

scope

Contemporary Research Topics

work-based learning 7

November 2025

Article

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6007006>

BECOMING THROUGH AKO: HOW LIVED EXPERIENCE SHAPES PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN PRACTICE-BASED EDUCATION

Glenys Ker, Rachel van Gorp and John Gualter

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BECOMING THROUGH AKO: HOW LIVED EXPERIENCE SHAPES PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN PRACTICE-BASED EDUCATION

Glenys Ker, Rachel van Gorp and John Gualter

INTRODUCTION

In today's vocational education environment, how we come to know ourselves as educators is inseparable from how we support others to do the same. This article considers the dynamic and relational nature of professional identity, how it is shaped and interpreted through lived experience, critical reflection, and reciprocal relationships. We believe that at the heart of our practice is ako, a Māori philosophy that sees teaching and learning as an interconnected, evolving process. We position ako as a way of being that transforms the facilitator–learner relationship into a shared journey of growth.

Our work at Capable NZ, a faculty of Otago Polytechnic, is situated within a distinctive work- based learning model. We support adult learners, many of whom bring significant cultural and professional knowledge but have been marginalised by traditional education, to gain qualifications through reflection on real-world experience. As facilitators, we do not deliver knowledge from above; instead, we co-create learning pathways that honour what learners already know and what they seek to become. This process continually reshapes our own professional identities. Through reciprocal engagement, we often transform alongside our learners.

Ako, as expressed by Pere (1982), is a spiritually and relationally grounded Māori concept in which teacher and learner are co-contributors to the learning relationship. Bishop and Glynn (1999) remind us that ako is grounded in the values of whakapapa (our genealogical connections), whanaungatanga (the relationships we build and sustain), and manaakitanga (the care and respect we show one another), reflecting a way of being deeply woven into the worldview of Aotearoa New Zealand. There are parallels with Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy, which analyses and critiques the banking model (in which students are conceived as containers to be filled) and highlights mutual engagement; however, ako carries unique cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions. Ako locates learning in relationships of interdependence, cultural identity, and ancestral connection.

As three Pākehā educators, we acknowledge we are not speaking on behalf of Māori. We aim to walk alongside Indigenous knowledge systems, honouring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and recognising our obligations as tangata Tiriti. We each bring a distinct lived experience: Rachel as a neurodivergent business academic, Glenys as an educator and career practitioner with business experience, and John as a former police investigator turned facilitator. What connects us is a common understanding that learning takes place in our workplaces, communities, and everyday lives. Identity is not fixed but continually shaped through our experiences, relationships and reflection.

This article is structured around our three reflective narratives, each illustrating how ako informs our facilitation and our professional becoming. We then synthesise these insights to offer implications for practice and identity development in work-based and vocational education. We aim to provide both an authentic account of our experiences and a conceptual framework for practitioners seeking to engage with ako in meaningful, culturally responsive ways.

CONTEXT: AKO AND WORK-BASED LEARNING AT CAPABLE NZ

Ako is not a technique we apply at Capable NZ; it is the foundation of how we engage with learners. It calls us to respect the mana of each person, to build trust and reciprocity, and to remain open to being changed by the learning relationship ourselves. As educators, we are not neutral technicians. We are cultural participants, accountable to our context and to the people we serve.

In Capable NZ's Independent Learning Pathway (ILP), learners gain formal qualifications through critical reflection on their professional and personal experience. The role of the facilitator is to co-design a learning journey with their learner, one that validates experience, brings to light tacit knowledge, and links theory to practice. Contemporary theorists of work-based learning (Costley et al., 2010) and lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2006) argue that identity, knowledge, and context are intimately linked.

Our approach has no place for the traditional hierarchy between educator and learner; instead fostering a learning partnership built on mutual respect and shared expertise. Ker (2017) describes effective facilitation as requiring elegant flexibility: the ability to adapt, respond, and pivot with the learner. She labels this the dance of facilitation, where the facilitator knows when to step forward and when to step back, requiring humility and observation. It is less about leading and more about co-travelling. Mezirow (1998) believes that transformative learning is possible when both learners and educators examine their assumptions, reflect critically, and open themselves to new perspectives.

Ako calls on us to be culturally responsive. It asks us to truly see the learner, to understand how they learn, what gets in the way, who they are, and where they come from. It invites us to stay open, to listen, and to value the diverse ways in which knowledge is shaped by culture and experience. We have found that creating safe, inclusive, and affirming spaces is not just good practice; it is essential when working with Māori, Pasifika, and neurodivergent learners. Culturally sustaining education (Berryman, 2018; Gay, 2010) emphasises the importance of fostering relationships that affirm identity and promote community connection. At Capable NZ, we continue to embrace and embed kaupapa Māori values, such as manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and tino rangatiratanga, into the heart of our facilitation.

The following narratives illustrate what ako looks like in our everyday work: how it shapes our questions, influences our roles, and changes us in the process. To visualise these interwoven influences, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of ako-informed professional identity development.

We present three reflective narratives as co-authors and colleagues, each illustrating a different facet of professional identity development through ako. Glenys explores the concept of “fit” focusing on the alignment between facilitator and learner, and how transformative partnerships can be formed across education, career development, business, and elite sport. Rachel's practice is shaped by her lived experience of being neurodivergent, which informs her inclusive and neuro-affirming approach to facilitation in the business qualifications. John brings the depth of his investigative background into his educational practice, using listening, storytelling, and co-reflection as powerful tools to support growth in both learners and facilitators.



Figure 1. Ako-Informed Professional Identity Development. This model illustrates the interconnected elements that shape facilitator identity in practice-based education, with ako at its centre. Each petal represents a key influence: reciprocal learning, reflective practice, cultural responsiveness, and the distinct contributions of Glenys, Rachel, and John. Adapted with AI assistance (ChatGPT, 2025).

This model reflects our shared understanding of facilitator identity development and the foundational role of ako in shaping our evolving practice. Our stories demonstrate that identity in professional practice is dynamic, relational, and co-constructed through lived experience and learning with others. We conclude by reflecting on the shared implications for practice, urging educators to honour lived experience, foster a relational fit, and embrace ako as a transformative model of professional development.

GLENYS: FINDING FIT AND PURPOSE THROUGH PRACTICE

Throughout my four decades as an educator, one question has consistently guided my approach: how do we ensure that learning is meaningful, respectful, and focused on the learner? Early in my secondary school teaching career, I recognised that students were often disengaged with traditional classroom methods. I taught subjects like shorthand, accounting, computing, and economics, and students were often bored, sitting in a hot classroom and not always interested in the topic. I began embedding applied experiences, such as outdoor education, into the curriculum. For example, a unit where students planned and managed a camp enabled them to use budgeting, logistics, and collaborative decision-making in a real-world setting. These experiences showed me that when learning is contextual, relational, and responsive to the student's world, it becomes transformative.

My doctoral research (Ker, 2017) focused on creating an alternative pathway into higher education for experienced adults, one grounded in a learner-first philosophy. The Independent Learning Pathway (ILP) was designed to validate professional and personal experience as legitimate sources of knowledge and to support learners in reflecting critically on that experience to achieve formal qualifications. The framework is constructed on key principles: trust, fit, facilitator-learner relationship, skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to the role of facilitator, as well as a learner-first focus, which places the learner as the expert in their own lives. As facilitators, our role is not to deliver content; it is to facilitate learning. We act as guides, coaches, and reflective partners. The role of facilitator is a relational one, drawing from academic and professional expertise. Facilitators must possess in-depth knowledge of adult learning, critical reflection, and work-based learning, as well as the interpersonal skills to engage with learners with empathy, curiosity, and cultural humility. Our multiple identities (what we as facilitators bring with us to the relationship) help build credibility and connection with learners who may have felt alienated by what they perceive as traditional educational spaces.

The concept of fit refers to the alignment between facilitator and learner: how we connect, communicate, and adapt to one another's style and context. Fit is not accidental; it is co-created through listening, observing, trust, and mutual respect. Sometimes this may mean adjusting our language, pace, or ways of questioning. It may be about disclosing something about our own learning journey. Sharing my story, when appropriate, can bridge the perceived gap between facilitator and learner. It signifies that I, too, am in a process of becoming, and that vulnerability and reflection are shared practices.

Many of the learners I support are Māori, Pasifika, or from neurodiverse communities. Their experiences continually challenge me to reflect on my assumptions. One Māori learner completing a degree in applied management used her portfolio to revitalise a whānau-based enterprise grounded in whenua and whakapapa. Her vision of leadership was collective, intergenerational, and anchored in cultural responsibility. Working with her reminded me to slow down, ask more questions to understand, create space for wānanga, and recognise the role of whānau in the learning process. These are not adjustments to content. They are relational commitments to ako.

My practice is also informed by kaupapa Māori principles, including manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and tino rangatiratanga, as well as culturally responsive pedagogy (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). These frameworks reinforce that education is never neutral. When we uphold mana, affirm cultural knowledge, and create relational accountability, we help shift education from an extractive process to a collaborative one. This supports not only learner transformation but also facilitator transformation.

Working with neurodivergent learners has deepened my understanding of the systemic barriers many face. One athlete with dyslexia and ADHD had spent years telling themselves they might as well stick to playing hockey, as tertiary education was not for them. By shifting this internal deficit thinking to a mode of engagement using oral storytelling, visual mapping, and reflective discussion, he was able to connect his professional experience as an athlete to academic theory. When he completed his portfolio and oral assessment, he said, "This is the first time I've seen my experience as valid." That is the essence of ako: shared recognition, mutual growth.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) reinforces the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I invite learners to set their own goals for their study timetable, define how they want feedback to occur, and choose learning methods that resonate with them. These discussions encourage a shift in identity. They begin to see themselves as knowledgeable, skilled, and reflective practitioners.

Another element of my work focuses on supporting elite athletes as they transition away from high-performance sport, understanding that sport is not just a career; it is a core part of their identity. Leaving that world requires what Ebaugh (1988) called role exit—a redefinition of the self. I work with athletes to identify the transferable skills embedded in their sporting life, such as leadership, resilience, and strategy, and reframe these as assets in new domains. My colleagues and I have presented this model nationally (Gualter et al., 2024) as an example of how education can honour alternative pathways and identities.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model helps athletes reflect on past performance, draw connections to theory, and then apply new insights in unfamiliar contexts, such as governance, business, or community leadership. As they construct new narratives, I witness profound shifts in their sense of identity. I walk alongside them, offering critical questions, validation, and language that gives shape to what they already know.

Across all these contexts, including education, business, career development, and sport, I see my role not as static but evolving. I am continually learning from the learners I work with. My facilitation is grounded in the principles of transformation, reflection, and *ako*. It is not about knowing more. It is about creating an environment where knowledge can be recognised, named, and applied with integrity.

RACHEL: OWNING MY NEURODIVERGENCE, EMPOWERING OTHERS

My journey as an educator has been shaped by the often challenging process of recognising and understanding my neurodivergence, and how I understand and see the world. For many years, I believed I was not smart enough. It was not until later in life that I was diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, and Irlen Syndrome. Having a diagnosis allowed me to make sense of my earlier struggles with learning and enabled me to begin reframing my identity as both a learner and an educator. As I came to understand myself better, I also began to rethink how I could support others to learn. On reflection, I was already doing this in other environments, for example, as a gym instructor. I was always aware that clients needed various ways and opportunities to get fit and feel good about themselves. A one-way-for-all approach did not work.

In my research on neurodiversity in vocational education (van Gorp, 2022), I found that many neurodivergent learners had internalised deficit-based narratives. Many saw themselves as failing students rather than as capable individuals whose inflexible systems had failed, which mirrored my own experience. Embracing my neurodivergence has become a foundation of my practice, allowing me to connect with learners not through sympathy but through shared understanding.

This connection is supported by the research of Clouder et al. (2020), who argue that neurodivergent learners often experience institutional exclusion and stigma. When systems privilege linear, standardised pathways, they neglect the flexibility that defines human understanding. In my experience, change begins with a story. Sharing my journey has helped break the silence that surrounds learning differences. When I say, "I used to feel dumb, too," many students respond with relief. That mutual recognition softens shame. We laugh, reflect, and begin to shift the frame from deficit to strength.

I now facilitate through a neuro-affirming and trauma-informed lens. Drawing on Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), I design teaching and learning environments that treat learner variability as the norm. I provide multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and expression. This is not just an inclusive strategy; it is ethically essential. Many learners carry invisible scars from their personal and educational experiences. As Carello and Butler (2014) explain, trauma-informed teaching recognises that learning environments must be emotionally safe, especially for those who have felt excluded, judged, or unseen.

In partnership with learners, I co-develop tools that affirm agency. I like to use a "strengths storyboard," for instance, where a learner visually maps key learning experiences across their work, community, and personal life. Another is a "learning preference matrix," which helps learners identify the sensory, social, and cognitive conditions that support or hinder engagement. For example, one learner who was overwhelmed with noise and task requirements discovered that working in short, focused bursts improved her confidence. As she said, "It feels like I get to choose, not just keep up." Learning about new strategies is fun, and learners often share their own ideas with me.

These shifts in practice often lead to deep and meaningful shifts in identity. Learners who once saw education as 'not being for them' begin to describe themselves as capable and purposeful. These revolutions are powerful for learners, including Māori, Pasifika, disabled, and neurodivergent learners, who have too often been asked to adapt to systems that were not designed for them. When we become learner-centred and focus on the learner's lived experiences and acknowledge their ways of knowing, ako moves beyond being an educational concept to become an ethical stance.

Completing my own Master of Professional Practice reinforced this understanding. I was initially reluctant to engage in the programme, thinking it was for others, but I soon discovered that it was also a reclamation of my own learning identity. Navigating academic systems while managing dyslexia, ADHD, and Irlen Syndrome gave me firsthand insight into the value of relationships, affirmation, and flexibility. Being genuinely understood and supported to succeed in ways that recognised how I learn was a transformative experience. It taught me that identity work is emotional work. It is also relational and political.

This journey led me to develop a teaching practice that integrates Universal Design for Learning, trauma-informed pedagogy, and inclusive design. I share this work through educator workshops, a Neurodiversity Community of Practice, and an annual symposium. These initiatives aim to change not just practice but mindset. Inclusion requires a shift in how we understand knowledge, learning, and identity.

As an educator, I no longer aim to fit into inherited models. I aim to remake them. My practice is embedded in reciprocity, care, and cultural humility. I bring my whole self into the learning space, and I invite learners to do the same. In this shared process of becoming, ako is alive. It is a living, relational practice that honours the complexity and strength of each learner's journey and my own.

JOHN: FROM DETECTIVE TO FACILITATOR, LISTENING FOR LEARNING

Before working in tertiary education as an assessor and facilitator, I spent over two decades in the police force. During that time, I led complex investigations, managed operational teams, and trained new detectives. Over time, I realised that what energised me most was not the authority or the action, but the chance to mentor and develop others. This realisation drew me into adult education, and eventually to Capable NZ. Transferring from investigator to educator required me to rethink my professional identity and to unlearn some of the ways I had previously positioned myself.

Pursuing qualifications in adult learning provided me with new insights into how people grow, change, and reflect. I enjoyed engaging with theories such as Knowles and colleagues' andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015), which reminded me that adult learners are mostly self-directed and experience-rich, and they will only learn deeply if the subject matter is of interest to them. But it was the realisation that ako could guide my practice that transformed how I now see my role. As a detective, I was trained to gather information, find answers, and make judgments, but as a facilitator, I listen differently. I focus on co-construction, empathy, and storytelling.

Many of the learners I support come from high-pressure, practical fields, including emergency services, defence, aviation, and elite sport. These learners often arrive unsure of their academic ability, yet with a lifetime of professional expertise. My task is to help them see that their lived experiences already contain the seeds of knowledge. Their challenge is not a lack of insight, but a lack of recognition of their insight as valid. That is where ako enters—not as a strategy I apply to them, but as a relational process we engage in together.

Storytelling is a key part of my practice. I often share a story from my time in the police, where I led a multi-agency operation that required split-second decisions, ethical clarity, and team trust. After telling the story, I invite learners to reflect on a parallel experience in their career and then support them to analyse it through a theoretical lens, such as adaptive leadership or moral reasoning. One learner, a senior paramedic, told me, "I didn't realise my practice involved theory until I saw it in your story, which then helped me make sense of mine."

These conversations model ako in action. We both bring knowledge, and through discussion and engagement, we both grow.

My background in cognitive interviewing has also shaped how I facilitate reflection. I ask learners to recall significant professional moments, then prompt them to describe what they saw, felt, and did in those moments. I might ask, “What guided your decision in that moment?” or “What principles were you drawing from without even knowing it?” These questions surface tacit knowledge. They help learners make the invisible visible, enabling connections between practice and theory to emerge organically.

Flexibility is essential. I enter each session with a structure in mind, but I let the learner’s story shape the path we take. My training as a jazz musician supports this. In jazz, you listen, respond, and improvise within a framework. Facilitation is much the same. There is rhythm, tone, and flow, but no fixed script. The learner’s story is the melody, and my role is to accompany, not dominate.

In addition to conversation, I use scenario-based reflection and journaling. I ask learners to revisit real events and consider them from new theoretical or ethical perspectives. Over time, these journal entries become evidence of learning and a springboard for academic writing. This practice aligns with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, where experience is the starting point for reflection, conceptualisation, and action. It is also deeply aligned with ako, which recognises the learner’s world as a legitimate and powerful site of knowledge.

My own Master of Professional Practice research focused on how Defence Force learners navigate the ILP. What emerged from that work, and what I continue to observe daily, is that transformation happens when learners see themselves differently. One senior military learner initially asked, “is my experience academic enough?” Through deep reflection and validation, he realised that his leadership decisions were not only significant but also grounded in complex frameworks. By the time he presented his portfolio, he had moved from self-doubt to confidence. He was no longer just describing his work; he was also explaining it. He was teaching from it. Witnessing that shift reshaped my own identity. I stopped seeing myself as a former detective who had moved into education. I began seeing myself as a facilitator of insight.

In every interaction, I focus on the learner as the hero of the story. I am there as a mentor and companion, helping them uncover what they already know. This approach reframes learning from transmission to transformation. It honours lived experience and recognises that we become educators not by mastering theory alone, but by entering into authentic, reciprocal relationships.

Ako is the frame that holds this work, acknowledging that learning is a shared experience, authority is relational, and growth is a mutual process. As learners grow into reflective, confident, and academically proficient practitioners, I grow alongside them. Their stories, insights, and challenges shape who I am becoming as an educator. That, to me, is the heart of ako in action.

LEARNER IDENTITY: SHIFTS, AGENCY AND BECOMING

At Capable NZ, we work with learners who often arrive feeling unsure about their academic potential. Many have been successful in their professional lives, yet they carry doubts shaped by past educational experiences. Some have never considered themselves learners. For others, education was something they had to survive rather than something they could thrive in. In these early moments, our role is to create a relational space where identity can shift safely and meaningfully. That space is grounded in ako.

We approach each learner as a whole person. We do not just look at their career or qualifications. We also explore their cultural background, community roles, personal experiences, and values. These become central to the learning process, which aligns with the concept of “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992), which recognises

the everyday knowledge that learners bring from their homes, workplaces, and communities as powerful resources for education. When we start with what learners already know and who they already are, we affirm identity rather than require its erasure.

Facilitating this shift involves more than encouragement. It requires an approach grounded in recognition, where learners are seen, heard, and respected. As Williams, Berger, and McClendon (2005) suggest, inclusive excellence in education is not just about access, it is about fostering environments where diverse learners can succeed on their own terms. At Capable NZ, success is not narrowly defined by grades or conformity to academic conventions, but rather by growth, insight, and the ability to identify and apply one's learning with confidence and integrity.

These identity shifts are often audible in the language learners begin to use. Phrases such as, “I didn’t think I could do this” are gradually replaced by “I’m proud of what I’ve achieved” or “Now I understand how I learn.” One Māori learner described completing their degree as enhancing their mana, not just for themselves but for their whānau. Others have spoken about finally feeling legitimate in their professional fields. These are more than reflective statements; they are declarations of becoming.

The concept of becoming positions identity not as a fixed state but as a continuous, relational process. Wenger’s (1998) notion of learning as participation in a community of practice reinforces this. Identity is shaped by what we do, who we do it with, and how we perceive ourselves in relation to others. In our context, the ILP facilitates this by allowing learners to narrate, reflect, and analyse their professional journeys. Through that process, they are not only demonstrating knowledge. They are actively reshaping their sense of self.

Critical reflection plays a vital role in this process. Mezirow (1991, 1998) emphasises that transformation occurs when learners examine the assumptions that shape their perspectives. At Capable NZ, we ask learners to engage in that level of reflection, which can often be difficult, even confronting, particularly when it involves revisiting past failures or experiences that have limited your identity. However, when learners are supported to reflect within a safe, relational space, they begin to reclaim their narratives. They shift from being recipients of education to active meaning-makers.

Ako reinforces that learning is not a solitary act. It is co-constructed, emotionally situated, and embedded in relationships. Our openness as facilitators helps create the conditions for learner transformation. When we share something of ourselves, ask meaningful questions, and stay present to what is emerging, we invite learners to step into new possibilities for who they are and who they are becoming.

In this way, the transformation of learner identity is not incidental but intentional and central to our practice. It reminds us that education is about connection, not just content. It is about the courage to see oneself differently, and to be seen. It is also about realising that learning can be a space of belonging, power, and possibility.

PROFESSIONAL BECOMING: IDENTITY AS A PRACTICE

Our professional identities, like those of our learners, are not set in stone. They evolve through our relationships, values, and the experiences that shape our work. At Capable NZ, becoming is embedded in our practice, not separate from it. Each facilitation, reflection, and learner story challenges us to grow. This reciprocal process reflects ako as a relational way of working. We are not simply delivering education; we are learning alongside those we support.

Dialogue and collaboration with colleagues have been essential to this growth. Our shared conversations form a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), supporting reflection, innovation, and a shared sense of purpose. Through this, our distinct approaches have influenced one another. Glenys’s emphasis on facilitator-learner fit, Rachel’s neuro-affirming practice, and John’s use of storytelling all reflect a commitment to inclusive, relational learning.

Becoming a facilitator in this context requires more than content knowledge. It calls for presence, cultural responsiveness, and humility. We draw on our diverse professional backgrounds not as add-ons, but as integral to our approach to connecting with learners. Whether through business, sport, policing, neurodiversity, or career coaching, our past experiences inform how we listen, support, and respond. Transformation, as Mezirow (1998) reminds us, requires critical self-reflection. But in our experience, it is also deeply relational. Ako invites us to be changed by the learning process. In modelling reflection and vulnerability, we offer learners a space to do the same. In this way, we continually learn from and with one another. We have come to understand professional identity as profoundly personal and inherently collective. When we engage in ako, we offer parts of ourselves, our failures, insights, and hopes to support someone else's growth. In doing so, we change too.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

From our shared journeys as facilitators, the following practices have emerged as central to learner success and our professional development:

- Recognise lived experience as expertise. Learners bring valuable knowledge shaped by their work, culture, and life experiences. Validating this is essential for meaningful learning.
- Build trust through relational connection. Getting to know the learner's world and context allows us to tailor our approach and foster mutual respect.
- Be open to reciprocal learning. Sharing aspects of our own stories, when appropriate, creates connection and models vulnerability.
- Facilitate reflective and narrative practice. Structured reflection helps surface tacit knowledge and link experience to theory.
- Understand identity as co-constructed. Learning is not just about acquiring knowledge. It is about becoming. Our identities, like those of our learners, evolve through the process.

These practices reflect ako in action. They support inclusive, learner-centred education and remind us that teaching is not a technical act. It is a relational one. When we honour who learners are and stay open to who we are becoming, education becomes a shared journey of transformation. By viewing professional identity as an evolving practice rather than a fixed status, we contribute to a deeper understanding of what it means to “become” an educator in a work-based learning context. Ultimately, we hope that sharing our journeys inspires others to value their lived experiences as integral to their ongoing professional identity and growth.

AI statement

We acknowledge that 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.

Rachel van Gorp is an accomplished Principal Lecturer with a wide-ranging background, including experience in banking, personal training, massage therapy, business ownership, mentorship, and volunteering. As a member of the Otago Polytechnic School of Business, Rachel brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to her undergraduate teaching programmes.

Rachel is a dedicated advocate for neurodiverse individuals in vocational education and serves as the chair of the Neurodiversity Community of Practice. She is committed to promoting inclusion and equal opportunities for individuals with diverse learning abilities.

Completing her Master of Professional Practice reflects her focus on the essential topic of Neurodiversity in Vocational Education: facilitating success. With her unique combination of experience, Rachel can bring a practical perspective to her teaching, engaging students in real-world scenarios and helping them to develop the skills they need to succeed in their future careers. Her dedication to vocational education has made her a highly respected member of the academic community, and her commitment to promoting neurodiversity has a significant impact on the lives of her learners and the wider community.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9407-0143>

Glenys Ker is a highly experienced work-based learning and professional practice facilitator and assessor, drawing on an extensive and highly successful background as a teacher and career practitioner at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in both university and polytechnic settings. She is also an active researcher in the field of work-based learning, integrating her research into the development of facilitators of independent learning.

Glenys is the primary architect of the independent learning pathway (ILP) approach to qualifications offered through Capable NZ, Otago Polytechnic's work-based and practice-based learning school. Glenys is an experienced leadership and management practitioner in multiple educational contexts, including academic and service departments, as well as the leadership of independent learning programmes. In her 20 years of experience in this field, she has worked with and supported many athletes, for which she is hugely grateful and has learned a great deal.

Glenys has co-authored a book on her work with her colleague, Dr Heather Carpenter, titled *Facilitating Independent Learning in Tertiary Education – New Pathways to Achievement*.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9665-8752>

John Gualter is an experienced academic mentor, facilitator, assessor, and researcher at Capable NZ, Otago Polytechnic, with a strong background in work-based learning, transformative learning, and learner identity development. With over 13 years of facilitating undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in applied management and professional practice, John brings a unique blend of strategic thinking, cultural responsiveness, and creative insight to his work.

His earlier career in policing and investigations, combined with qualifications in management, music, adult education, and bicultural competency, underpins his ability to guide diverse learners through complex educational journeys. He has supported over 600 adult learners, led national programme cohorts, and partnered with organisations such as the NZ Defence Force, Air New Zealand, and Waka Kotahi.

John is a published researcher and accomplished jazz musician who integrates reflective and relational pedagogy in his facilitation and artistic work. His current Master of Professional Practice inquiry explores learner identity, facilitation, and transformation within Capable NZ's Independent Learning Pathway (ILP).

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