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SUCCESS IS SUCCESSION: SUSTAINABILITY, POWER, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN PRACTICE

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Ingrid Campbell

FROM THEORY TO EMBODIMENT: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF INTEGRATION

There is a significant difference between researching sustainability and learning to live sustainably.

When I completed my Master of Professional Practice thesis, *Akapapa – The Journey Home*, I believed I had reached an important point of integration around sustainable practice, trauma-informed leadership, relational accountability, and ethical care. Through autoethnography and Indigenous relational frameworks, I explored the impacts of spiritual abuse, coercive systems, and burnout within counselling, leadership, and community practice (Campbell, 2025). What I did not fully anticipate was that completing the thesis would not end the inquiry. It would begin a more confronting process of implementation.

In this article, sustainable practice means creating ethical, shared, and realistic conditions that protect people and the work over time, rather than relying on individual endurance. Trauma-informed leadership recognises how trauma shapes perception, relationships, and organisational responses, and prioritises safety, choice, dignity, agency, capacity, and boundaries. Relational accountability locates responsibility within relationship, reciprocity, and respect (Wilson, 2008). Ethical care therefore requires attention not only to intention, but also to power, impact, and the capacity for repair.

Indigenous relational frameworks strengthen this understanding. Te Whare Tapa Whā presents wellbeing as a house whose interdependent dimensions must remain in balance (Durie, 1998). The Tivaevae Model understands knowledge and collective contribution through Cook Islands Māori quilt-making: many hands and carefully joined pieces create the whole (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Maua-Hodges, 2001; Te Ava & Page, 2020). Wayfinding Leadership frames leadership as attentive, humble, and collective navigation rather than command and control (Spiller et al., 2015). Together, these frameworks helped me recognise whether my practice was sustaining balance, reciprocity, and collective participation. Trying to live them revealed the distance that can remain between understanding a principle and embodying it.

Following my study, sustainability became something I had to practise in governance conversations, therapeutic and advisory work, voluntary labour, relational expectations, and the realities of my capacity. Schön's (1983) reflection in and on action, alongside Freire's (1970/2000) understanding of praxis, helps me frame this period as a continuation of the research. I am not simply applying a completed framework; I am being changed by the consequences of trying to live it.

Re:Woven Therapy Charitable Trust became the clearest place where this praxis was tested. I started the small community-based organisation in Murihiku Southland in 2023 after recognising that many marginalised people were struggling to access support. Governed by volunteer trustees and supported by facilitators and volunteers, it provides creative arts therapy, community programmes and events, and accessible, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive wellbeing spaces.

The kaupapa remains strong, and Re:Woven has created meaningful spaces for creativity, connection, reflection, and therapeutic engagement. Yet its growth has also relied on founder-led momentum, unpaid labour, emotional overextension, and blurred operational boundaries. This is not easy to name, because the work itself is good. That is part of the complexity. The goodness of the work cannot remove the need to examine how trustees, facilitators, volunteers, and I share roles, make decisions, respond to concerns, and protect the dignity and safety of everyone involved.

Sustainability cannot be measured by the depth of my passion, the strength of my intentions, or my ability to keep going. It must also be measured by whether the structures around the work are ethical, shared, realistic, and capable of protecting people. Implementation has shown that my worth can still become tied to productivity, usefulness, and over-responsibility. Lalich's (2004) concept of bounded choice helps me understand why overwork can feel like devotion, responsibility like safety, and stepping back like failure.

This awareness has become especially important in my developing role as a cultural and wellbeing advisor with Decult, a New Zealand initiative providing education, connection, and recovery-focused support for people affected by cultic, coercive, and high-control environments. The role sharpens my attention to positionality, cultural accountability, boundaries, and the subtle movement of power through helping relationships.

In my thesis, I developed the Wayfinder's Pathway of Practice as a framework for sustainable practice. It asks me to pause, read the conditions, locate myself, and navigate with others rather than force a fixed route (Campbell, 2025; Spiller et al., 2015). It now returns me to practical questions: What am I carrying that needs to be shared? What patterns am I recognising but not interrupting? Where is power concentrated? Where are boundaries unclear? What does ethical leadership require when my humanity, rather than my perfection, is the starting point?

IDENTITY FORMATION AND SURVIVAL-BASED LEADERSHIP

Professional identity does not emerge separately from personal history. Understandings of leadership, responsibility, care, boundaries, authority, and relational obligation are often shaped long before formal practice begins. For those with lived experience of trauma, coercive systems, spiritual abuse, or relational harm, survival strategies may become embedded within professional identity itself.

For much of my life, I understood value through usefulness. Productivity became intertwined with safety, belonging, and worth. Rest carried guilt, while over-functioning was rewarded internally and externally. I learned to read rooms, anticipate needs, manage emotional currents, and notice subtle shifts in power before I had language for trauma, coercive control, or professional ethics. These were adaptations formed where compliance, self-denial, and attentiveness to authority were associated with relational safety.

Jenkinson's (2016) discussion of pseudo-identity helps explain how such adaptations can become mistaken for the self. Within coercive, cultic, or spiritually abusive systems, performances of goodness, obedience, loyalty, and usefulness may be rewarded until authentic care becomes difficult to distinguish from fear-based compliance. This helps me understand how self-sacrifice could feel morally correct, being needed could feel like belonging, and over-functioning could become confused with ethical responsibility. These patterns did not disappear when I entered helping professions; they found new language through service, empathy, commitment, and leadership.

Survival adaptations can therefore be mistaken for professional strengths: sensitivity as empathy, hyper-responsibility as leadership, over-availability as dedication, and the capacity to hold emotional intensity as resilience. These capacities may be valuable, but without reflexivity and supervision they can lead towards burnout, blurred boundaries, saviour dynamics, defensiveness, and ethical strain. Lived experience is not a liability. It makes responsibility for how that experience enters practice especially important.

Herman (1992) and van der Kolk (2014) show how trauma can reshape trust, autonomy, embodied perception, and relational responses. Practitioners bring histories, bodies, values, wounds, wisdom, blind spots, and patterns of protection into professional spaces. Ethical development is not the work of becoming untouched by these histories, but of becoming increasingly responsible with them.

This is where my understanding of the "mosaic self" remains useful. In my thesis, I described identity as layered, adaptive, relational, and still integrating rather than singular or fixed (Campbell, 2025). Under pressure, different aspects may move forward. The visionary moves quickly. The protector becomes defensive. The rescuer over-functions. A wounded part fears being misunderstood, rejected, or dominated while the practitioner tries to remain calm as the body reads threat. Recognising these responses creates a pause before they are mistaken for professional certainty.

Brown's (2012) work on vulnerability and shame helps me understand what can happen when that pause is lost. Armouring may look like defensiveness, over-explaining, perfectionism, withdrawal, or the need to control outcomes. Lived experience may also produce sophisticated pattern recognition, but familiarity is information, not proof of sameness. Discernment requires supervision, context, evidence, and humility. If I protect myself from shame or interpret the present too quickly through past harm, I may defend my self-image rather than remain available to truth.

Autoethnography places this personal experience in relationship with wider cultural, systemic, and professional contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). It allows me to ask not only what happened to me, but how it continues to shape the ways I practise, lead, protect, respond, and interpret power. Survival-based leadership is not something to condemn. It is something to understand, honour for how it enabled survival, and then consciously transform through embodied honesty, supervision, relational accountability, and attention to how trauma, purpose, power, and fear still enter practice.

REENACTMENT, POWER, AND SAFEGUARDING IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

If survival-based leadership begins in identity formation, reenactment begins when those internal patterns move into relationships, organisational culture, and professional practice. Harm is not recreated only through obvious domination. It may also emerge through urgency, defensiveness, narrative control, avoidance of critique, blurred boundaries, saviourism, or the unconscious use of power to protect oneself from vulnerability.

This makes the inquiry more complex than burnout. Lived experience can sharpen discernment, but past harm can also shape how present tensions are interpreted. When I feel exposed, misunderstood, or criticised, I may armour up, over-explain, withdraw, manage the narrative, or move too quickly to protect what matters to me. Ethical practice requires me to slow down and test my response through supervision, evidence, context, and humility: Am I acting from clarity or protection? Am I responding to what is happening now or to what my body remembers? Am I empowering others or reducing my fear through control?

Foucault's (1980) understanding of power as relational and embedded within systems moves this discussion beyond intention. Power operates through knowledge, language, dependency, access to information, and the capacity to shape what is accepted as true or possible. In founder-led organisations, helping relationships, and advisory roles, it may become concentrated quietly through expertise, charisma, emotional reliance, or the assumption that one person is central to the work's survival.

Freire's (1970/2000) critical consciousness reminds me that oppressive patterns can be internalised and reproduced unless examined through reflection and action. Spaces seeking liberation are not automatically free from domination. The desire to protect meaningful work can become entangled with protecting identity; service can become fused with the need to be needed; and creating safety can become control over process, pace, interpretation, or decisions. Good intentions matter, but they do not remove the need to account for impact.

Bloom's (2013) work on trauma-organised systems explains how urgency, exhaustion, unclear roles, and limited reflective space can become normalised. At Re:Woven, boundaries between governance, operations, facilitation, volunteering, and relational holding have sometimes been difficult to sustain. When roles are unclear, power becomes harder to track. Assumed expectations can produce resentment and dependency; invisible labour can be exploited; and an organisation becomes vulnerable when one person holds too much knowledge, responsibility, or emotional weight.

A recent governance review made this concentration visible. My first impulse was to work harder to stabilise what felt fragile. Instead, supervision and governance conversations helped slow the response. We began clarifying governance and operational boundaries, documenting responsibilities, and redistributing leadership. What initially felt like failure or loss of control became evidence that succession might protect the organisation, the people within it, and me. Reflective practice did not remove the discomfort, but it changed what I understood the discomfort to be asking of me.

This is where safeguarding becomes central to sustainability. Safeguarding includes designing relational and organisational conditions that make harm less likely, not only applying policies after harm occurs. In my practice, it involves supervision, clear roles and boundaries, transparent decision-making, cultural accountability, realistic capacity planning, and openness to feedback and repair. These responsibilities extend to clients, colleagues, facilitators, volunteers, and communities, and are reinforced by the New Zealand Association of Counsellors' (2020) emphasis on supervision, ethical responsibility, boundaries, and power.

My advisory work with Decult has sharpened this responsibility. I must consider how my history, professional authority, cultural positioning, language, and relational influence affect others. Power literacy asks not only, "What power has harmed me?" but, "What power do I now hold, and how

do I hold it responsibly?" Indigenous and Pacific relational frameworks direct me towards the wellbeing of the whole, shared decision-making, cultural humility, and leadership that strengthens the dignity and contribution of others (Durie, 1998; Spiller et al., 2015; Wilson, 2008).

Sustainability is therefore inseparable from safeguarding. It reduces the likelihood that unresolved fear, concentrated power, or blurred responsibility will be passed to others. Ethical practice requires willingness to examine impact, repair where needed, and build structures that make harm less likely.

SUCCESS IS SUCCESSION: SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ETHICS OF LETTING GO

If the previous sections examine survival-based leadership and the subtle reenactment of power, this section turns towards transformation. "Success is succession" has become more than an organisational strategy. It is an ethical framework for reimagining leadership, sustainability, and professional identity.

The phrase emerged through discomfort, grief, and recognition that meaningful work cannot remain dependent on one person's energy, vision, labour, or identity. Within Re:Woven, I have had to examine what it means to build something with love while noticing when love becomes gripping. Does my leadership create space for others to participate, challenge, grow, and lead, or has fear of collapse kept me too central to the work?

This is where sustainability becomes more than self-care. It becomes an ethical redistribution of power.

Earlier, I understood leadership largely through responsibility: if something mattered, I carried it; if it was fragile, I protected it; if it needed doing, I did it myself. These instincts created momentum, but also dependency and vulnerability. My thesis began a process of becoming and unbecoming: unlearning the belief that usefulness determined worth, deconstructing leadership built around survival, and loosening identities formed through over-responsibility and self-sacrifice. Research gave me language for these patterns; transformation requires recognising them as they return, interrupting them, and choosing differently.

Spiller et al. (2015) describe Wayfinding Leadership as relational, responsive, and grounded in collective navigation. The wayfinder reads conditions, listens deeply, and remains attentive to the wider relational field. They do not dominate the ocean; they learn to read it. They do not force the island to appear; they align, attune, and navigate towards it. My Wayfinder's Pathway of Practice has similarly become less a model I developed and more one that develops me. It asks me to pause, gather my bearings, and notice whether I am navigating from wisdom or fear.

The pause is one of the most practical expressions of transformation. I am learning to recognise when my days accelerate, urgency becomes driven by fear, or intensity pushes me beyond my capacity zone. Pausing creates space between activation and action: Does this require an immediate response? Do I need support or supervision? Will my next action support sustainability or reinforce the survival pattern I am trying to change? It allows me to respond with greater wisdom rather than react from protection.

The Catalyst's Way extends this reflection. Spiller (2023) distinguishes catalytic leadership from heroic or positional leadership through collaboration, discomfort, praxis, power awareness, and

succession. A catalyst activates change without being consumed by the reaction it initiates. If leadership ignites transformation, the catalyst cannot become the fuel endlessly burned to keep the work alive.

This is where succession becomes a safeguarding practice. Succession asks who else is being developed, who holds knowledge, who can make decisions, where responsibility is concentrated, and whether leadership is building capacity or dependency. A member of my team helped me recognise that although I said I wanted to delegate and receive support, I did not always create enough space for others to step in. This exposed the difference between wanting help and relinquishing control. Delegation requires sharing knowledge, accepting approaches that differ from mine, allowing others to develop confidence, and resisting the urge to reclaim my position when I feel uncertain.

Succession therefore involves working myself out of being indispensable. This does not remove me from meaningful contribution. It means building empowerment and capacity so the kaupapa is not restricted by my availability or dependent on my presence. Success is demonstrated not by how necessary I remain, but by how effectively others are supported to contribute, question, reshape, and lead.

These questions are also deeply personal.

In my reflective writing on non-attachment, I began to understand that letting go was not abandoning love, responsibility, care, or hope. It is the slow practice of loosening my grip on outcomes, identities, relationships, roles, and versions of myself I have tried to keep alive. It means caring without consuming myself, leading without owning the outcome, and allowing the work to breathe beyond my control.

For practitioners shaped by coercive systems, attachment to responsibility is complicated. If being needed has felt like safety or usefulness like belonging, decentralising power can feel like personal failure. If self-sacrifice has worn holy clothing, sustainability may feel selfish. Yet depletion is not devotion, and over-functioning is not the same as care.

Transformation has also required me to examine what my repeated availability has taught others to expect from me. Upholding boundaries means saying no more consistently and tolerating the guilt or shame that may follow without allowing those feelings to reverse the boundary. It means challenging harmful behaviour while recognising where my over-accommodation or fear of conflict has contributed to unhealthy expectations. Boundaries are not a rejection of relationship; they help keep relationship, responsibility, and care ethical.

Māori and Pacific frameworks call me towards a relational understanding of leadership. Te Whare Tapa Whā reminds me that spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, and collective dimensions affect the stability of the whole (Durie, 1998). Wilson's (2008) relational accountability asks me to measure practice not only by intention, but by how responsibility is shared and responded to in relationship. The Tivaevae Model locates creativity and collective contribution within many hands, many pieces, and commitment to a shared pattern (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Maua-Hodges, 2001; Te Ava & Page, 2020).

A tivaevae is not diminished because more than one person contributes to it. Its beauty emerges through careful joining, colour, patience, relationship, and collective vision. Likewise, Re:Woven

does not lose integrity when others contribute their wisdom and leadership; it may become more whole. If the vision is genuinely collective, succession is not the loss of the pattern but the continuation of the weaving.

Block's (2013) stewardship supports this movement from control towards shared responsibility. It asks whether I am building dependency or capacity, and whether my decisions protect my founder identity or the organisation's future health. In practice, sustainability requires clear roles, realistic expectations, transparent decisions, appropriate resourcing, documentation, supervision, board development, and the ethical separation of governance and operations. Goodwill may begin a kaupapa, but structure is needed to sustain it.

Transformational change also requires recognising when my patterns have harmed interpersonal relationships. Good intentions do not protect others from urgency, defensiveness, overextension, or attempts to control outcomes. I have needed to enter difficult conversations, acknowledge mistakes, accept responsibility for what belongs to me, and act towards repair. This does not mean accepting every criticism without discernment. It means becoming able to receive feedback without immediately taking offence, defending my position, or allowing shame to close down reflection. Discomfort becomes information rather than something I must escape.

Letting go is active ethical work. It requires boundaries, delegation, accountability, and humility. It also requires grief: grief in realising I cannot and should not carry everything; grief that love does not exempt me from limitation; and grief in releasing the self who survived by being endlessly available.

At the same time, there is freedom.

To decentralise power is to trust that the kaupapa has life beyond my capacity. To practise succession is to honour the work enough not to make it dependent on my exhaustion. Power no longer has to be understood only through the survival narrative of powerlessness or measured by how much I retain. It can be acknowledged, shared, and exercised through an ethical, relational framework that protects mana, dignity, autonomy, and collective agency.

Although this inquiry begins with my experience, the patterns are not mine alone. Helping professions, community organisations, and academic institutions can reward over-functioning, certainty, productivity, and individual expertise as commitment or excellence. Sustainability is therefore a collective and structural responsibility, not a private test of endurance. Professionals might ask: Who participates in decisions? Who can question without penalty? Whose knowledge and labour remain unseen? Where does a team depend too heavily on one person? Who is being supported to lead next?

Shared power can be practised through transparent decisions, clear roles, accessible knowledge, appropriate recognition, mentoring, supervision, realistic workloads, and genuine space for disagreement. Succession begins long before someone leaves a role: through teaching what we know, documenting processes, inviting others into decisions, supporting their development, and accepting that they may carry the work differently. This is not the loss of professional knowledge or authority. It is the ethical use of both.

In this way, success is no longer measured by indispensability, visibility, or how much I can hold. It is measured by whether the work becomes more ethical, shared, mana-enhancing, and capable of

continuing without reenacting the depletion and dependency it seeks to heal. This is sustainability as relational design, leadership as stewardship, and legacy as creating conditions in which others can continue the work in ways that are freer, safer, and more collectively held.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL BECOMING

I do not write this article from a place of resolution or arrival. Professional identity is not something we complete. It is something we keep becoming through practice, pressure, reflection, rupture, repair, and relationship.

The thesis brought me into unlearning, deconstruction, and unbecoming. It showed how survival shaped my relationship with usefulness, urgency, responsibility, care, and power. The work beyond it has required me to live those insights. Sustainability is demonstrated not by how clearly I explain it, but by whether it changes how I respond, make decisions, hold boundaries, repair relationships, share power, and participate in my own life.

Transformation is becoming visible in practical ways. It looks like recognising when my pace accelerates and questioning what drives it; noticing when fear pushes me beyond capacity and pausing before I commit, respond, or take control; and saying no without allowing guilt or shame to decide for me. It looks like acknowledging mistakes, acting towards repair, and creating enough room for others to contribute without determining exactly how their contribution must unfold.

I have also recognised that relentless activity can become avoidance. When emotional or relational difficulties feel overwhelming, productivity offers a familiar retreat. Busy periods are not inherently harmful. The distinction is whether activity remains purposeful or becomes protection, and whether I can return to presence, relationship, rest, and a more balanced participation in my life.

This is where reflexivity moves beyond recognition. Noticing is the beginning, but transformation requires a changed response. I may still become activated, defensive, over-responsible, or afraid, but I am increasingly able to catch these movements before they determine what happens next. The pause creates room for supervision, reflection on impact, and a response shaped by wisdom rather than reactivity. It becomes a sustainable counterbalance to the speed, intensity, and protective certainty of survival adaptation.

Critical feedback remains part of this practice. When it touches a blind spot or challenges how I see myself, my first response may still be discomfort. Transformation lies in becoming less governed by it: neither automatically accepting every criticism nor immediately personalising it, taking offence, or defending my position, but examining what has been offered and what it may reveal. This makes accountability, repair, and relational learning more possible.

Have I arrived? No. Am I well on my way? Absolutely. The hope-filled outcome is not perfect response in every situation, but greater awareness and therefore greater choice: to challenge biases and blind spots, receive feedback, sit with discomfort, uphold boundaries, repair harm, and pursue outcomes that protect my wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around me.

My experience therefore becomes an invitation to practitioners, leaders, researchers, and educators. Reflexivity is more than private self-awareness. It asks whether what we notice changes how we practise, facilitate, supervise, govern, research, distribute opportunity, and respond to challenge. It asks whether others experience greater agency because of our leadership

and whether our structures can remain ethical without depending on anyone's depletion. The questions become: What do I now have the power to change? What am I holding that could be shared? What space must I create for others? What becomes possible when I no longer need to protect my position?

This is where power becomes shared. I am neither defined by powerlessness nor by how much power I can hold. Transformational change is not a final state or a claim of mastery. It is the repeated movement from survival towards choice, reactivity towards reflection, control towards shared responsibility, and endurance towards a life and practice that are more present, balanced, relational, and sustainable.

Perhaps this is what professional becoming asks of me now: not to transcend my humanity, but to become more responsible with it. Not perfect or finished, but aware, accountable, still learning, and practising with integrity and humility. It is allowing the work to transform me while creating enough space for the work—and the people around it—to grow beyond me.

AI statement

I used ChatGPT to support the clarification and organisation of ideas and to assist with editing for concision and readability within time constraints. The paper's lived experience, critical reflection, interpretation, analysis, and conclusions are my own. I critically reviewed, revised, and approved all AI-assisted suggestions. AI was not used to generate data, evidence, quotations, or references.

Ingrid Campbell is a counsellor, creative arts therapist, writer, and the Founder and Director of Re:Woven Therapy Charitable Trust in Murihiku Southland. A graduate of Capable NZ's Master of Professional Practice, her work explores sustainability, trauma-informed leadership, creative practice, spiritual abuse recovery, and culturally responsive approaches to wellbeing.

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GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Submissions for *Scope (Work-based Learning)* should be sent by 30 April for review and potential inclusion in the annual issue to: rachel.mcnamara@op.ac.nz or henk.roodt@op.ac.nz.

Scope (Work-based Learning) 9 theme: "Whose Knowledge, Whose Voice? Power, Practice, and Learning Through Work."

We invite contributions exploring knowledge, voice, and power in learning through work. What remains hidden, unheard or taken for granted? How does inquiry reshape practitioners, workplace relationships and cultures? How might voice and choice strengthen agency, accountability and collective action? We welcome practitioner research, case studies, visual essays, reflective accounts, and personal narratives from health, engineering, policy, business, community practice, education, and other fields.

All submissions will be peer reviewed. Peer review comments will be sent to all submitters in due course, with details concerning the possible reworking of documents where relevant. All submissions must include disclosure of whether and how AI was used in writing the work. All final decisions concerning publication of submissions will reside with the Editors. Opinions published are those of the authors and not necessarily subscribed to by the Editors or Otago Polytechnic.

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Mātauranga Māori is a significant component of Aotearoa/New Zealand's heritage, and sharing mātauranga Māori facilitates inter-cultural dialogue and understanding that is in the national interest. However, we recognise that the originating Māori community and/or individual has the primary interest as kaitiaki over the mātauranga and we are therefore committed to ensuring that the sharing, promotion and innovation based on mātauranga Māori respects and enhances its cultural and spiritual integrity, as well as that of the originating community and/or individual.

Submission formats include: editorials, articles, perspectives, essays, research notes and work in progress. Other formats will also be considered.

High standards of writing, proofreading and adherence to consistency through the APA referencing style are expected. For more information, please refer to the APA Publication Manual, 7th edition; and consult prior issues for examples. A short biography of no more than 50 words; as well as title; details concerning institutional position and affiliation (where relevant); contact information (postal, email and telephone number) and ORCID number should be provided on a cover sheet, with all such information withheld from the body of the submission. Low resolution images with full captions should be inserted into texts to indicate where they would be preferred, while high resolution images should be sent separately. Enquiries about future submissions can be directed to rachel.mcnamara@op.ac.nz; henk.roodt@op.ac.nz.