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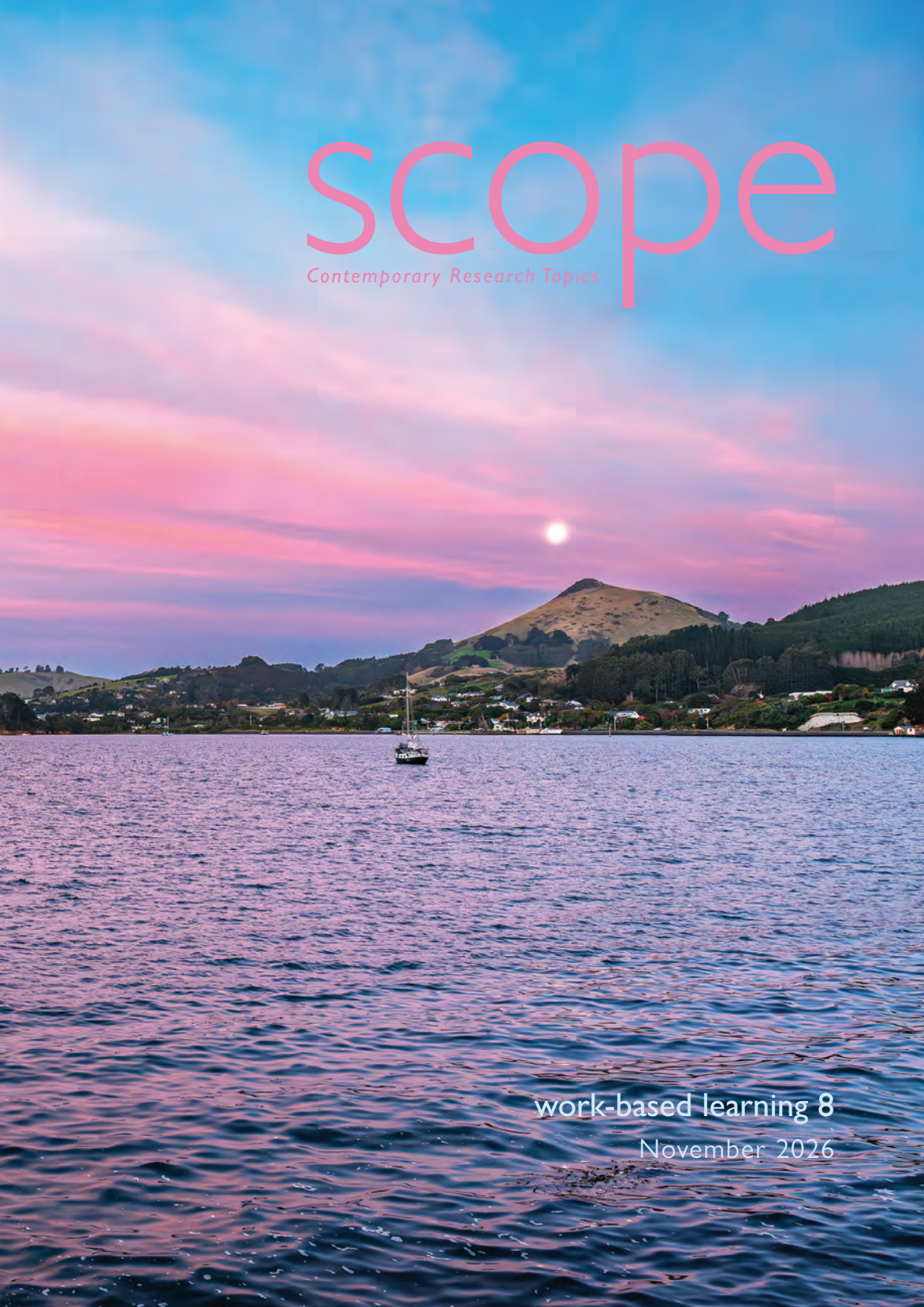
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Contemporary Research Topics

CONTENTS

6	Rachel McNamara and Jan Hendrik Roodt	The Horizon Moves With Us: Reimagining Power, Practice, and Purpose
9	Michelle Te Koeti	Moving Māori Success From the Margins to the Centre
16	Bronwyn Alton and Matthew C. Miller	Exploring the Value of Mentorship Experiences of Women in Leadership Positions in the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand
25	Favour Onamrewho Atubi and Clinton Akpomena Atubi	Preparing Higher Education Students With AI Work-based Skills
35	Amanda Cossham and Mary-Liz Broadley	Power, Practice, and Purpose in Transformation: Twenty Years of People-Centred Change at Open Polytechnic
45	Steph Mann	Reflecting on Parallels of Professionalism: Large Animal Veterinary Technicians, ***Deer Wars***, and ***Search and Rescue New Zealand***
50	Leigh Quadling-Miernik	Leigh Reimagined: The Outcome of a Doctoral Journey
55	Ingrid Campbell	Success is Succession: Sustainability, Power, and the Transformation of Professional Identity in Practice

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THE HORIZON MOVES WITH US: REIMAGINING POWER, PRACTICE, AND PURPOSE

Rachel McNamara and Jan Hendrik Roodt

This year, artist Pieter du Plessis provides us with a cover image filled with the colours of a new horizon. At first, it appears peaceful. Look for a little longer and it becomes less settled. The water holds patterns but continues to ebb and flow. The boat sits within conditions it cannot control. Land, water, and sky meet, but the line between them depends upon where we stand.

We encourage you to open the cover wide and move the book about. Different colours and features will catch your eye. The view changes with the movement. So does the horizon. A horizon can appear to mark the distance between where we are and where we need to go. However, it does not offer a fixed destination. It moves as we move. Our understanding develops, and what once seemed distant takes on a different shape. Work is reimagined in much the same way, through technologies and structures, but also through relationships, identities, and choices.

The theme of this eighth issue of *Scope (Work-based Learning)* is Work Reimagined: Reframing Power, Practice, and Purpose. Its seven contributions begin in different places but converge on a shared question: what does it mean to practise well when neither work nor the conditions surrounding it remain still?

We begin with Michelle Te Koeti, who "mov[es] Māori success from the margins to the centre." Drawing on her Master of Professional Practice research, she shows that success for ākonga Māori cannot be separated from mahi, whānau, identity, and everyday life. Cultural grounding, flexibility, and lived experience are not additions to learning. They help make learning meaningful. Te Koeti also keeps the facilitator visible. Facilitators walk alongside ākonga as mentors, advocates, and trusted partners. They listen, question their assumptions and hold the learner's 'why' in view. Together these practices ask educators to reconsider whose realities shape the learning environment and where responsibility for learner success is located. This learner-attentive orientation anchors educational purpose in the people education is intended to serve.

Bronwyn Alton and Matthew Miller carry this concern with relationships into their study of the leadership journeys of women in the Bay of Plenty. They explore what women value in mentoring, the barriers they encounter, and the support they seek. Informal relationships, trust, challenge, and access to networks emerge as important. At its best, mentoring creates room for voice, reflection, and informed choice. Power can be used to open pathways rather than guard them.

Relationships help people navigate work in a rapidly changing landscape. In their contribution to this issue, Favour Atubi and Clinton Atubi turn towards artificial intelligence (AI) and the gap

between its use for academic tasks and the capabilities required in contemporary workplaces. They consider interdisciplinary learning, curriculum development, industry collaboration, continuing professional development, and entrepreneurship as ways of preparing learners for AI-enabled work. The water in Pieter's image offers one way of thinking about technology: as an environment with currents, patterns, and uncertainties that influence where work may go. Like the horizon, however, its possibilities shift as people move, learn, and make choices. AI does not determine the direction of travel. Educators, institutions, and learners shape how it enters practice. Questions of access, privacy, ethics, and sustainability therefore sit alongside challenges of technical skill. Work readiness also requires judgement about when, why, and in whose interests the technology should be used.

At the midpoint of the issue, Amanda Cossham and Mary-Liz Broadley look back across more than twenty years of transformation at Open Polytechnic. Systems and technologies are part of that history, although organisational transformation is lived through people. In this article, long-serving kaimahi describe changing roles, redistributed responsibilities, and the continuing work of keeping learners at the centre. Change that appears sudden from a distance is often accumulated through years of adaptation, professional learning, and negotiation. Agency moves among people, policies, technologies, and specialist roles. Organisational memory allows these movements to be seen. Reflection in action is one of the ways transformation is lived and made meaningful.

As organisations change, the boundaries of professions change with them. Steph Mann draws unexpected parallels among Large Animal Veterinary Technicians, deer management, and search and rescue in Aotearoa New Zealand. Each domain developed from relatively informal and community-based practice through training, regulation, technology, and a growing sense of professional responsibility. Looking beyond her own field helps Mann see familiar patterns differently. Professionalism is not simply a title bestowed from outside. It develops through competence, community, and conscience. Sometimes we recognise our own practice more clearly when we encounter it, in another form, elsewhere.

Leigh Quadling-Miernik then turns the lens towards the practitioner herself. Across five years of contributions to *Scope*, she has documented her Doctor of Professional Practice journey. In this final piece, the question changes from what she has done to who she has become. She moves from being a teacher who does towards a researching teaching practitioner who also asks what it means to be. This is not a tidy arrival. Theory has given her new language for understanding a career rich in practice, while the doctoral journey has turned the inquiry back upon the researcher. The work and the person investigating it have changed together. The lens used to examine practice also changes the person looking through it.

Becoming may also require us to release control. Ingrid Campbell closes the issue by reconsidering success through succession. Her Master of Professional Practice developed her understanding of sustainability, relational accountability, and trauma-informed leadership. The work that followed required her to embody those ideas within governance, community practice, and the realities of personal capacity. In her article, Campbell distinguishes service from over-functioning, and care from becoming indispensable. Sustainable leadership creates conditions in which others can contribute, question, and lead. Goodwill may begin a kaupapa, but structure is needed to sustain it. Succession becomes an ethical practice through which power is shared and responsibility matures into stewardship.

Here we return to the boat. A capable navigator cannot calm the waters or fix the horizon. What can be developed is the judgement to read changing conditions, choose a direction and make room for others to take part in the voyage. Agency does not mean controlling the environment. It means acting thoughtfully within it.

Across this issue, work is reimagined at several scales: around the lives of ākonga, through mentoring and technological judgement, as organisations and professions adapt, as research reshapes the researcher, and as leadership moves from personal endurance towards collective continuity. These voyages are not separate. Power concerns who can speak, choose, and act. Practice concerns how judgement develops within real conditions. Purpose returns us to the people, communities, and futures the work serves. The horizon connects them, not as a destination, but as an invitation to keep looking and moving.

The contributions leave us with questions that extend beyond this issue. Whose voices shape learning, and where does meaningful choice reside? How does research into practice also become research into the self? What might education look like as lifelong learning and as service? Which knowledge traditions guide us? And what becomes visible when work-based learning is understood as a technological, cultural, and civic practice? These are questions we will carry into *Scope (Work-based Learning)* in 2027. The horizon remains open.

We thank the authors and the editorial team for the care and work they have brought to this issue. We hope you will find within it ideas that inform your own practice, unsettle something that has become too settled, and bring a little more of the horizon into view.

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MOVING MĀORI SUCCESS FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE

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.

Michelle Te Koeti (Kāi Tahu, Ngāi Māmoe, Ngati Apa) holds a Master of Professional Practice and a Bachelor of Applied Management (both with distinction), with a double major in Business Transformation and Strategic Management. With over 30 years of leadership, she has facilitated and assessed Māori learners at Capable NZ, Otago Polytechnic, since 2018.

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EXPLORING THE VALUE OF MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN THE BAY OF PLENTY, NEW ZEALAND

Bronwyn Alton and Matthew C. Miller

INTRODUCTION

Women remain proportionally underrepresented in leadership roles worldwide, despite increasing recognition that gender diversity in leadership is associated with diversity of thought, broader perspectives, and improved organisational outcomes (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Research by Deloitte Centre for Financial Services (Rogish et al., 2021) on women in finance reported a multiplier effect in senior leadership, where adding one woman to an executive C-suite position was associated with three additional women joining senior management roles.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, women's participation in the labour market has long contributed to economic growth. However, women continue to experience the labour market differently from men, often in ways that create economic disadvantage (Ministry for Women, 2023a). Although New Zealand compares favourably with many countries in relation to women's representation in leadership and governance, inequities remain and further progress is still required (Ministry for Women, 2023b). Deloitte (2022b) reported that women held 31.9 percent of board seats in New Zealand, compared with 19.7 percent globally. Deloitte New Zealand Chief Executive Mike Horne noted in a press release that while New Zealand was among the top 10 countries globally for the percentage of board seats held by women, there remained "a major opportunity to harness talent by closing a still material gap" (Deloitte, 2022b).

International data show that progress remains slow. In August 2025, only 33 of the Global 500 companies (worldwide corporations ranked by revenue) had female CEOs, representing 6.6 percent of the list. This was an increase from 28 women the previous year, but remained below the proportion of women leading Fortune 500 (top-ranking U.S.) companies, which was 55 companies or 11 percent of the list (Hinchliffe, 2025). This slow progression continues despite research and industry reporting linking women's representation in leadership and governance with stronger organisational and financial outcomes (Deloitte, 2022a; Insala, 2018b; Turner-Moffatt, 2019). A Deloitte report (2022a) projected that, at the current rate of change, gender parity on boards is unlikely to be reached before 2045.

These patterns highlight the need for strategies that support women's development, retention, and advancement into leadership roles. Mentoring has been recognised globally, and in New

Zealand, as a valuable form of learning in, and through, work (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Kuntz & Livingston, 2020; Logan & Crump, 2007). For women in leadership, mentoring can support career development, professional confidence, access to networks, reflective practice, and navigation of complex organisational environments. As part of my master's thesis, I conducted research that explored the mentoring experiences, and the characteristics valued by women in leadership positions in the Bay of Plenty business environment. Specifically, it examined the types of mentoring relationships women experienced, the features they found valuable, the barriers they encountered, and the ways mentoring supported their personal and professional development.

Mentoring is commonly understood as either a formal or informal relationship grounded in trust, mutual learning, and professional development. Informal mentoring relationships often develop naturally over time through existing professional connections and may evolve as the mentee's needs change. Formal mentoring relationships are usually more structured, with defined objectives, roles and responsibilities, matching processes, and timelines. Both forms of mentoring can provide value, but their effectiveness depends on the quality of the relationship and the extent to which the mentoring experience responds to the needs of the mentee.

Despite the recognised value of mentoring, gaps remain in the understanding of women's mentoring experiences in the New Zealand business context. Previous literature has identified limited research on the complexities of mentoring relationships for women. There is an absence of ethnographic studies examining how New Zealand businesses establish and support mentoring (Holland, 2009; Kuntz & Livingston, 2020). Kuntz and Livingston (2020) also found that only a limited number of women leaders had experienced mentoring, despite mentoring being recognised as a strategy that may support women's advancement into leadership. Understanding what women value in mentoring relationships is therefore important for developing high-quality mentoring experiences and ensuring that the potential benefits of mentoring are realised (Machida-Kosuga, 2021). This article discusses the research findings to develop this understanding and make recommendations for organisations and mentoring programmes.

METHOD

This phenomenological qualitative research design (Carter, 2018) was a discovery-oriented process that was open to whatever might be revealed by the voices of the participants. This life story method was used to encourage women to reflect on their career and to voice their perceptions and experiences. To identify their lived mentorship experiences in the workplace, and to learn what mentoring experiences were of value, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women in leadership roles in the Bay of Plenty. A woman 'in a leadership position' was defined as being in a role that had financial responsibility and direct people reports. All participants held senior positions within their organisations and were drawn from diverse industries, including the finance, hospitality, horticulture, and corporate sectors. The Bay of Plenty region was chosen because the researcher was able to access participants if they chose to meet face to face. There were 14 questions used to guide the discussions, with each interview lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. The participants were recruited with a snowball sampling, where the first participant (recruited through professional connections) was asked to recommend other participants from their professional network (Patton, 1990). It was recognised by the researcher that participants might recommend friends and associates with similar views to their own, potentially creating a biased sample, but due to the nature of the semi-structured interview methodology, each participant had the freedom to express their own views and life experiences. The data gathered

was thematically analysed to identify patterns, themes, and experiences, with a focus on learning about the participants' experiences from their perspective, without prejudice or judgement, ensuring the participants were culturally safe, and that all participants consented to their stories being documented. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Toi Ohomai Research Committee (approval number TRC PG2024.020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that mentoring was experienced and valued by participants as a meaningful form of learning in careers. Participants described mentoring as a relational process that supported the building of confidence, created a space for reflection, and provided career development and leadership growth. The value of mentoring was shaped less by whether it was formal or informal, and more by the quality of the relationship, particularly the level of trust, respect, and flexibility and the ability to engage in honest dialogue. As a result of the questions used to guide the discussions, four key themes emerged: a preference for informal mentoring experiences; the value of the mentoring relationship; mentoring is a valued strategy for professional and personal development, and barriers to gaining a mentoring experience.

This study's findings on what the participants valued in mentorship matched the descriptions in the literature, for instance that the mentor "brings wisdom and constructive ideas to a younger, inexperienced member" (Logan & Crump, 2007, p. 47). "Mentors are individuals who have advanced knowledge and skills and who assist and provide protégés with psychosocial support for their career development," Machida-Kosuga found (2021, p. 181). Machida-Kosuga adds that, "regardless of the formality, mentoring provides a significant developmental experience that provides support to developing leaders" (2021, p. 181). A definition of mentoring by Allen and Eby (2010) describes the experience as being an emotionally deep relationship, the authors also stating that "distinct interpersonal exchanges and idiosyncratic interaction patterns define and shape the relationship" (p. 10). This was also found in this study: participants valued trust in their mentoring relationships, and this provided a platform for challenging conversations to take place that were open and honest, also supporting the development of the participants' reflective practice. These highly trusting relationships also provided practical emotional support for growth moments to occur.

Preference for informal mentoring experiences

All participants overwhelmingly preferred informal mentoring relationships to formal arrangements throughout their careers. The participants preferred to naturally connect with someone on an *ad hoc* basis and preferred to seek out their own mentors. These relationships were driven by personal and professional aspirations, rather than following an organisational strategy. Participants sought out mentors they perceived could help them navigate specific challenges and with whom they believed they could build relationships through a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and flexibility. For example, Participant 5 related that they preferred a "very informal" relationship, adding, "I hear of lots of people who have this mentorship where every week or every second week they go and catch up … and it feels quite rigid to me."

These informal relationships evolved naturally over time, through consistent interactions and 'open door' accessibility. The mentoring experience was found to facilitate knowledge transfer and allowed mentees to be challenged in a safe environment. Participant 1 noted that working

closely with senior leaders on various projects fostered the deep trust required for meaningful, high-level conversations: "Informal relationships generally develop over time through shared experiences … the trust developed over time."

In contrast, formal programmes were often perceived as rigid or mismatched to individual needs. Participant 5 described the challenge of the mentorship when it was forced: "You've either got chemistry where you click … or you don't. If it's forced, I'm not quite sure how to navigate." While formal mentorship was less popular and there was limited engagement, this style still provided value. One participant used a formal arrangement to alleviate stress and share grievances. Although the formal relationship was recognised as more structured and needing clear guidelines, both informal and formal mentoring were seen as having the same value; they were just different processes.

This study found that participants gained confidence from the mentoring experience, they learned from their mentors, and they were often guided in their career path and in the actions they took. Mekahli (2021) agrees that mentors are role models for mentees and increase their confidence, teach, and help them find their own path and pursue their career independently.

Value identified in the mentoring relationship

The study identified that mentoring has a powerful role in everyday work, where women in leadership positions are learning to navigate the shifting expectations, power dynamics, and ethical tensions inherent in leadership. The mentoring relationship created an environment in which participants learned to make sense of disruption, whether in male-dominated environments, through moments of self-doubt, or through organisations. The relationships that were most valued were when dialogue enabled vulnerability, courageous conversations, and reflective practice, in a safe, confidential environment that allowed women leaders to explore their potential. Participant 3 explains how mentoring strengthened self-belief and supported them overcoming self-doubt: "I really didn't back myself … and he [the mentor] literally was like, don't be ridiculous, of course you can."

When mentors used their positional power to advocate, open doors, provide connections, and provide psychological safety, mentees learned new skills and new ways of seeing themselves and their roles, often reframing their purpose to strengthen their leadership identity. Within these relationships, hidden roles emerged: the mentor as a cultural interpreter, an emotional anchor, a connector of networks, and a promoter of confidence. "She would always fight tooth and nail for me," Participant 2 said of her mentor. "She was definitely my biggest advocate in terms of employment and development."

The mentee, meanwhile, also had an active role in shaping and directing the relationship, creating goals, and interpreting feedback in real time. The relationships that were most valued allowed honest conversations that made space for shared storytelling and mutual learning. These discussions often went beyond technical advice and into personal experiences. Participants drew meaning from these experiences, learning what 'felt right' and what aligned with their values, and learning how to navigate ethical questions of fairness and belonging. These mentorship experiences were able to support the development of participants' own leadership styles throughout their career.

Trust emerged from all participants as the foundation of an effective mentoring relationship, and an important characteristic that needed to be strong in order for deeper learning to occur. As expressed by Participant 1, "The trust developed over time, sharing experiences, and then eventually getting to a point where you share some things on a deeper level, and that's then

reciprocated." Participant 3 expressed the value of developing trust through storytelling: "Learn off people as you go, as you open up, you start to share your story about where you're from and what you've come up against and start to be vulnerable and open up." Due to the formation of trust, mentorship relationships turned into lasting, long-term friendships.

A study by McGregor and Tweed (2002), also found that New Zealand women valued the ability to have a sounding board, someone to boost confidence and motivation, and a source of business contacts. It was also mentioned by the participants in my research that support to maintain a work-life balance, and health and well-being guidance, were of value. This links to a study into the impact of mentoring on women's work-life balance by Bahrami et al. (2022) which found that the benefits from mentoring can support this balance, along with a growth in confidence, career progression, and self-management.

It was widely agreed by the five participants that they valued being challenged (presented with different viewpoints) and learning from the mentor's differing life and business experiences, and expertise in their specific industry. Eissner and Gannon (2018) also discuss the way mentoring provides for those from different backgrounds to share their experiences and skills in a meaningful way. Brown and Ross (2010) found that the positive aspect of the mentoring relationship is that it is with "a person who could provide alternative ways of looking at problems" (p. 41). It was also found that "truth and honesty, [and] openness" (Brown & Ross, 2010, p. 46), along with support in working through challenging life moments, created meaningful friendships.

Mentoring recognised as valuable for professional and personal development

Participants consistently reported gaining a wide range of transferable skills through mentoring, including enhanced self-awareness, improved decision making, and a deeper understanding of their own value within organisational contexts. These relationships challenged their thinking and encouraged reflection. Mentoring enabled them to use all the 'good bits' that they learned and experienced to develop and strengthen their own leadership style and approach. Mentoring also played a critical role in personal development and encouraging work-life balance and emotional well-being. Women discussed how they applied learning from their mentorship not only at work but in their personal lives, highlighting the depth and impact of these relationships. Participants often became mentors themselves, creating a reinforcing cycle of support and capability development within their organisations and professional communities. This comment by Participant 3 highlights the value placed on the learning within the mentoring context: "To be challenged with respect is a real gift … the gift is once you've heard that [challenge], then it's up to you to change."

The participants in this study often found it difficult to find mentors. However, Machida-Kosuga (2021) found that the quality of the mentorship was more critical than just having mentors available, and that when high levels of satisfaction were achieved in the mentorship relationship there were more positive outcomes. The participants in this study also shared the value of having a quality mentoring relationship, with high levels of trust, and that they experienced positive outcomes from such relationships in terms of career development and personal growth.

Barriers to the mentoring experience

Participants identified several barriers that limited their access to meaningful mentoring experiences. Such barriers included a lack of support to find a mentor and less availability of female mentors (which was a preference), time pressures, gender imbalances, and insufficient general support

for mentoring within their organisation. Difficulty finding suitable mentors (especially women in leadership positions) was experienced by Participant 5, who said that they had been "lucky" to have had inspirational women to look up to in their careers, but recognised that there was a lack of women leaders to access. Participant 3 also noted the lack of access to women mentors: "There's not enough women in leadership for me to go to … there are no women around to talk to about this sort of stuff." Although the participants displayed a preference for a female mentor, all of them had worked with a male mentor.

Machida-Kosuga (2021) acknowledges that "there are advantages of having a male mentor in male-dominated industries, as they have access to social and resource capital" (p. 182). What was important was that the mentors were supportive, that they respected and trusted mentees, and that the mentor recognised the mentee's value. Another study by Logan and Crump (2007) reported that women did not consider the majority of mentors being male to be a problem and shared that the most important factor was having a mentor they could respect, who could give appropriate advice, and who had appropriate attitudes and approaches. However, in Logan and Crump's (2007) study there were not many women in leadership positions in the participants' industries, so it was difficult to find and seek out inspirational women leaders as mentors. As with my research, these women wanted female mentors but were unable to find them (Logan and Crump, 2007).

In addition, all the participants in my research had busy workloads, full home lives, and other responsibilities which meant that finding time to engage in mentoring was difficult. In organisations where the leaders were encouraged to engage in mentoring, the workloads were otherwise prohibitive.

Some participants talked about uncomfortable experiences in male-dominated business environments and actively sought advice from experienced women to overcome issues with the workplace gender imbalance. These informal, self-initiated mentoring interactions provided reassurance and strategies for coping with challenging dynamics.

The participants also reported that, although mentorship was acknowledged and promoted as a career progression tool by industry bodies, there was limited support to find or retain a mentor. They expressed that getting a mentor by yourself could be challenging, especially at the beginning of a career when women were still developing their self-confidence. There were workplace cultures that did not encourage mentorship during work hours, where limited time was given to professional development, and where technical training was often given priority over broader professional growth. Participants also experienced practical and financial barriers to participating in mentoring: "You're encouraged to go and find a mentor [but] that's a really hard thing to do because you think, who's gonna want to do that? [And] you kinda just back away from it" (Participant 1).

Many of the participants had never sought out formal mentoring because they felt uncertain and lacked understanding of the process. There was a perceived professional and personal risk that they would not be matched with the right person. In addition, not knowing how to get out of the relationship if it failed to work out was an issue. This perceived lack of control and inability to participate in the process was a barrier to accessing formal mentorship.

Attributes that enable effective mentoring relationships

Participants in this research displayed common personal characteristics. They were all driven to improve, were open to new learning experiences, and sought out mentors to support their professional goals. Read et al. (2020) found that women leaders must chart their own path which included being willing to seek out mentors and be committed to the mentoring process. The findings of my research are also supported by Logan and Crump (2007), who state that the mentee "should drive the mentoring process" (p. 49), and that taking ownership of the process may not suit all mentees, especially new graduates and those in male-dominated sectors.

Ghaffari (2014) discusses how the value of mentorship is in the development of skills (listening and ability to learn) rather than trying to develop a perfect one-on-one relationship. In the modern business environment, people who want growth must seek out learning; it is up to the seeker to identify what they believe to be of value, what learning that they want, and how they choose to gain wisdom (Ghaffari, 2014). The participants in this research also looked for mentors whom they respected and trusted, and for relationships that would help them gain the wisdom or knowledge they wanted and then made this new knowledge their own. Participants also looked for access to social networks and specialist knowledge, indicating that this was a valuable element of mentorship. Reis and Grady (2020) also state that sharing of knowledge and power is valued as part of mentoring, as well as the opportunity to access resources and social capital.

It was found in this study that the participants valued the mentor challenging them. Ghaffari (2014) also discusses that often the mentor does not teach the protégée directly but, rather, pushes the protégée (mentee) into a learning experience for a growth to occur. If the mentee develops from the process, they grow to possess better judgment (Ghaffari, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that mentoring is a valuable strategy for supporting women in leadership roles; however, the benefits are most likely to be realised when mentoring is accessible, relationship-based, and responsive to an individual's needs. Participants consistently described mentoring as a source of confidence, reflection, career guidance, professional networks, and personal growth. The following recommendations arise from the experiences shared by the women in this study.

Recognise the importance of informal mentoring relationships

A key finding of this study was the strong preference for informal mentoring relationships. Participants valued relationships that developed naturally through shared experiences, mutual respect, and trust rather than through prescribed organisational arrangements. Organisations should therefore create environments that encourage professional connections, networking, collaboration, and relationship-building, recognising that these interactions can provide the foundation for effective mentoring relationships.

Prioritise trust and psychological safety

Trust emerged as the foundation of meaningful mentoring relationships. Participants valued relationships where they felt safe to be vulnerable, discuss challenges openly, receive honest feedback, and engage in reflective conversations. Organisations and mentoring programmes

should recognise that relationship quality is more important than mentoring structure alone. Time and support should be provided for trust to develop between mentors and mentees.

Support access to mentoring throughout women's careers

Participants valued mentoring at different stages of their careers, not only when entering the workforce or leadership roles. Several participants indicated they would have benefited from greater support in accessing mentors, particularly in the earlier stages of their careers when confidence and professional networks were still developing. Organisations, industry groups, and professional networks should therefore promote mentoring opportunities throughout career progression.

Strengthen opportunities for women to connect with experienced women leaders

Although participants generally reported positive experiences with both male and female mentors, some women expressed a desire for greater access to female leaders, particularly when navigating gender-related workplace challenges. Participants also noted the limited number of women leaders available in some industries. Industry associations and professional networks could support women by increasing opportunities to connect with experienced women leaders who are willing to share experiences, offer guidance, and act as role models.

AI statement

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) was used solely to refine grammar and improve readability. These tools were employed to enhance clarity while maintaining the intended meaning and context. The authors independently reviewed and checked the final work for accuracy and authenticity.

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PREPARING HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH AI WORK-BASED SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the capability of computer systems and machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, including problem-solving, learning, reasoning, and decision-making. In recent years, AI technologies, algorithms, and intelligent systems have become integral to teaching, learning, and institutional management in higher education, thereby transforming educational practices worldwide (Alkan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The rapid emergence of AI applications in education has created an urgent need to equip higher education students with the technical and practical AI competencies required to thrive in an increasingly AI-driven workplace. AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Khanmigo, and other intelligent applications are now widely used by students to support learning, research, and academic productivity. Beyond enhancing academic performance, AI has the potential to prepare students to become critical thinkers, innovative problem-solvers, and productive members of the future workforce. Despite these opportunities, evidence suggests that many higher education institutions have not fully integrated AI work-based skills into their teaching and learning processes (Ravinshakar & Logasakthi, 2023). As a result, students often develop proficiency in using AI for academic purposes but receive limited exposure to the technical and practical AI skills required in modern workplaces, such as programming, machine learning, data analytics, robotics, and computational thinking. This disconnect has created a noticeable gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations.

Although the educational benefits of AI have been widely documented, insufficient attention has been given to its role in developing the technical and work-based competencies required for employment in AI-driven industries. Consequently, this article seeks to address this gap by examining how higher education institutions can better prepare students with AI work-based skills that align classroom experiences with career realities. Using a discussion-based research framework supported by professional observations, relevant literature, and conceptual models, the article provides new insights into strategies for developing an AI-ready workforce and extends current scholarship on AI in higher education.

The research framework

Preparing higher education students through effective teaching, learning, and scholarship can significantly enhance their acquisition of AI work-based skills. However, a noticeable gap exists

between the knowledge and experiences students gain in the classroom and the competencies required in today's AI-driven workplace. This article addresses this gap by adopting a discussion-based approach supported by professional observations, a review of relevant literature, and conceptual models. The findings derived from these approaches are presented in the following sections.

FINDINGS

Research on artificial intelligence has grown remarkably in recent years, resulting in an extensive body of literature that explores various aspects of AI in education, including AI system design, teaching and learning, educational outcomes, research, and institutional practices (Chen et al., 2022; Chiu et al., 2023; Guan et al., 2020; Luan & Chin-Chung, 2021; Srinivasan, 2022; Sun et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). This growing body of research has reinforced the importance of AI in higher education. Nevertheless, relatively few studies have specifically examined how equipping students with AI work-based skills can bridge the gap between classroom learning and career realities. Consequently, this article contributes to the literature by highlighting strategies for preparing students for an AI-driven workforce.

Based on our professional observations and experiences at Delta State University (DELSU) and Southern Delta University (SDU), Nigeria, there is limited evidence that AI work-based skills have been systematically integrated into teaching and learning. Although AI technologies are increasingly available, instructional practices remain largely centred on traditional classroom approaches. We therefore argue that higher education institutions should redesign their instructional practices to incorporate AI work-based skills that better prepare students for the realities of the modern workplace.

AI has demonstrated considerable potential for improving learners' digital competencies and enhancing productivity (Damioli et al., 2021). Mahmoud (2020) and Edewor (2024) further contend that the application of AI work-based skills can create greater educational and professional opportunities. Consequently, integrating AI work-based learning into higher education is essential for preparing graduates to meet the evolving demands of today's labour market. Such integration can provide students with authentic workplace experiences, personalised learning opportunities, intelligent feedback, performance monitoring, and practical exposure to solving real-world problems. For example, medical students can learn through AI-powered patient simulators, while engineering students can develop technical competencies using AI-supported virtual laboratories.

Accordingly, there is a need to establish a stronger connection between classroom instruction and workplace practice. Our professional observations indicate that although students frequently use AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, QuillBot, Notion AI, and Claude for academic purposes, they receive limited training in technical AI competencies such as programming, coding, machine learning, robotics, and data analytics. Addressing this gap should become a priority for higher education institutions seeking to prepare graduates for AI-driven careers.

Hakansson et al. (2025) emphasise that learner-centred approaches such as project-based learning, simulation environments, and micro-credential programmes are effective strategies for developing AI-relevant work-based skills. These approaches enable students to bridge theory and practice by engaging with authentic workplace problems while promoting motivation, lifelong learning, and continuous professional development (Dubey et al., 2021). However, based on our

professional observations, these instructional approaches are not being used nor implemented at DELSU and SDU.

Similarly, AI-powered adaptive learning systems, including Khanmigo, ALEKS, and CENTURY Tech, together with intelligent tutoring systems such as AutoTutor, Cognitive Tutor, and SQL-Tutor, have demonstrated significant potential for enhancing personalised learning, self-regulation, and digital competence (Huang et al., 2023). Greater attention should therefore be given to integrating these technologies into higher education to strengthen students' AI work-based skills and prepare them for the ethical and effective use of AI in future workplaces. Hence, from our professional observations, increased attention should be paid to nurturing effective work-based skills that can instill AI efficiency into higher education students at DELSU and SDU. Special emphasis should be placed on adaptive learning systems and intelligent tutoring technologies, since these AI capabilities can enable students to critically evaluate, contextualise, and ethically guide the use of AI in their education and by extension the workspace.

As countries move towards increasingly AI-driven economies, the demand for a technologically competent workforce will continue to grow (Okebukola, 2025a). AI is widely recognised as a transformative technology underpinning the Fifth Industrial Revolution and driving economic growth and innovation (Golic, 2019). Consequently, higher education institutions such as DELSU and SDU should prioritise the development of AI work-based competencies to ensure that graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and adaptability required for success in twenty-first-century workplaces. DELSU and SDU higher education students, who are expected to provide a high-level labour force, should be prepared with work-based AI skills to cover the gap between what they are presently experiencing in the classroom and what they will meet in the twenty-first century workspace.

The labour force in key sectors such as finance, education, agriculture, health, and national security stands to increase productively with proper AI mobilisation at the higher education level. Failing to build a work-based labour force driven by AI at that level could represent a huge risk of low productivity (Al-Zahrani & Alasmari, 2024). This is because the world is striving towards technological advancement in industrialisation, innovation, infrastructural development, clean energy, transportation, and logistics. The role of artificial intelligence in building an efficient, prepared labour force of students should become an area of major concern for higher education because AI can be leveraged in all sectors of the economy (Okebukola, 2025b). As the demand for artificial intelligence is increasing, the management team and faculty members at DELSU and SDU might have to step up their game by ensuring that AI is used to propel efficient work-based learning for future workforce innovations and a global competitive AI labour force.

Bridging the AI gap between classroom and career realities

Bridging the gap between classroom learning and career realities requires higher education institutions to ensure that students can effectively transfer the AI knowledge acquired during their studies into practical workplace competencies. Achieving this objective demands deliberate institutional reforms, curriculum innovation, and the adoption of learner-centred strategies. The major approaches proposed in this article are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 and discussed below. Figure 1 implies that through a combination of AI skills and technologies, higher education graduates can contribute to global competitiveness, create employment, and achieve sustainable development.

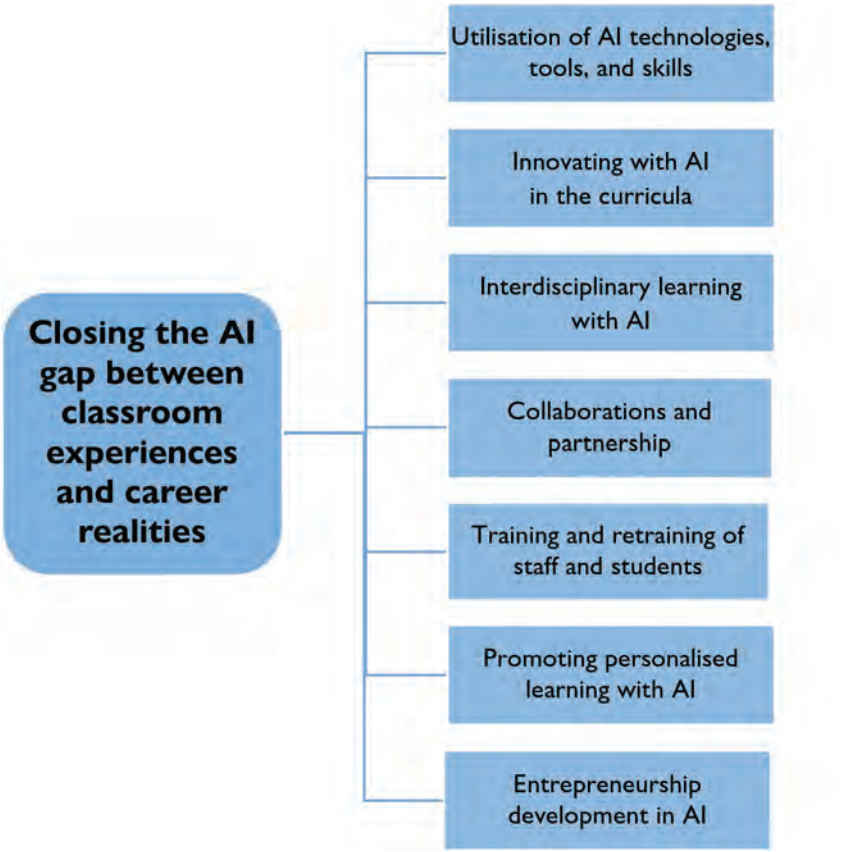


Figure 1. A conceptual model for closing the AI gap between classroom and career realities.

First, universities such as DELSU and SDU should integrate AI technical competencies including machine learning, data analytics, coding, programming, robotics, computational thinking, and digital literacy into work-integrated learning programmes across all academic disciplines. Such integration will expose students to practical AI applications that align with contemporary labour market expectations (Al-Enezi & Al-Shammari, 2024; Yetişensoy, 2024). As technological advancement continues to reshape industries, employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also practical AI competencies that enhance workplace productivity and innovation (Finley, 2021; Forero-Corba & Negre, 2024).

Second, higher education institutions should review and modernise their curricula by introducing dedicated AI work-based courses and embedding AI competencies within existing programmes. Curriculum innovation is essential for equipping graduates with the technical expertise required in rapidly evolving labour markets (Atubi, 2021; George, 2025). Universities should also promote AI literacy across all disciplines by replacing outdated course content with contemporary AI-related learning experiences that reflect current technological developments (Kumar & Rewari, 2022). By implication, higher education curricula in DELSU and SDU should reflect real career prospects

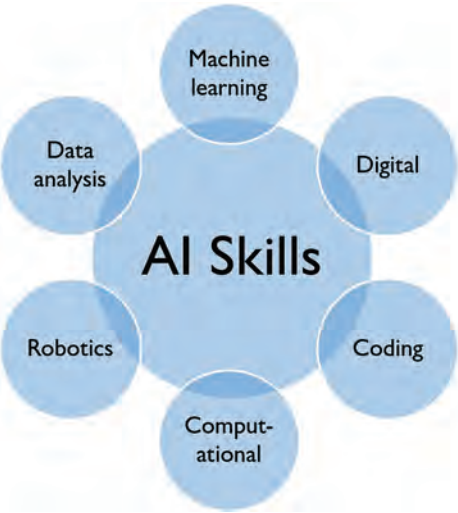


Figure 2. A conceptual model showing AI work-based skills.

in order to equip students with essential AI work-based skills and core academic knowledge in AI as it relates to their various disciplines of study. Bridging this employability gap will need a collaborative effort from the management of these institutions through revamping their curricula.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary learning should be strengthened by integrating AI into diverse fields such as education, engineering, the social sciences, business, the arts, and the humanities. Previous studies have shown that students' engagement with AI varies across disciplines (Elshaer et al., 2024; Raman et al., 2024; Starkey et al., 2023; Stöhr et al., 2024). While engineering and computing students often demonstrate higher levels of AI adoption, students in other disciplines generally have fewer opportunities to develop AI competencies (Qu et al., 2024). An interdisciplinary approach would enable students to acquire transferable AI knowledge and skills that support innovation, collaboration, and professional adaptability across multiple career pathways.

The authors therefore suggest that the application of AI in interdisciplinary learning at DELSU and SDU can aid the performance of work-based tasks and help higher education students exhibit skills across disciplines, as interdisciplinary culture might significantly influence the way these students can utilise AI technologies. An interdisciplinary approach with AI would ground students in different AI concepts, methods, skills, and technologies that can shape their professional efficiencies and identities. However, while most studies emphasise the importance of considering an interdisciplinary approach in students' engagement with AI, these studies do not address how interdisciplinary learning can bridge the gap between classroom experiences and career gains. This is a crucial research gap that calls for deeper investigation.

In another vein, higher education institutions should establish strategic partnerships with AI technology companies through internships, industrial attachments, mentorship programmes, collaborative research projects, and memoranda of understanding. These partnerships provide students with authentic workplace experiences while strengthening the alignment between academic training and industry expectations (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Downes et al., 2021).

Collaborations with industry also promote knowledge exchange, creativity, ethical awareness, and practical problem-solving, thereby enhancing students' readiness for AI-driven employment (Amoako et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020).

To buttress the positive impact of collaborations and partnerships on the AI work-based skills of higher education students, studies by Liu et al. (2020) and Amoako et al. (2021) have demonstrated practical examples of such relationships. Jiang et al. (2019) confirm that collaboration between higher education institutions and AI experts can serve as a channel for students to successfully adopt and incorporate AI skills and technologies in the workplace. Collaboration can bring about the exchange of different perspectives and experiences. Educational organisations should therefore maximize the advantages of collaborations for developing the AI work-based skills of higher education students. For these reasons and more, institutions such as DELSU and SDU and AI organisations should give high priority to collaborative programmes and equip students with AI work-based skills to provide an efficient labour workforce and boost socioeconomic development. In order for students at DELSU and SDU to become competitive and gainfully employed in AI-dominated economies, there should be collaborations with AI tech companies that are willing to partner through student internships and mentorships. Collaboration with AI tech companies is emphasised in this article as a solution to the problem of how to link classroom experience with career goals.

Similarly, continuous training and retraining programmes should be provided for both students and academic staff. Professional development initiatives, including short certification courses in programming, robotics, machine learning, coding, and data analytics, can ensure that higher education institutions remain responsive to rapid technological change. Such programmes will equip both lecturers and students with current AI competencies that support lifelong learning and workplace relevance. The management teams at DELSU and SDU should spend time and resources on training and retraining their students and new and established employees. The goal of this training is to set them on the right trajectory to prepare for adopting and devising effective AI solutions in the workplace. Training and retraining will enable them to apply the knowledge and skills gained in the university with little or no guidance.

Additionally, institutions should promote personalised AI-supported learning environments that enable students to strengthen critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and decision-making skills. AI technologies can facilitate personalised career guidance, virtual workplace simulations, mock interviews, adaptive learning experiences, and performance feedback, thereby improving students' confidence and career readiness in AI-enabled work environments (Al-Zahrani & Alasmari, 2024; George, 2025). When DELSU and SDU students practice personalised learning in an AI environment, it can aid the development of decision-making, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are core essentials for achieving career success in any AI work-based environment.

Finally, entrepreneurship education should be integrated with AI work-based learning to encourage innovation, self-employment, and business development. AI technologies can support entrepreneurial activities through business intelligence, customer relationship management, automation, predictive analytics, marketing optimisation, and strategic decision-making (Elia et al., 2020; Ibrahim, 2025; Uriarte et al., 2026). Equipping students with AI-driven entrepreneurial competencies will not only improve graduate employability but also contribute to economic growth and job creation. Bearing in mind that not all undergraduates of DELSU and SDU may

have the opportunity to be employed in already established private or public agencies, companies, or industries, it has become necessary to leverage the benefits of AI for entrepreneurship, as this can also help curb unemployment.

While these strategies offer considerable potential for bridging the gap between classroom learning and career realities, their successful implementation requires careful attention to ethical considerations, equitable access to AI technologies, data privacy, institutional readiness, staff capacity development, and long-term sustainability. Addressing these challenges will enable higher education institutions to maximize the benefits of AI while preparing graduates for productive participation in an increasingly technology-driven global workforce.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that equipping higher education students with AI work-based skills is essential for preparing a competent workforce capable of meeting the demands of an increasingly AI-driven global economy. Although AI technologies are becoming more prevalent in higher education, a significant gap remains between students' classroom experiences and the practical competencies required in contemporary workplaces. Addressing this disconnect requires higher education institutions to move beyond the use of AI as a tool for academic support and intentionally integrate AI work-based competencies into teaching, learning, and curriculum development.

The discussion identified several practical strategies for bridging this gap, including integrating AI technical skills into work-integrated learning, modernising higher education curricula, promoting interdisciplinary AI education, strengthening collaborations between universities and AI technology companies, providing continuous training and professional development, encouraging personalised AI-supported learning, and fostering AI-driven entrepreneurship. Collectively, these strategies can enhance graduates' employability, workplace readiness, innovation, and lifelong learning while contributing to sustainable socioeconomic development.

This article makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the growing literature on artificial intelligence in higher education. It extends current scholarship by proposing practical pathways through which AI work-based skills can bridge the gap between classroom learning and career realities. The conceptual models presented in this article also provide a useful framework for researchers, university administrators, policymakers, and educators seeking to design AI-integrated work-based learning initiatives. Future research should empirically validate the conceptual framework proposed in this article across different higher education contexts and disciplines. Such studies could examine the effectiveness of AI work-based learning in improving students' employability, workplace performance, career readiness, and professional competencies. By implementing the recommendations presented in this article, higher education institutions such as DELSU and SDU can produce graduates who are better prepared to thrive in AI-enabled workplaces and contribute meaningfully to national and global development.

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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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REFLECTING ON PARALLELS OF PROFESSIONALISM: LARGE ANIMAL VETERINARY TECHNICIANS, *DEER WARS*, AND *SEARCH AND RESCUE NEW ZEALAND*

Steph Mann

INTRODUCTION

This reflection arises from my Doctor of Professional Practice research at Otago Polytechnic, which examines how the role of the Large Animal Veterinary Technician (LAVT) in Aotearoa New Zealand might be developed to support long-term career sustainability. Reflective encounters with stories outside one's own profession are themselves a powerful mechanism for professional learning.

While travelling recently, I listened to two Radio New Zealand documentary series—*Deer Wars* and *Search and Rescue New Zealand*—that unexpectedly illuminated the professional journeys of those in other New Zealand fields. Both documentaries depict a shift from *ad hoc*, community-driven activity toward structured, ethically accountable, and technologically sophisticated practice. Listening to them from the perspective of my own field prompted a deeper inquiry into what professionalism means, how it evolves, and what sustains it over time.

Although prompted by documentary storytelling rather than formal educational activity, these reflections represent a form of work-based learning. They illustrate how professional understanding can develop through critical engagement with experiences beyond one's own discipline, enabling practitioners to question assumptions, recognise common patterns of professional development, and re-examine their own identity and practice. From a work-based learning perspective, these stories demonstrate that professional becoming, and therefore professional identity, is shaped not solely through formal education but through reflection on practice, participation within communities of practice, and continual adaptation to changing workplace contexts. This reflective article does not report empirical research involving human or animal participants. Ethics approval was therefore not required.

REFLECTIONS ACROSS PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Deer Wars describes how the introduction of deer to New Zealand created a thriving wild population that demanded management. What began as a loosely organised, often dangerous industry of government shooters and private cullers gradually matured into a regulated and profitable deer-farming sector.

There are striking parallels with the development of the Large Animal Veterinary Technician profession. In the early days, veterinary work relied on whoever was available—a farmer's wife, a junior vet, or a spare farmhand—to lend a hand. Over time animal welfare standards rose. As practices such as the routine use of sedation and pain relief during calf disbudding, together with herd teat sealing for mastitis prevention, became commonplace, the need for trained allied veterinary professionals emerged. Like the deer industry, we have moved from being informal helpers to skilled practitioners guided by best practice, regulation, and a strengthening professional identity.

Search and Rescue New Zealand tells a related story. What began as small groups of locals with area knowledge evolved into a coordinated national network supported by advanced communication systems, trained extraction teams, and technology such as drones, GPS, and personal locator beacons. The pattern is familiar: grassroots collaboration transforming into professionalism through experience, training, and innovation.

Today, the LAVT profession is experiencing its own technological revolution. Livestock wearables, remote monitoring, and data-driven herd management are reshaping how we work. Like the New Zealand Land Search and Rescue community, we rely on communication, teamwork, and the ability to adapt in unpredictable conditions. Across all three stories lies the same thread: professionalism is not static. It is built through experience, shaped by technology, and refined through reflection.

These parallels remind me that being a professional is not only about competence or credentials; it is about evolving responsibly, maintaining ethics, and contributing to something larger than ourselves. On a personal level, I recognise that each of these industries—deer management, search and rescue, and veterinary technology—has had to confront ethical questions as it matured. What once was acceptable practice has shifted as our collective understanding of welfare, safety, and responsibility deepened. In deer recovery, that meant moving from exploitation to sustainable management. In search and rescue, it meant balancing personal risk with duty of care. In the veterinary world, it has meant embedding pain relief, animal owner or client consent, and welfare at the core of every decision. For me as an LAVT, reflecting on these parallels reinforces the idea that professionalism is an ethical stance as much as a practical one. It means acting with integrity even when no one is watching, acknowledging the trust the public and clients place in our profession, and striving to do better as our tools, science, and understanding advance.

EXTENDING REFLECTION THROUGH A DOCTORAL INQUIRY

As my doctoral research progresses, these stories resonate strongly with my inquiry into how the LAVT role in Aotearoa can evolve sustainably. Each of these narratives charts a movement from informal, community-based practice toward structured professionalism, a process that, while often messy, has been essential to securing both ethical integrity and vocational survival.

Professionalisation as socio-cultural evolution

Like the early deer cullers or the volunteer trampers who became trained Land Search and Rescue personnel, LAVTs are negotiating a space between necessity and recognition. We have long carried out complex, skilled work on the margins of the veterinary profession, often without the structures that safeguard wellbeing or acknowledge expertise. My doctoral work aims to articulate what sustainability looks like for LAVTs—not only in terms of workforce numbers, but in the sense of being able to thrive within our practice rather than merely endure it.

Professionalisation also involves navigating power. As with deer farming or search and rescue, legitimacy in the LAVT field is shaped by those who hold institutional authority: veterinarians, regulatory bodies, and agricultural policymakers. Yet, as Evetts (2013) points out, there is a crucial difference between organisational professionalism, imposed by institutions, and occupational professionalism, which is generated collectively by practitioners themselves. My doctoral work aligns with this latter conception, advocating for a distributed professionalism that emerges from practice itself. This challenges traditional hierarchies and repositions LAVTs as active agents in their own professional evolution, much as nursing once did as it developed from a profession historically positioned as subordinate to medicine, moving beyond medicine's shadow and into professional autonomy.

Ethical evolution

Ethically, these comparisons between professions are revealing. *Deer Wars* relates how ethical practice evolved from an unregulated pursuit to one governed by welfare and ecological awareness. In *Search and Rescue*, we hear how the moral imperative to help others became embedded in formal systems of safety and accountability. In both cases, professionalism involved ethical maturation as much as technical development. Growing attention to pain relief, consent, welfare, and emotional resilience illustrates how values that may once have been expressed largely through instinctive care are becoming consciously articulated, shared, and ultimately codified as professional expectations. Much of this ethical practice is embodied and relational. Our work takes place through physical acts of care such as holding an animal, reading its behaviour, or supporting a farmer in distress. These are not simply matters of abstract ethical decision-making; they are lived moral encounters that echo what Tronto (1993) calls the ethic of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness enacted through relationship. This resonates with Mol's (2008) notion of the logic of care, which emphasises continual adaptation and context-sensitive ethical action rather than static rule-following. Both frameworks help articulate what I see daily in LAVT work: the ethical texture of practice that unfolds through embodied response to living systems.

PROFESSIONAL RESILIENCE AND THE NARRATIVE OF ADAPTATION

Across all three contexts, resilience emerges as a defining feature of professionalism. The deer recovery teams adapt to shifting economies and environmental pressures; search and rescue responders learn to work under extreme conditions of uncertainty while minimising risk to themselves; and LAVTs continually adjust to new technologies, diseases, and ethical expectations. My doctoral research situates resilience not as endurance but as adaptive professionalism—the capacity to evolve, learn, and sustain care in changing contexts. Schön's (1983) idea of reflection-in-action describes this process: professionals think through doing, improvising ethically and technically in real time. This ongoing calibration of professional judgement and response, moving continually between thought and action, forms the flexible backbone of professional resilience. From a te ao Māori perspective, this resilience also carries a collective dimension. Professional strength arises from whanaungatanga, the relationships and trust that bind teams together, and from kaitiakitanga, the notion of guardianship that underpins our ethical responsibilities to animals, land, and community. The whakataukī "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini" expresses this beautifully: my strength is not that of one but of many.

METHODOLOGICAL RESONANCES AND REFLEXIVITY

Methodologically, the parallels between the documentaries reinforce my use of reflective and practice-based inquiry. Each of these podcast narratives functions as a form of public reflection or collective storytelling that documents how professionals learn, adapt, and define meaning in their work. Listening as both practitioner and researcher, I recognise my own field within those narratives: a community negotiating legitimacy, identity, and sustainability. Rather than treating the podcasts as data sources, I use them as reflective prompts through which to view familiar professional questions from different perspectives.

As an insider researcher undertaking phenomenographic inquiry, which seeks to identify the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or understand a phenomenon, I acknowledge that my interpretations are shaped by my lived experience as a working LAVT. This dual position requires continual reflexivity, recognising that my professional identity both informs and constrains what I am able to see. Finlay (2002) describes this as "negotiating the swamp" of practitioner research—maintaining critical distance while embracing the insight that comes from being immersed in one's own field. In the Aotearoa context, this reflective stance aligns with Macfarlane and Macfarlane's (2019) call to "listen to culture": acknowledging relationships, context, and reciprocity as integral to ethical research practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

This reflection reinforces my commitment to building frameworks that support not only technical proficiency but also wellbeing, belonging, and ethical reflection within LAVT teams. Just as Land Search and Rescue and deer management achieved sustainability through structured training, shared language, and mutual trust, so too must LAVT practice formalise the relational and reflective dimensions of our work. These insights will inform the next phase of my doctoral project, particularly in designing interventions that strengthen professional identity, ethical confidence, and long-term career satisfaction across the sector.

Seen in this way, professionalism becomes not a badge conferred by external authorities but a living relationship between competence, community, and conscience. The parallels I hear in these podcast stories remind me that professionalism grows strongest when it is grounded in shared purpose, ethical integrity, and the courage to redefine what our work can be. Ultimately, these reflections suggest that professional learning is not confined to one's own discipline. Sometimes the most powerful insights emerge by recognising familiar patterns in unfamiliar professions.

For work-based learners, these reflections highlight that professional identity is not acquired at graduation but evolves through experience and ethical reflection. Rather than an optional extra, reflection becomes an essential component of professional learning, just as work-based learning moves beyond the acquisition of technical competence towards the continual reshaping of professional identity through reflection, relationship, and practice.

AI statement

The author confirms that this work was independently written and that no generative AI tools were used in its production.

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LEIGH REIMAGINED: THE OUTCOME OF A DOCTORAL JOURNEY

Leigh Quadling-Miernik

Work Reimagined is a great theme to focus on as I near the end of my Doctor of Professional Practice (DProfPrac) journey. The DProfPrac centres its Graduate Profile Outcomes on two aspects: new knowledge creation, and contribution to practice within one's field or industry. As you may be aware, I have been documenting my DProfPrac journey over the last five years. It started with a piece in *Scope (Work-based Learning) 3* (Quadling-Miernik, 2022) and this is now *Scope (Work-based Learning) 8*. The previous articles have focused on my yearly development, and each ended facing the next year of study. By the time you read this. I will hopefully have completed all stages and be looking forward to graduation in 2027.

There have been challenges in my DProfPrac, as I assumed there would be. However, the biggest challenge has been turning this highly experienced educator and teacher educator into a researching practitioner, and further into a researching teaching practitioner, one who is working in education but using research to develop. So the theme of this article is: Leigh Reimagined.

This article takes the form of a scholarly personal narrative. Writing a scholarly personal narrative allows me to use my voice and my language to explore the journey of a doctoral student as an insider (Nash, 2004). It emphasises the need for a story not only to be personal but to also uphold academic rigour (Heidelberger & Uecker, 2009). The narrative's structure is formed around three quotes I came across in early 2021, before formally starting the journey of the doctorate. I titled them "Quotes to keep me grounded" on page one of my DProfPrac journal. These quotes are not from academic journals. Two are from novels I was reading, and I cannot remember where I read the third, but I attribute it to its original source. I link my story to these quotes and highlight aspects of relevance to any doctoral journey, not just mine.

My narrative expresses my understanding of self and my personal identity through giving meaning to the question "Who am I …?" (Polkinghorne, 1991) as a doctoral student, at this moment in time, before completion, in relation to the quotes. Personal narratives within academia go beyond a story with a beginning, middle, and end, and are interpreted for insights into the experience (Barkhuizen, 2016). By viewing my development across the entire DProfPrac journey, I bring forth "Leigh Reimagined" in its current form.

Quote 1:

> "Everything is connected and it is how they are connected that tells their story."
>
> (Pattison, 2011, p. 80)

This statement is one that the central character of *Eye of the Raven*, a Scotsman, hears from his mentor, a Native American, who is teaching him how to interpret the landscape. This quote made me see that what I was before starting was connected to what I was to become upon completion. In my Review of Learning (RoL) task, I stated that Leigh in 1991, the year I started teaching, was a 'Do' teacher but the Leigh in 2021 was beginning to feel like a 'Be' teacher. I can confirm that in early 2026, on reading one sentence in one article, something went click in my head, and I realised my whole career of over 30 years has centred on the doing part rather than the being part. The sentence stated that within teaching "epistemology" was "in the service of ontology" (Dall'Alba, 2024). As a teacher and teacher trainer I am always trying to improve delivery to achieve learning outcomes. Furthermore, if there is a challenging situation or a time when someone says it cannot be done, well, I will take on the challenge and show them that it can be done. I have been a do-er through honing my skills in teaching, not a be-er through focusing on what it means to be a skillful educator. My practice was the outcome of my experience and my internal drive to develop, not a result of reading educational theory (Turner, 2016).

Leigh Reimagined is a confident 'Do and Be' teacher. As a teacher educator, I now focus on supporting teachers, not only developing their skills but also working with their professional identity. Thus, the points along the way: developing my practice over more than 30 years, writing the RoL task focusing on my career, focusing on professional identity in the DProfPrac, and reading an article that became a critical moment that changed the focus for the future. They are all connected and they tell the story of my development.

Goodall et al. (2017) write about their experiences and identity shifts as four female academics who were the first graduates of a new professional doctorate programme, much like the DProfPrac. The further they ventured into their studies, the more confident they became, enabling them to move further along the "academic continuum" (p. 11). The shift from outsider to insider came with a deeper understanding and knowledge but this shift did not come without costs. My journey from outsider to insider mirrors theirs. Along the way I have had goals to achieve, but it has been a constant struggle to understand these goals, the process to achieve them, and the language needed. I did not see connections between each goal.

Some of my most frequently used resources throughout the entire DProfPrac have been Google, and more recently ChatGPT and Gemini. They have been my lay definition provider for academic language not familiar to or even used by me. This started in the first month and still continues, as there are words I vaguely understand but not enough and I need to confirm my understanding. The crunch is that for most of my career I have been an English Language teacher, where the English language is my subject-matter expertise. Too often the thoughts have been, "Why don't I understand? Am I good enough? Am I bright enough? How can I fit in?" Articles on doctoral journeys have stressed that anyone doing a PhD or doctorate needs to accept they are a talented, educated, and skilled beginner—a novice, as such (Cook, 2020)—while those who drop out may do so not because they are not bright enough, but because they are not knowledgeable about the academic world (Hawley, 2010). Feeling like an academic is enhanced through recognition by others, building the feeling of belonging (Emmioğlu et al., 2017).

It is now in hindsight I can see the connections between myself and academia as loose links. These connections are more like wispy cotton threads than solid hemp ropes, as Leigh Reimagined can connect language, theory, and practice to some extent. I feel confident that my actions will be regarded as holding academic rigour and contributing knowledge. However, I still feel like a novice

academic. Over the doctoral journey, recognition by others has been encouraging, but it has also been disheartening as I have struggle to feel like I belonged. Leigh Reimagined is slowly moving along that academic continuum from outsider to vague insider.

Quote 2:

> We've bought into the idea that education is about training and 'success,' defined monetarily, rather than learning to think critically and to challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers.
>
> (Hedges, 2009, p. 104)

The words that struck me in this quote were "the true purpose of education is to make minds" as they align with my vision of teaching and learning: to develop into a better version of oneself. Why would someone do a doctorate? Is the reason status, or financial gain? Maybe it is a burning desire to seek the answer to a question. With Aotearoa New Zealand's attrition rate for doctoral students sitting at about 20 percent (Education Counts, 2026), it might be relevant to consider why I started and why I stayed.

Lesham's study (2021) investigated the identity formations of students while studying for their doctorate. Three different routes arose, with the first being the unmotivated student who did not identify as a researcher and was doing their doctorate for external reasons such as employment requirements. Unmotivated doctoral students do not identify themselves as researchers, which is something I have felt throughout my journey, yet I started for other reasons. Perhaps those applying pressure on the unmotivated student should read Hedge's quote and ponder the purpose of requiring anyone to do a doctorate. The students in Lesham's study experienced frustration and struggles, and the pressure extended to the supervisors to support the students. Crucial to any doctoral student's success is the relationship they have with their supervisor (Sverdlik et al., 2018), so how does the pressure support the wellbeing of a student?

While I am not aligned with this route of the unmotivated student, one moment that spurred me into contemplating a doctorate was a confrontation between myself and a lecturer I will name Dr X. During a moderation workshop I delivered, Dr X was frustrated. The cause of his frustration could have been a number of things: his lack of understanding of what moderation was or why it occurred; his sense of not needing to attend this compulsory workshop; the time the workshop took away from his other tasks; the compulsory nature of the workshop as set by management; or perhaps my delivery. Whatever was the cause of his frustration, it bubbled and came out as a belittling comment as he left the room: "Who are you to tell me what to do? I am a doctor and you … you are nothing." This experience was not the catalyst for my starting my DProfPrac, but he has been in my mind throughout. The true reason for doing a doctorate is that I have a passion to create learning opportunities, be that with students, with educators, or within myself. In Lesham's (2021) terms I would be classed as the highly motivated and goal-oriented student. Linking to quote 2, my doctoral journey was never about money or status; it was not even about challenging myself with research and critical thinking. It has always been the goal to understand how to support educators like Dr X to develop.

Leigh Reimagined has a deeper understanding of teacher education and professional identity. My core being has been widened beyond knowledge of actions to now include theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, my core being has strengthened its focus on education as developing the person first. The rest—money, status, career—is secondary to this goal.

Quote 3:

> The ivory tower of academia is an echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. You look at the world through glass and eventually all you see is yourself.
>
> (Harper, 2010, p. 7)

This is the rebuff given by the director of a prestigious bank to the protagonist of Harper's novel. In this scene, the director is attempting to employ the main character who has only recently started their DPhil at Oxford. This quote is the most poignant of them all. The process of becoming Leigh in 2026 has only echoed louder, as I am a distance student and I do not feel high in a tower while alone in my small office. However, the quote reminds me that I have been using a magnifying glass to research an itty-bitty area of the entire world, and the end result is that I am looking at myself. That basically sums up my doctorate and *Scope* journey. I have been investigating the professional identity development of tertiary educators to improve my practice, and I finish off this public journey by describing myself; my professional identity, not the outcomes of what I have been researching for five years.

Going back to the confronting power-driven comment from Dr X, my identity as a teaching researching practitioner is what I have held as I have been wandering around the "ivory tower of academia." Dr X was right in that I did not know what he had achieved nor did I know who he was. The process of completing doctoral research affects who we become (Knowles, 2016). Leigh Reimagined now stands tall because I know I know. Furthermore, I know the title "Dr" from the qualification comes with sacrifice (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012) and represents extremely hard work but is also an example of someone investigating a tiny bit of the world.

The three quotes I have looked back on were written down to ground me before starting the DProfPrac journey. Each one had an element that supported my focus. They highlighted to me that the journey was about growth, connection, and humbleness. I often see qualifications as just pieces of paper, not to belittle them but because real learning goes beyond the information bouncing about in your head and put down within assessments. Ultimately, it is how you use the knowledge that is of greatest importance, and how that knowledge improves you the most rewarding. Leigh Reimagined is still developing.

Leigh Quadling-Miernik (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5527-5912) is in the final push to the end of her Doctorate of Professional Practice journey. The journey has been looking into professional identity development of tertiary educators, but to be honest, upon reflection, it has been also about her own professional identity development. Her passion holds strong for creating learning opportunities and the motto "whatever gets to the goal with integrity."

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

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.

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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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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.

