library and student mentors.

On the downside, there continues to be some frustration with the functionality of iQualify (although this continues to improve) and the lack of agency kaimahi have in using it directly. The roles of learning designers, subject matter experts, graphic designers, and an assessment team mean the course leader is several steps removed from being able to add and update course content immediately. We note that digital platforms such as iQualify enable scale and flexibility but may constrain immediacy, autonomy, and experimentation.

Assessment writing continues to be complex, because it brings together external subject matter experts, assessment writing experts, current course content, and the course leader. One participant said, "I think we have become used to the idea that we as academics are just one of the wheels in a complex system."

Technology has greatly improved access for learners and responsiveness by kaimahi. However, kaimahi noted that building strong online learning communities takes energy, effort, and intention to meet modern-day learners' educational needs and wants. An increasing familiarity with online systems in daily life means learners have increased expectations of an e-learning platform (although we note that familiarity does not necessarily equate to expertise).

Kaimahi have adapted to a group-focused and project-based course and programme development environment. For example, Nguyen et al. (2020) evaluate the development of a Level 4 Open Polytechnic certificate, highlighting the positive experience of professionals coming together to design and develop the new qualification for educators working with children and families. They examine the pedagogy that empowers learners in an online flexible distance learning environment, the innovative teamwork, and initial positive feedback from stakeholders.

Giving effect to te Tiriti

One area that has made a big difference to kaimahi and their roles is Open Polytechnic's progress in embedding a bicultural approach in teaching, learning, and learner support. Participants spoke positively about this aspect of their changing role, as they did about increased professional development around neurodiversity. Specific activities have included cultural awareness training, and visible leadership commitment to giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Kaimahi saw the establishment of Te Kura Wānanga (the Māori Office) as a key step, alongside practical actions such as the increased use of te reo Māori in communications and courseware, and using Māori names, places, and contexts in learning materials and assessments.

While there is pride in how far the organisation has come, there is also a strong message: this is an ongoing journey, and the momentum must continue; we have really only just begun. A whakataukī comes to mind here which sums up perfectly our kaimahi wishes: tē tōia, tē haumatia; nothing can be achieved without a plan. The kaimahi cohort of 20 years or more would advocate for a strategic action plan to authentically give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi across the organisation; this may be forthcoming in the near future.

Looking to the future: Informing practice and change

Most participants characterised their current professional lives as a process of learning how to work effectively within shifting organisational structures, digital environments, changing roles, and learner expectations. They described flexibility as a defining feature of their professional practice. Many kaimahi work remotely and value the ability to live and work in their communities. However, they acknowledged the risk for them to overwork due to the temptation to be available 24/7 to meet the expectations of ODFL learners. They noted the importance of sustaining wellbeing, particularly during periods of rapid change.

The global pandemic accelerated many of these changes, rapidly improving both digital infrastructure and altered ways of working. From a work-based learning perspective, and as reflected in the literature, this demonstrates learning that is inseparable from practice: professional capability is developed through navigating practical situations as much as through formal training. Kaimahi commented on the importance of balancing hauora (wellbeing) and mahi (work) for themselves to mirror this balance to learners and greater communities of practice.

Looking ahead, kaimahi anticipate more personalised ākonga learning, greater peer-to-peer interaction across the motu (country), and increasing use of AI to support learners while maintaining academic integrity. They strongly recommend embedding closer industry connections and deeper integration of Māori world views within the organisation to ensure the relevance of the programmes offered to Aotearoa New Zealand. These changes will continue to require professional learning and development of kaimahi.

Kaimahi aspirations reflect closely what the Tertiary Education Strategy Report 2026–2030 is asking polytechnics to do: re-establish as regionally focused institutions delivering continuing education that meets local, community, and industry needs; responding to changing skills and societal needs; and delivering flexible, employment-focused learning.

CONCLUSION

After more than 20 years of significant change, Open Polytechnic and its kaimahi continue to adapt while keeping learners at the centre of everything. The voices shared in this research highlighted resilience, collegiality, and a shared commitment to be "better for the learner" (the organisation's pedagogical kaupapa). Transformation is ongoing, grounded in people, purpose, and pride in what Open Polytechnic stands for.

We anticipate that our organisational transformation will continue to respond to learner realities and to offer new challenges to learners and kaimahi. We are well-placed to continue evolving, meeting diverse learner and society needs and wants for the next 20 years.

> *Whāia te mātauranga hei oranga mō koutou.*
> *Seek after learning for the sake of your wellbeing.*

This whakataukī encapsulates how kaimahi understand learning not as an output of education alone, but as integral to professional sustainability, purpose, and identity. The reflections shared by the participants illustrate work-based learning as a continuous, relational process: learning to work well, ethically, and adaptively within a system undergoing constant change. In this sense, reflection in action is not a response to transformation—it is the means through which transformation is lived, negotiated, and made meaningful.

Open Polytechnic's vision is for vocational education that supports a thriving and resilient economy and prosperous communities throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Our research findings show kaimahi hold a similar vision to "whaiwhia te kete mātauranga"; that is, to fill the basket of knowledge for our inspiring akonga, whanau, and communities.

AI statement

We acknowledge that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in the form of Copilot was used to summarise interview data as part of the data analysis, and to improve clarity and shorten some overly long sentences and sections of the article. The authors separately reviewed and checked the final version to ensure their voices, participants' voices, accuracy, and meaning were maintained.

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