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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY AND OUR NON-TRADITIONAL TERTIARY STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This article represents research conducted within the context of the Aotearoa New Zealand tertiary education sector, with a specific focus on understanding academic self-efficacy experiences and perspectives of teachers and learning support staff who work with non-traditional students. Academic self-efficacy (ASE) is grounded in Albert Bandura's (1977) model of self-efficacy. Non-traditional students represent a distinct cohort, defined by socio-demographic factors that differentiate them from their younger counterparts. Chung et al. (2014) noted that the term non-traditional student is often used interchangeably with "mature student," typically referring to individuals whose educational journeys diverge from a more conventional path. Age is frequently cited as a common criterion for identifying non-traditional students, with 25 years and older serving as a widely accepted benchmark (Beckworth, 2023).

This study is informed by the researcher's professional interactions with students aged 25 years and older within the Aotearoa tertiary environment. These interactions led to the hypothesis that the academic success of non-traditional students is significantly shaped and underpinned by teacher and learning support staff knowledge of self-efficacy; specifically, how Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy along with early, incremental, task-specific achievements, lay the foundation for future academic success.

BACKGROUND

Non-traditional students who engage in tertiary education later in life often enter environments that are historically designed for traditional students; in other words, students who transition directly from secondary school to tertiary study (Stamou et al., 2024). These learning environments potentially marginalise non-traditional students and, however inadvertently, fail to acknowledge the distinct learning needs of this group. In Aotearoa, these non-traditional students include Māori and Pacific Peoples and an increasing number of international students (Scott & Ali, 2024).

In Aotearoa, enrolment rates for students aged 25 years and over, as of 2024, were twice the OECD average (Scott & Ali, 2024), reflecting a trend toward lifelong learning and career transitions, particularly in the post–COVID-19 era. These enrolments span a range of qualification levels, including foundation, degree, and postgraduate programmes. Non-traditional students bring a wealth of experience, life skills, and practical knowledge to the learning environment,

enriching classroom discussions and contributing to a culturally diverse and inclusive academic culture. Non-traditional students also contribute differing perspectives to the understanding of academic self-efficacy; therefore, it is imperative that their unique learning needs are recognised to enable their success.

Self-efficacy is a central concept in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete specific tasks. Such beliefs stem from and are shaped by mastery experiences, emotional responses, social persuasion, and vicarious experiences. These sources do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact dynamically within the learning environment. Pearman et al. (2021) note that individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to exhibit greater resilience, perseverance, and motivation when confronted with a task. In contrast, those with lower self-efficacy are more likely to avoid complex or challenging tasks. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2022) further emphasise that self-efficacy significantly impacts student effort, persistence, and academic achievement. Academic self-efficacy focuses on the context of the student within the academic environment, including formative and summative assessment, and their integration into the broader tertiary learning environment. It is considered a key predictor of academic success, second only to individual ability (Wiederkehr et al., 2015).

However, non-traditional students face unique challenges that can impact their academic self-efficacy. These challenges align with Bandura's (1977) sources of self-efficacy and include family responsibilities, connections and support (social persuasion), imposter syndrome (physiological/emotional feedback), navigating an unfamiliar academic culture, and overcoming previous negative educational experiences (mastery experiences and vicarious experiences).

The effectiveness of supporting academic self-efficacy in non-traditional students depends on the knowledge and understanding of teachers, learning support staff, and tertiary institutions. The ability of these key stakeholders to foster learning environments that promote academic self-efficacy, through encouragement and culturally responsive teaching, is crucial (Khine & Nielsen, 2022).

METHODS

The research question that guided this study was: What are tertiary teachers' and learning support staff (LSS) understandings of the role of academic self-efficacy in the success of non-traditional students and how do they attend to this in their practice?

The research employed a mixed method, reflective approach and involved 32 participants who provided feedback via an online survey. The survey targeted both tertiary teachers and learning support staff currently working within the Aotearoa university and polytechnic environment. An anonymous online survey was employed as it provided both broader quantitative data (for example, Likert scale and demographic questions), and narrower qualitative responses (for example, to open-ended questions on personal experience and opinion), to analyse participants' practices for supporting academic self-efficacy.

Participants

The 32 participants surveyed included 20 Learning Support staff (identified below as 'LSS' with a number) and 12 lecturers or teachers (identified as 'T'). The average professional experience of participants in these roles was between six and seven years. The participants held a range of academic qualifications: doctorate degree (n = 4), master's degree (n = 18), bachelor's degree (n = 4), postgraduate certificate/diploma (n = 4) and adult teaching certificate (n = 2).

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Massey University (Aotearoa New Zealand) Human Ethics Committee. Consent to participate in this research was gained through the teachers' institutions academic research committee and learning support staff organisations' committee approval process.

Experience range (years)	Number of participants (n)
0–2	2
3–5	14
6–10	9
11+	7
Average experience (years)	6–7

Table 1: Participants' teaching and learning support staff experience.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and ideas within participants' responses. Codes were generated inductively from the data, grounded in the language used by participants. Direct quotations served to anchor the analysis in the participants' voices and ensure that interpretations remained closely aligned with the research question's focus. Analysis emerged from manual data coding using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word. This thematic analysis addressed the main research question in two parts:

a. what are tertiary teachers' and LSS understandings of the role of academic self-efficacy on the success of non-traditional students?

b. how do they attend to non-traditional student success in their practice?

FINDINGS

Finding one: Most participants share a developed understanding of academic self-efficacy and their non-traditional students

Twenty-nine participants indicated that they had a "good" to "excellent" understanding of academic self-efficacy leading into the survey. Three participants indicated that they had "none" to "limited" knowledge of academic self-efficacy leading into the survey. Two of these participants recorded that they had been in their teaching role for no longer than two years and had a limited knowledge of academic self-efficacy and their non-traditional students, one teacher had no prior knowledge of this topic and indicated they had been in the role between three to five years.

Fourteen participants "strongly agreed" that they currently had the knowledge to help develop non-traditional students' academic self-efficacy. Fourteen respondents "somewhat agree[d]" with this statement while three participants "somewhat disagree[d]" and one participant "strongly disagree[d]" that they had the knowledge to help develop non-traditional students' academic self-efficacy.

Twenty-nine out of 32 participants answered the question, "What role does self-efficacy play in your non-traditional students' learning?" Participants provided a variety of responses, for example:

> "It helps them believe in themselves and their ability to take on academic tasks" (T1).

> "It's foundational—either a great enabler when present or a barrier when yet to be developed." (LSS5)

Finding two: Academic self-efficacy is a catalyst for transformational learning in non-traditional students

Participant responses highlighted the transformational aspects of academic self-efficacy for their non-traditional students. Transformational learning in this context involves the process of empowering a student so they can reflect on their own position within the learning environment and analyse personal assumptions and beliefs in order to thrive academically. The finding suggests participants believe that positive academic self-efficacy development enables non-traditional students to reshape and strengthen their academic identity, and more effectively navigate systemic academic barriers, which in turn supports continued growth in their academic confidence. Overall findings indicate that participants believe developing academic self-efficacy also influences motivation, resilience, autonomy, and personal growth.

The process, one participant says, is "Different for different ākonga. For some they arrive with existing academic self-efficacy, for others they need reconciling, or having their sense of self rebuilt over time" (T7). Some participants highlighted that positive academic self-efficacy provides a means of personal change. One participant stated that positive academic self-efficacy: "supports motivation and hence engagement, persistence and resilience, an ability and willingness to seek support as required, supports mana Motuhake and ako, long term success and achievement" (T12).

Finding three: Academic self-efficacy in non-traditional students is attended to through relationship-based, reflective practice

Data indicated that teachers and learning support staff aim to foster confidence, autonomy and positive academic self-efficacy by building genuine and consistent, relationship-based partnerships with non-traditional students while creating and facilitating meaningful, reflective, supportive learning environments. Participants were asked to consider what they believed to be the most important factor that influences the academic self-efficacy development of their non-traditional students. Ten participants favoured the concept of ako, or reciprocal teaching and learning practice, when supporting academic self-efficacy in their non-traditional students. These participants often used the word "holistic" to describe this process. Eleven participants indicated that they favoured one-on-one mentoring practice when supporting academic self-efficacy. As highlighted by one participant: "There is confidence grown through group discussions, but most appreciated is the one-to-one discussions with kaiako during or after class" (T4).

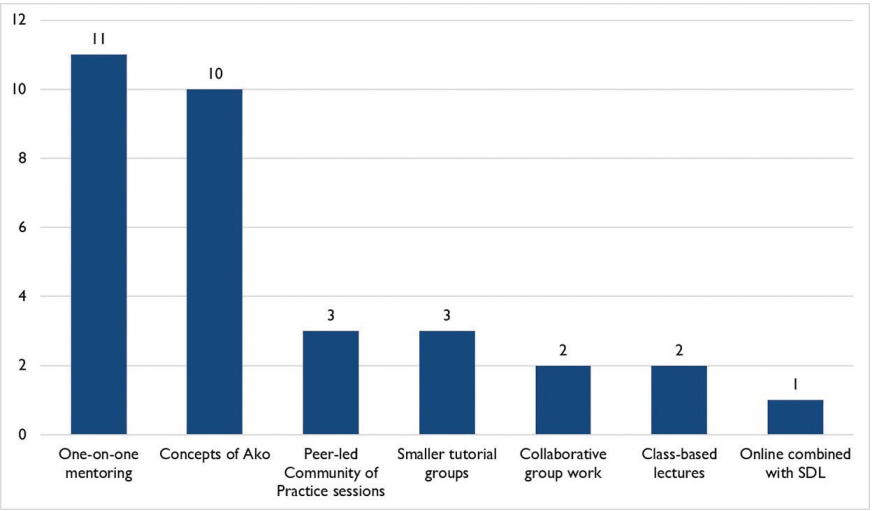


Figure 1. Learning concepts that influence academic self-efficacy in non-traditional students.

DISCUSSION

Understanding of academic self-efficacy

Based on the data from finding one and participant personal academic achievement, it is important not to assume that a higher level of academic qualification naturally implies that teachers at tertiary level have a foundational knowledge of the sources of academic self-efficacy, especially if teachers and learning support staff are new to the tertiary environment. Adjustment to new teaching philosophies and cultures can involve a protracted process of developing and understanding teaching values (Masterson & Edwards, 2022).

Implications for practice include developing the inclusion and further understanding of Bandura's sources of self-efficacy within adult teaching qualifications and professional development. This inclusion by institutions should also integrate te ao Māori and Pacific Peoples' views on this key area of academic development. Participants also revealed that their non-traditional students included a proportion of international students. This potentially broadens the scope for addressing academic self-efficacy in not just a bicultural learning environment, but also a multicultural one. Cultural educational differences within the Aotearoa tertiary environment significantly impact the ASE of non-traditional students and the understanding of teachers and learning support staff.

Cultural diversity within Aotearoa's tertiary education context may also influence the operation of Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy. Variations in physiological responses, vicarious and mastery experiences, and the degree to which social persuasion is naturally integrated within a culture into learning processes, can each shape how non-traditional students develop academic self-efficacy.

Responses suggests that although most participants are comfortable with the concept of academic self-efficacy, some are less certain about the adult learning-based strategies required to intentionally build it amongst their non-traditional students. These responses may also indicate that for some teachers and learning support staff, the promotion of ASE comes in the form of offering encouragement and support while not consciously linking to Bandura's mastery

experiences, vicarious learning, or social persuasion (Gale et al., 2021). The diverse examples of understanding and application within the data align with Karim et al.'s (2021) findings that as the education practitioner develops their own teaching and facilitating experiences and self-efficacy, it allows a deeper level of confidence and a willingness to understand how professional practice can be developed, leading to improved ASE and achievement among the practitioner's students.

What participant teachers and learning support staff understand about ASE in relation to their non-traditional students is very much steeped in their own belief in effectively developing teaching and facilitating tasks that are tailored to the non-traditional student (Watson & Marschall, 2019). At times, this can be seen as teaching practice that deviates from the norm when focusing on the non-traditional student within the adult teaching process.

Transformational learning

Transformational Learning Theory in the context of the second finding involves enabling teachers, learning support staff, and non-traditional students to reflect on their own position within the learning environment, critically reflect on assumptions and personal beliefs, engage in discourse within a peer group, and integrate new perspectives into the learning experience. These new perspectives can lead to personal growth and change within the learning environment (Mezirow, 1997).

The literature supports academic self-efficacy as not just a belief in an individual's academic capabilities, but a dynamic interaction of social and emotional factors (Gebresilase et al., 2025; Percy, 2017). How participants understand this topic indicates that developing ASE for non-traditional students empowers the student to rethink and adjust individual perceptions of the tertiary learning environment and engage in their learning journey at a deeper level. Gebresilase et al. (2025) state that ASE in this context also mediates the relationship between teacher, student, and academic achievement.

Early experiences within the school system can significantly shape academic self-efficacy for non-traditional students, particularly when they enter tertiary study for the first time. Wiederker et al. (2015) argue that the development of ASE at both primary and secondary school, functions as a strong predictor of academic success, especially in subjects such as mathematics and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Negative learning experiences during this key period can be enough to impact perceptions of further education. Key understandings demonstrated by participants in the present study, highlighted the transformational potential of academic self-efficacy for non-traditional students within the tertiary environment. Participants described developing non-traditional students' self-efficacy as foundational to developing motivation, resilience, autonomy, and growth within both an academic and personal development context.

The development of "persistence" and "resilience" emerged as a common theme across the dataset, with early intervention and targeted support playing a pivotal role in enabling non-traditional students to navigate the initial stages of tertiary study. Pearman et al. (2021) similarly argue that elevated academic self-efficacy builds the perseverance and resilience required to manage academic challenges, which is a pattern often observed among non-traditional students entering tertiary study for the first time. Developing resilience is a direct response to being persistent within the tertiary environment and connects to Bandura's mastery experiences source. Passing assessments and overcoming anxieties related to failure and workload management can be perceived as incremental successes that can influence the likelihood of the non-traditional student

engaging in the task long enough for them to achieve mastery. Huang and Kou (2025), state that mastery experiences are, in fact, the most dominant among Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy as they provide tangible evidence that ongoing success is possible.

Academic self-efficacy as a transformative force for non-traditional students is deeply woven into participant responses. This was reflected in the frequent use of key words within the responses such as "support," "confidence," "motivation," and "growth." Participants described practices that encouraged risk-taking and persistence, noting that when these practices were introduced early in the term and facilitated effectively, they contributed to the development of academic self-efficacy and broader personal growth. In this way, early scaffolded experiences based on the unique needs of the non-traditional student appeared to link initial academic perceptions with the development of life-long learning.

Relationship-based, reflective practice

Finding three highlights that teacher and learning support participants use several key strategies to attend to academic self-efficacy in their practice. These strategies are primarily driven and underpinned by relationship-based, open reflective practices. Some participants, for example, favoured reciprocal teaching and learning and peer-led communities of practice. These approaches enable non-traditional students to draw on and apply their existing life skills, including collaboration, communication, active listening, and time management skills. Within the initial stages of establishing these strategies, participants did highlight the need for informed and well-practiced facilitation skills. Skilled facilitation employed by the teacher and academic support staff ensures that less confident non-traditional students do not feel isolated and unheard.

This finding links to the physiological elements of Bandura's (1977) framework, which highlights that emotional responses to the learning environment are a key component to developing and understanding ASE. These initial physiological responses relate to the ability to manage the overwhelming effects of stress and anxiety, especially when presented with deadlines, the complexities of technology, and finding one's place in the tertiary environment. This is especially so for the non-traditional student who may already be experiencing low confidence, low self-esteem and, potentially, dealing with imposter syndrome. Due to the unique stage of their learning journey, this group can be more sensitive to positive and negative interactions within the learning environment due to external pressures that come with being a non-traditional student. Landberg and Langdon (2026) refer to these external influences as "general realities of life" (p. 6). With this in mind, teachers and learning support staff are in a position where they can facilitate and promote ASE through a deep level of understanding of the concept itself, their non-traditional students, and the place of collective learning (Meijer et al., 2020).

Communities of practice (COP) that assist in the development of ASE in non-traditional students within smaller groups can be self-directed or initiated by teachers and student learning support. These COP are consistent with the concepts of reciprocal learning (ako) that involve smaller group environments, where, if appropriate, learning is guided by the tutor or academic support staff. Bandura's (1977) vicarious experiences are being utilised here and, as identified by participants, can be a powerful element in strategies to develop ASE. However, not all non-traditional students thrive within a COP environment, and this emerged as a divergent theme within the data. Some prefer to work independently and rely on their own capacity to navigate the tertiary environment. This independence can be both positive and negative, depending on

academic outcomes and previous experiences working within the COP space. Comparatively, research undertaken by Beckworth (2023) relates that some non-traditional students are more transient within the tertiary environment compared to their traditional counterparts. This is due to some non-traditional students having other responsibilities external to the learning space that require developing minimal attachment to 'place' as a learning resource and minimal attachment to the group process.

Relationship-based learning is a key component to developing ASE in non-traditional students. It is at the forefront of an equitable learning and teaching philosophy that has the student at the centre of the Aotearoa tertiary learning environment. This student-centred approach was a recurring theme that ran through participant responses. Frequently used words such as "support," "confidence," "mana," and "engagement" appeared when participants reflected on their interactions with non-traditional students. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy source of social persuasion is very much a key component in the relationship-based development of ASE. Effective social persuasion built on trust, relationship-based interactions, and the credibility of staff and institution, can strengthen the non-traditional student's belief that they are capable of succeeding within the tertiary environment. Timely and meaningful affirmation within this interaction is ideally supported by a genuine understanding of the non-traditional student within the tertiary environment. Relational dynamics between teacher, learning support staff, institution, and the non-traditional student, underpin the sensitivity and understanding needed to support the development and maintenance of academic success (Situmorang, 2022). Social persuasion also sits within the student's immediate social sphere, where family, peers, and the wider social group all play a part in developing and supporting academic self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

The non-traditional student is a key element of the tertiary learning environment. They bring mana and life experiences to both the classroom and institution. Thriving within the tertiary environment for this group requires skilled and intentional facilitation to promote sustainable academic self-efficacy by knowledgeable education professionals who are willing to further their personal understanding of this area. Therefore, the first few months of any programme of study for the non-traditional student are key in establishing connections with teacher, support staff, peers, and the institution. The implications of this study highlight the complex nature of both the non-traditional student, ASE, and the relationship between the two. Teachers, learning support staff, and tertiary institutions play a key role in facilitating this interaction.

The concept of academic self-efficacy was widely understood by most participants, who described it as a key aspect of how non-traditional students engage and persist in learning, and understand their academic capabilities. Most participants felt somewhat confident in supporting the development of academic self-efficacy, although a small group reported they currently had limited knowledge of this area. Findings indicate that ASE acts as a catalyst for transformational learning, which enables the non-traditional student to enhance motivation, resilience, and autonomy.

Participants highlighted that ASE development varied across learners, ranging from non-traditional students with some academic confidence to students requiring careful, sustained rebuilding of self-confidence and self-belief. Relationship-based practice emerged as a key driver of ASE, with both teachers and learning support staff prioritising holistic support and one-to-one engagement to foster confidence and independence. A common theme highlighted by participants was the

use of ako, or reciprocal learning, in fostering and developing ASE, along with smaller group and individual interactions with their non-traditional students. The concept of ako and communities of practice adopt a holistic view of learning development, where there is shared knowledge between teacher, learning support staff, and student, and the promotion of connection within the bicultural and multicultural learning space. The findings in this study indicate that although participants have an intimate knowledge of their craft and understanding of their non-traditional students, further exploration of the intricacies of ASE, could be warranted.

It is important to remember that tertiary staff are in a position of influence. Therefore, teachers and learning support staff working with non-traditional students should invest time in furthering their own facilitation and academic self-efficacy knowledge, as inattention to these can have lasting consequences for the non-traditional student. This can be achieved by developing their own honest, critical reflective practice, understanding ASE, and fostering a relationship-based, student-centred approach, enhancing their capacity to support the non-traditional student.

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