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Editorial

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CHALLENGE AND INSPIRE

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Trish Chaplin-Cheyne

Nau mai, haere mai and welcome to this thirteenth issue of *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Learning and Teaching)*. We had a strong response to our call for papers this year. The sixteen contributions to this issue come from tertiary education institutions around the motu and also from industry and organisations in the disability support and education space. The issue's open theme invited authors to address the opportunities, challenges, concepts and critical thinking that inform contemporary learning and teaching practice in higher education within New Zealand.

In 2022, *Scope (Learning and Teaching)* featured a special section on Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence. Following the success of this initiative and the Neuroabilities Symposium held at Otago Polytechnic in 2023, this issue again highlights recent research on neurodivergence in learning and teaching. The number and range of contributions in this area reflect a growing hub of research and align with our goal of building community amongst researchers from an array of New Zealand institutions and a wider international community.

Improving student outcomes

We open this issue with two contributions reflecting on bicultural learning and teaching. First, John Mumford reflects on how the Māori welcome at the start of the academic year left an indelible impression on his teaching. His contribution describes how elements inspired by pōwhiri enriched the teaching of computer connection concepts to ākonga. In their co-authored contribution, David Woodward and colleagues consider how Māori pedagogy might inform their teaching practice. The authors, five of whom identify as Pākehā and one as Māori, set out to investigate what informs their perspectives of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. They propose that tertiary education, while still expressing Pākehā cultural dominance in curricula, is moving to a more culturally inclusive approach in which whanaungatanga/connections with family and community are considered fundamental. Through sharing their own experiences, the authors seek to better understand Māori pedagogy and how Pākehā facilitators can better support Māori learners.

Staying with the focus on ākonga, Willfred Greyling addresses the topical issue of literacy. Despite recent claims that literacy skills are declining among young people in New Zealand, Greyling shows that Waikato Trades Academy learners' reading competence, measured by the Literacy and Numeracy for Adult Assessment Tool (LNAAT), has remained stable for the past seven years. Targeted learners continue to make statistically significant progress in reading and literacy, and Greyling offers recommendations for how to ensure such positive results continue.

Next, Marianne Cherrington, Tavish Sehgal and Margo Ballesta explore using project-based learning along with reflective practice to inspire new student cohorts at Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus to become sustainable practitioners. They report on how their project-based learning exercise aimed to reimagine sustainable practice for the next generation of OPAIC graduates in the context of the businesses and communities they serve. Project management skills also form an essential component of Information Technology at the Southern Institute of Technology. Working with IT learners on a staircasing pathway to degree courses,

John Mumford uses a case study of one lesson to reflect on how learners pass from grasping basic concepts to making connections between project management and their own lives and contexts.

Learning design

In “VARK is a Four-Letter Word,” Amy Benians and Terri Brian urge educators to be cautious before adopting notions of learning styles. The VARK (Visual, Auditory, Reader/Writer, and Kinesthetic) model and similar frameworks, they argue, are not supported by neuroscience and, if conflated with learning ability, may disempower learners by encouraging a fixed self-assessment of their preferences and abilities. Benians and Brian outline a series of more multimodal approaches kaiako can adopt, including positive ways to encourage ākongā to recognise their learning strategies.

When given the opportunity to redevelop a nursing sociology paper, Josie Crawley and Amy Simons turned to narrative pedagogy as a way of expanding and transforming students’ frames of reference and cultural awareness. Their contribution to this issue explains this approach, and describes the strategies and specific exercises the authors used to explore and deconstruct diverse stories with their students. Through narratives, reflective writing and conversations, the authors show how nursing students engaged in the process and became reflective practitioners who approach diversity with respectful curiosity.

To conclude the first part of this issue, Chloe McMenamin and Kristie Cameron from Unitec investigate how students in veterinary and animal science are using digital tools, from ChatGPT to Zoom. Their study encourages educators to be aware of their students’ needs, including the needs of neurodivergent ākongā, and to use a considered range of digital tools using a multimodal design. A guided approach by the educator, they argue, should ensure that learning directives are effective, safe and achievable without digital barriers for people suited to working with animals.

NEURODIVERSITY AND NEURODIVERGENCE

The special section opens with a survey of current understanding of neurodivergence among staff in tertiary education. As neurodivergent educators, Stella Lange and Rachel van Gorp wanted to find out how colleagues across their institution understood, recognised and responded to neurodiversity in their students. The results of their interviews with kaimahi are reported in this issue. They reveal that, while many educators have some knowledge of neurodiversity and adapt their teaching to accommodate individual ākongā needs, others lack a contemporary or informed understanding of neurodivergence. They conclude that work remains to be done to ensure best outcomes for kanorau ā-roro (neurodivergent) ākongā.

Rachel Byars in her contribution then reflects on her own efforts to better understand and acknowledge neurodivergence and neurodiversity. As an experienced educator seeking to learn from others in the neurodivergent space, Byars describes how she moved from learning the terminology and exploring the research on neurodivergent ākongā to taking active steps towards adapting her teaching, guided by colleagues and mentors in a team approach to professional development. Rebecca Gilbertson and Tania Allan Ross also recognise the need to further educate kaiako to support neurodivergent learners. Their article, “Executive Functioning: What it Is and Why it Matters,” outlines the cognitive skills comprised under the heading of executive functioning, and how difficulties with these skills can impact learners. The authors then share the results and strategies gleaned from a workshop discussion on the same topic, drawing on the wealth of personal and professional experiences of practitioners.

Victoria Beckwith explores the Kato Toolkit’s “10 Habits for Phenomenal Educators for Pacific Learners” through a neurodivergent lens. The 10 Habits’ descriptions encourage reflexivity and reflection, which could

challenge and inspire educators who are supporting and teaching neurodivergent learners. Beckwith proposes that relationality, belonging, story-telling, kindness, clarity, trust, and creativity encourage positive engagement for both Pacific and neurodivergent learners and educators. Knowing ourselves and our learners, this article proposes, supports diversity in our organisations and provides inspiration for our communities. Marianne Cherrington's contribution to this section also considers organisational diversity and neurodivergence, especially in tertiary vocational education. Reflections are given from the author's experience in the electrical training industry, and focus on a six-month period culminating in cyclone Gabrielle and two major flood events which created enormous challenges to overcome for learning and teaching. In this context, Cherrington's article suggests ways to enhance the learning, resilience and wellbeing of neurodiverse students.

The next article explores the authors' combined experiences teaching neurodivergent learners in healthcare assistant programmes at one institute of technology in New Zealand. Elizabeth Youard, Lizzy Guest, Carolyn Wilson and Mary Cooper share insights gained from experience on how kaiako can best support the individual needs of neurodivergent learners. They discuss their collective learnings in the context of neurodivergence in vocational education and propose future research opportunities based on our experiences.

We conclude this section with two contributions focusing on autistic ākonga, an underserved area of research in Aotearoa New Zealand. First, Nicolina Newcome presents the experiences of five autistic people in tertiary education. As a counterbalance to published research around autistic students, this piece considers how the tertiary education environment can be a positive space for autistic ākonga. Newcome and her research participants echo other contributors to this issue in calling for educators to see neurodivergent tertiary students not necessarily in terms of challenges and needs, but also in terms of strengths and motivations. To close the issue, we hear from a team of authors from Altogether Autism, a free, national advisory service. In their article, Rachael Wiltshire, Joanne Lawless, Rebekah Corlett, Timothy Folkema and Luella Wheeler describe the development and dissemination of guides for tertiary educators on Autistic learners' needs in Aotearoa New Zealand. Going beyond the provision of advice, the authors consider barriers to support and challenges around engaging staff to use resources once developed. On a positive note, they conclude that many autistic learners' needs can be met with relatively small changes in teaching practice.

As with many of the contributions to *Scope (Learning and Teaching) 13*, the articles in the Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence section offer practical recommendations for kaiako alongside reflections on teaching theory. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Trish Chaplin-Cheyne is the Director of Te Ama Ako | Learning and Teaching Development (LTD), where she is responsible for developing and implementing the learning and teaching strategic direction and workplan to implement the goals and objectives of Otago Polytechnic's strategic plan. Te Ama Ako (LTD) are tasked with ensuring that Otago Polytechnic programmes and courses are designed to best practice standards, that our academic staff have the full range of knowledge and skills needed to facilitate learner success, and that learners enjoy an outstanding experience with Otago Polytechnic. She is the editor for *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Learning and Teaching)* and a member of various polytechnic-wide committees, task groups and panels. Trish joined Otago Polytechnic in 2015, as a Learning Facilitator involved in the Designing for Learner Success initiative. Her areas of particular interest are curriculum and assessment design.

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