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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A TOOL
TO BRIDGE TASKS WITH SOLUTIONS:
A DISABILITY AND INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A TOOL TO BRIDGE TASKS WITH SOLUTIONS: A DISABILITY AND INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE

Fenella Wilson

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming more prevalent throughout the world. In fact, many may argue that it is becoming more difficult to distinguish the representations in AI-developed online media from reality. In many cases, AI is developing faster than humans can understand it. From my experience within our polytechnic, a number of ākonga and kaiako alike believe AI to be contributing to a welcomed revolution within higher education, particularly in how ākonga are assessed (Overono & Ditta, 2025). One outcome of this new technology is that assessment must continue to evolve in ways that ensure academic integrity along with satisfying kaiako that ākonga have met agreed learning outcomes. In many cases, assessment was already changing before the rise of AI to better meet the needs of diverse ākonga (Mutuota, 2024). Some traditional assessments, such as reports, essays, and bibliographies, are being replaced with creative compositions and group mahi to allow knowledge to be shared and assessed in flexible ways. While AI continues to compel these changes, kaiako could also consider embracing the technology to expand study and learning opportunities, and to improve assessment as a general education tool.

In this article, the lens of disability and neurodivergence has been chosen to explore the use of AI in this changing education landscape. Initially, this focus challenges more traditional expectations of preparing for assessments such as sourcing, reading, and comparing information from numerous sources manually, acknowledging that, for some ākonga, prioritising reading for information gathering can be a barrier in its own right. While many learners navigate a full range of assessments with ease, others with disability and/or neurodivergence may be challenged to gain and express their understanding, particularly if they are asked to do so in ways that are mismatched to their learning and communication preferences (Mutuota, 2024). This mismatch can result in lower assessment results than are representative of their knowledge. Even less defensible is the fact that these challenges with assessment can prevent ākonga from progressing through their chosen educational pathway. Experimenting with AI has been one example of seeking equitable outcomes for diverse learners.

It needs acknowledging that AI is still reasonably new to many people, and is likely to keep evolving and changing the way we practice. Its use can be problematic within some faculties and academic journal publications, with misuses of AI highlighted typically with software such as Turnitin (Halbert et al., 2025). However, as we navigate the early relationship phase, AI technology remains ahead of the detection capabilities of Turnitin software. With this in mind, we need to proceed with caution when AI use is indicated and require good policy and practice to be in place.

NEURODIVERGENCE WITHIN EDUCATION

Neurodiversity, a term coined by Singer (1998), is an understanding of the diversity of all human brains; neurotypical being representative of how a brain typically functions, and neurodivergent signalling a variable brain functionality, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism spectrum disorder.

Multiple groups are often viewed as deficient or divergent from that which is considered normal (Bešić, 2020). Those with disabilities, including dyslexia and dysgraphia, along with neurodivergence, sit alongside many more such marginalised groups within the community. Those who identify within these communities often have their rights (to education, for instance) undermined, even though a full set of human rights are naturally afforded to everyone from conception (Human Rights Act, 1993). Even with legislation, there remain many instances where accessibility is compromised, physically or otherwise (Ingham et al., 2022; McCaffery, 2016; Mutuota, 2024). Education in Aotearoa New Zealand can be a barrier in its own right. Our system still favours narrow aspects of education, such as numeracy and literacy, as measures of success, which undermines individual understandings of accomplishment. This emphasis on certain knowledge can compromise self-assurance, belonging, and value for some, while contributing to a confident entry into universities for those who enjoy success within these subjects (NZQA, 2025). Studying the arts and sports at secondary school, for instance, might provide greater personal enjoyment and success for some ākonga (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024), but are often insufficient in themselves for higher learning placements, particularly when numeracy and literacy credits are listed as eligibility criteria. Historically, disabled and neurodivergent groups have been oppressed, because ableism has maintained its foothold through those holding positions of power, such as world leaders, government officials, business people and, dare it be said, educationalists (Bešić, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Mutuota, 2024). It seems we have yet to fully realise that diversity policies, increasingly common at national and local levels, rely on encouraging diverse thinking and responses much earlier in education, and in life in general.

Human rights are protected through legislation (Education and Training Act, 2020; Human Rights Act, 1993), containing clear messages of inclusion; or, more specifically, the inability to legally discriminate. This in turn frames policy, whereby safe and inclusive education providers and workplaces welcome the richness of our human population. An example of such a policy is the *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan 2024–25*, in which the Ministry of Education proposes that by “actively embracing a diverse and inclusive culture, we will better serve the diverse communities of Aotearoa/New Zealand” (2024, p. 4).

However, for an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme to gain approval for delivery, the provider must be able to prove that all applicants have evidenced their quality based on their general academic capability, highlighting proficiency in literacy and numeracy in particular (Teaching Council of New Zealand, 2019). This demand fails to acknowledge that these skills may be improved along the way.

Given this contradiction, an applicant may well be denied their right to enjoy success within further education, undermining their potential to make a significant difference for the diverse learners they would go on to serve, because the entry criteria to the profession were too narrow to capture their worth. Drawing from *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), New Zealand’s early learning curriculum, we might consider that, like tamariki, adults learn skills effortlessly when they are in an environment that uses them through the lens of their chosen interest (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024). Arguably, returning to the recruitment policy example, the Ministry of Education will ultimately seek qualified staff to fill their vacancies to best meet the demands of the role. Ironically, the very people sought under their diversity, equity, and inclusion plan may be denied access to their qualification pathway long before the job opportunity arises.

The outcomes sought in the *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan 2024–25* (Ministry of Education, 2024) sit at odds with the application criteria for ākonga under the ITE Programme Approval, Monitoring and Review Requirements (Teaching Council of New Zealand, 2019). The conflict is frustrating but understandable, given that the legislation

to protect diversity is disseminated from the same place as the neo-liberal policies that promote competition, business acumen, and ultimate economic success for the country. It is easy to see how messages of diversity and inclusion lose their clarity as polytechnics navigate the pressure between serving their ākonga in the best way and maintaining competitive outcomes to stay afloat (Mutuota, 2024; Waiwiri-Smith, 2025).

Consider, for instance, that a neurodivergent ākonga finds their place on an ITE programme. Education to date perhaps has not served them well but, given promises of equitable opportunities for success, they are excited to enter the course. They hope that their personal experience positions them well for creating positive outcomes for many neurodivergent or disabled ākonga once they are in their own teaching role. This is provided the ākonga is able to successfully navigate in-course assessment to physically reach the practice space. It is often during assessment that gaps might appear showing that the written understanding of an ākonga is misaligned with the knowledge evidenced in class, pointing perhaps towards issues with the method of assessment (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024). In our early childhood education programme, we can observe ākonga achieving success in their practicum placements, while struggling to express the same understandings through traditional course assessment. This was the initial call to consider assessment tasks more laterally, to capture the full breadth of ākonga experience, to promote successful outcomes, and ultimately support future livelihoods. Even so, connecting with content may remain more difficult for ākonga who learn in ways that differ from those of the wider group.

AI IN THE EDUCATION SPACE

If a person has a culinary passion, through repetition they may master the art of preparing certain dishes with ease and pride, whereas someone else with less experience in the kitchen is likely to rely strictly on a recipe and refer back to it often to recreate a dish successfully. The recipe provides the steps required to achieve success and acts as a scaffold for the user to develop confidence through repetitive use. In the world of academia, we can investigate how AI can be used as a tool, or recipe, while still considering academic integrity for task completion (Bottomley et al., 2018).

As tools, AI apps and services can be helpful for time management and creating order within the brain. While the time management aspect could be beneficial for any ākonga, returning to a disability and neurodivergent lens, chatbots such as Chat GPT, Copilot, and Cogniti can be useful for summarising information and breaking it into manageable pieces, or task segmentation.

Academic writing can be tricky to comprehend for many, due to writing conventions and jargon that can break reading continuity. Navigating such writing with a disability can be so difficult it becomes an injustice. To make information more widely accessible, many organisations and individuals consider alternative formats. One example is the United Nations reproducing convention documents in multiple formats and languages, such as braille, audio, New Zealand Sign Language, and Easy Read, so rights may be widely understood (United Nations, n.d). Easy Read is a framework that makes information accessible. Used with the AI command, “please create an easy read format of this article,” this universally understood concept can break down barriers to grasping academic content (Ministry of Social Development, 2021). Assimilating the more accessible text remains the responsibility of the ākonga, particularly for assessment purposes.

The AI platform, Google NotebookLM, allows users to upload an article, before prompting specific information of a chatbot, such as “What does this article say about creating an inclusive environment for children?” A second option leads to the creation of a podcast, which offers an audio summary of the article. Ākonga can listen to the podcast, enabling multitasking in too-busy lives, or providing an audible intake of information for ākonga who prioritise this sense in their learning (Jafarian & Kramer, 2025). The chatbot may help to determine the relevance of an article, and with accurate prompts, list ways to critically engage with it. However, doing so comes with a warning that the platform may or may not pick up all the intentions of the article. Additionally, AI has

already paraphrased the material, so ākongā must be confident when considering the original article against the information that AI returns that their final summaries are their own (Bottomley et al., 2018).

For some kaiako, particularly those who are neurotypical, it can be difficult to contemplate or understand another person's lived experience and how complex study might be for them. In today's world, innumerable instances of information can be immediately overwhelming for some neurodivergent ākongā. While ākongā have been electronically navigating information for years before they reach tertiary environments, the ability to navigate lengthy texts and critically engage with them can be an underdeveloped skill, as can absorbing programme-specific content. AI tools are shared within my own classrooms to assist ākongā to make sense of and prioritise information that contributes to both learning and assessment.

To make this process visible, I queried ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024), "Can you show me how to critically analyse the following two paragraphs?" before submitting paragraphs three and four from the Neurodivergence Within Education section of this article. These two paragraphs highlight a surface level conflict between the Ministry of Education's *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan 2024–25* (2024), and an excerpt from the ITE Programme Approval, Monitoring and Review Requirements (Teaching Council of New Zealand Matatū Aotearoa, 2019). The following example shares the response.

Critically analysing these paragraphs involves *going beyond summarising* the content to evaluating *underlying assumptions, implications, contradictions, and power dynamics*. Here's a breakdown of how to approach this analysis:

PARAGRAPH 1 ANALYSIS

Summary

The first paragraph argues that human rights legislation (e.g., Human Rights Act, Education and Training Act) establishes a legal framework that promotes inclusion and prohibits discrimination. This legal mandate influences educational policy, such as the Ministry's *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan*, which links embracing diversity to better outcomes for New Zealand's communities.

Critical Analysis

Strengths:

- Connects law and policy clearly, showing how legal principles trickle down into educational practice.
- Uses specific examples (DEI Plan 2024–25) to support claims, giving the paragraph credibility and grounding in real-world application.
- Highlights the aspirational language of policy—"actively embracing a diverse and inclusive culture"—which can be seen as progressive and hopeful.

Questions & Limitations:

- *Assumptions:* The paragraph assumes that inclusion is achieved simply through legal or policy statements. But how well are these policies enacted in reality?
- *Power & Practice Gap:* There's no mention of the gap between policy and implementation. Are diverse communities truly experiencing inclusion, or is the language performative?
- *Whose Inclusion?* Inclusion for whom? The term "diverse communities" is used, but not interrogated. Does this include neurodiverse learners? Disabled students? Indigenous learners?

- *Critical Perspective:* It lacks a critique of how power dynamics (e.g., colonial legacies, systemic bias) may still be operating within these legal or policy frameworks.
-

PARAGRAPH 2 ANALYSIS

Summary

The second paragraph critiques the criteria for entry into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, specifically the requirement for applicants to demonstrate literacy and numeracy proficiency. It argues that this prerequisite may exclude capable candidates who could develop these skills over time.

Critical Analysis

Strengths:

- Identifies a tension between inclusive policy rhetoric and exclusive practice in teacher education admissions.
- Brings attention to the gatekeeping role of “standards,” questioning whether they serve equity or reinforce inequality.
- Offers a valid critique of a system that may ignore potential and growth in favour of fixed metrics.

Questions & Limitations:

- *Equity vs. Standardisation:* Who benefits from these fixed entry requirements? Do they disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (e.g., ESOL speakers, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds)?
 - *Assumptions about Capability:* The paragraph assumes that all applicants could “improve along the way,” but what support structures would need to be in place for that to happen?
 - *Policy Contradiction:* It contrasts nicely with the first paragraph—where inclusion is celebrated in theory—while here, a specific policy contradicts those inclusive ideals. This could be explored more.
 - *Omission:* There’s no mention of culturally responsive assessments or alternative pathways to demonstrate readiness—an opportunity to challenge dominant (Western/colonial) norms of academic success.
-

PUTTING IT TOGETHER (SYNTHESIS & HIGHER-LEVEL CRITIQUE)

These two paragraphs set up a useful contradiction between the **ideal of inclusion in policy** and the **exclusionary nature of some educational practices**. A strong critical analysis would:

- Explore this contradiction more explicitly.
 - Raise questions about **how inclusion is defined and operationalised**.
 - Ask **whose knowledge and skills are valued** in teacher education.
 - Consider whether **systemic inequities are being reproduced** through seemingly neutral criteria like literacy and numeracy.
-

IN SUMMARY

To critically analyse:

- **Identify the claim** being made.
 - **Evaluate the assumptions** and evidence.
 - **Question power structures** or inconsistencies.
 - **Reflect on broader implications** for equity and inclusion.
-

The 'problem' that many ākonga are faced with is meeting the task of learning or assessment. For some disabled or neurodivergent ākonga, unpacking information and making a beginning can be the most significant hurdles to navigate. Offering ākonga a tool that helps quieten a noisy mind can help to align thinking more relevantly to what is being asked of them. The key conversation to have with ākonga is to know when to stop, and that is at the prompt below:

Would you like me to help write a full critical reflection paragraph that synthesises these ideas?

"No, thank you."

In this example, not only does AI assist with the process of critical writing, but the results are broken down into specific areas of focus. This assists ākonga who may struggle with task segmentation as part of their neurodivergence (Hennekam et al., 2025). Large tasks that seem overwhelming are broken into small elements creating bite-sized chunks that can build towards learning a new skill or meeting assessment criteria.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF KAIKO

With an increased flexibility of assessment options, more ākonga can enjoy success, joining peers who already perform well under the narrow skillset of academic writing (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024). These changes in assessment have gained further attention because of a need to combat plagiarism and concerns around the actual knowledge of ākonga being evidenced (Halbert et al., 2025). However, some content may prove more difficult to effectively summarise outside of a report or an essay. Additionally, some prefer written communication, so excluding this option fully would undermine the aims of inclusive assessment. The responsibility of kaiako turns to maximising the voice and experiences of ākonga to authenticate their own understanding (Overno & Ditta, 2025).

So how does the academic world encourage ākonga to keep using their own voice, particularly when their voice is consistently mismatched to expectations at undergraduate level? Is it the voice of the ākonga that needs to change, or a too-narrow expectation of what signals understanding of a learning outcome? (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024). This expectation, for many disabled or neurodivergent ākonga, begins a cycle of activity: "I used my voice, and I discovered it wasn't the right one, so I used someone else's."

Plagiarism is not valued in any part of society. While authors can share the views of others, it is important to formally acknowledge the source of those views (Bottomley et al., 2018). Yet many ākonga are tempted to use AI, particularly those who repeatedly receive negative feedback or, worse, have failed assessments because their communication fell short of the standard.

The conversation about modes of assessment must continue. This topic deserves wider consideration than simply asking in which ways we can assess the knowledge of ākonga that prevent the use of AI. Even if it does not fully

align with our goals as educators, AI is here and kaiako should look to exploring its benefits to better understand its potential use, in an effort to combat academic dishonesty.

Having the conversation around AI and its acceptable uses and boundaries is important to set the tone of academic achievement (Halbert et al., 2025). Presenting AI as a tool to bridge tasks with solutions honours the fact that we live a world of innovation. Within learning institutions, AI can be celebrated for its ability to streamline access to, and navigate, vast amounts of information. However, understanding how AI might be used is important to balance innovation with personal responsibility and integrity within study (Bottomley et al., 2018; Halbert et al., 2025).

Furthermore, we should communicate the full range of study supports to all ākonga, not just those who struggle with more traditional or formal methods of assessment. Actively recommending ākonga to use Learning Facilitators to gain clarity around assessments, along with tools such as Studiosity or Cogniti for valid structural feedback in place of AI polishing, can help them strike a balance between personal, work, and study life. Directing ākonga to these services up front places these supports into a maintenance kete, rather than upholding the belief that accessing learning support and engagement services comes from a place of deficit (Bešić, 2020).

During this early stage, where AI detection tools such as Turnitin are evolving, there is an understanding that actual levels of GenAI use cannot be ascertained. Internal policy often brings about reparation measures such as face-to-face conversations to determine a student's actual understanding of content, or academic misconduct. Reinforcing expectations around AI use within these first conversations is important for ongoing assessment and has future implications for study.

Lastly, the feedback returned to ākonga through assessment is the bow that ties everything together. While rubrics enable ākonga to comprehend assessments, they also create consistency and transparency of grading by kaiako. Using credit-based feedback, together with suggestions for strengthening future assessments, acknowledges where the work has fallen short of the rubric, while balancing this feedback with mana-enhancing recognition of areas of success to repeat. Feedback is as much as about informing course delivery for the future, as it is about improving the quality of mahi from ākonga. When ākonga receive feedback that reinforces a self-conscious belief of deficiency in themselves, their temptation to use AI tools to improve their mahi may increase. If we want ākonga to use their own voice, we must show respect and gratitude to them for doing so.

CONCLUSION

Our world is neurodiverse and that is to be celebrated, as neurodivergence often brings about the innovation of tools to meet identified needs. AI is one such innovation that can be used to bridge a gap between what is being asked of ākonga for assessment and how they meet that task. It can be common for ākonga with disability or neurodivergence to arrive at polytechnics and other tertiary environments with concerns about how their study pathway may go, due to the ways that education might have served (or underserved) them previously. Conversely, others may arrive with a renewed enthusiasm, particularly in the teaching and learning space, knowing they can make a difference for diverse learners due to their own lived experiences. In a cruel twist of fate, such ākonga may discover that the entry criteria may prevent their placement on the programme, regardless of legislation that upholds the rights of all humans to receive the education they need to flourish.

A number of ākonga do get accepted into a programme, only to discover that the world of study is much more demanding than they anticipated. Some may struggle with the assimilation of content, navigating assessments including traditional assignments, or time management, particularly due to learning disabilities or neurodivergence.

This article presents AI as a support to ākonga who struggle with understanding course content or how they might be able to meet assessment criteria. When AI is queried in agreed ways, which maintain the authentic voice of ākonga, it can compartmentalise information and break down the skills required in assessments. These

functions may assist neurodivergent ākonga with compromised executive functioning, and build upon skillsets that require further development over and above their chosen course content.

While the use of AI can contribute to the ultimate learning success of ākonga, kaiako have certain responsibilities related to and around its use. Upfront conversations about acceptable guidelines for the use of AI should form a part of all courses. Ākonga are aware of AI, and many are familiar with its use and need to understand what constitutes appropriate usage within academic study. Highlighting support structures, such as Learning Facilitators and Studiosity, contributes to inclusive learning environments by positioning such supports as tools to equip ākonga to balance study and life, thus reframing the association of additional support with a sign of personal deficiency.

One of the most significant responsibilities of kaiako lies in the way in which assessment feedback is given, particularly, but not limited to, the case of ākonga who may have entered undergraduate study with a compromised sense of self-worth. A big part of what makes polytechnics stand apart is their commitment to pastoral care, and upholding the dignity of our learners is fundamental to their success.

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