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What Would Make the Biggest Difference? Enhancing Disability and Access Services in ODFL

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Abstract

This reflective paper describes insights gained in the process of seeking to enhance disability and access services for adult disabled learners in Open Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) in Aotearoa New Zealand. This paper explores the question: What would make the biggest difference to disabled learners' experience in ODFL? It presents brief background information about the specific context of ODFL, Kuratini Tuwhera Open Polytechnic, and what was known about its disabled learners at the outset of this work. It highlights the related understanding of four underpinning bodies of knowledge (models) of disability that inform the enhancement of services. Five themes detail the insights and recommendations of a year-long advisory group that included disabled learners and Open Polytechnic staff. One important finding is that the biggest difference lies in the disability confidence of the staff across the organisation. Limitations of the paper include the small size of the disability advisory group (six learners and six staff), the resulting small dataset, and the inability to evaluate outcomes against the model.

Keywords: disability and access services; disability confidence; open, distance, and flexible learning (ODFL); disabled learners

Introduction

The aim of this reflective practice paper is to describe insights gained from working with a disability advisory group to enhance services for disabled ākonga (learners) studying in an open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) context in Kuratini Tuwhara Open Polytechnic, New Zealand's leading tertiary distance learning organisation. Over 2 years, and in response to sector and environmental changes that raised concerns about equity and inclusion for disabled learners in vocational and tertiary education, Open Polytechnic undertook to review its responsiveness to the needs of disabled ākonga. This review included evaluation of its Disability Policy, the formation of an advisory group, a series of workshops with kaimahi (staff) and the development of a disability action plan. This paper focuses on presenting the recommendations of the advisory group as a step towards understanding and provisioning aspirational services to enhance the experience, access, and outcomes of individual disabled ākonga in ODFL across the spectrum of impairment categories identified as "disability".

In framing this undertaking, we aligned definitions and terminologies with those presented in the *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (New Zealand Government, 2016), which is in turn aligned with the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983, 2013; Barnes & Oliver, 1993). In this model disability is understood to be the process of one group creating barriers by designing a world for their own way of living, taking no account of people with impairments. Barnes (2019) notes that the Social Model has influenced Western policy circles to recognise disability as a human rights concern, and to both examine and challenge the material and structural causes of their

disadvantage. Essentially, according to the Social Model, the world disables the person (O'Halloran, 2015), accessibility is positioned as a shared social responsibility (Lomellini, et al., 2022), and inclusion is seen as a "fundamental moral issue" (Terzi, 2004, p. 156). *The New Zealand Disability Strategy* identifies impairments that are long term and may be physical, sensory, neurological, psychiatric, or related to learning. Such impairments, in conjunction with barriers, may hinder a person's participation in society (New Zealand Government 2016, p. 49). The strategy uses the term "disabled people" to apply to people who are disabled by their environment, and the term "non-disabling" to strengthen understanding of the responsibility to remove the barriers that disable people in society. Our mahi (work) is therefore also underpinned by the understanding of the terminology such as "disabled ākonga" and our responsiveness to the needs of disabled ākonga as "non-disabling strategies and services" to reflect this understanding.

Context

Disabled ākonga who study with the Open Polytechnic include those who have permanent impairment, impairment resulting from long- or short-term injury or illness, sensory impairment, learning disability, neurological or cognitive conditions, mental health conditions, and other hidden impairments. Information about impairment is gathered from disclosures made at enrolment.

When we began this work, we reviewed the previous 4 years of disclosure data. We found that the total count of ākonga that disclosed a disability had increased along with increasing enrolment numbers. The total percentage of ākonga that disclosed a disability, however, was static at 6%. Data showed that 21% of Open Polytechnic's disabled ākonga identified as Māori, 5% as Pasifika, and 74% as non-Māori, non-Pasifika. Ākonga Māori consistently made up a higher proportion of disabled enrolments than the total learner base (22% of disabled learners, 18% of the total learner base). The data identified the top three declared impairment categories as mental health conditions (~30%), medical conditions (~20%) and specific learning disability (~10%). Additionally, approximately 15% of ākonga who had disclosed disability at enrolment stated their specific impairment type was not listed, or they had left the field blank. A 3% disparity in first assessment submission rate, consistent over the 4 years of data, provided evidence of an equity gap between disabled and non-disabled ākonga.

The data review highlighted the complex nature of disability in ODFL—static disclosure information identifies but fails to analyse the intersections of impairment, race, culture, gender, and identity (Pak & Parsons, 2020). The range of impairments disclosed aligned with the social model of disability, in which impairment categories include learning difficulties and psychiatric, physical, or sensory impairments that may be temporary, intermittent, or permanent (Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2023). Our data review also identified clear issues with how information related to disabled learners was collected, issues that gave rise to further questions about how this information was then used and shared and led us to seek firsthand understanding about disabled ākonga experience.

Disability models

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, in theory, underpin all elements of the ODFL environment. International Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are strongly linked to UDL and this approach to the design and delivery of ODFL incorporates accessibility as inherently interlinked—not separate or added on. That stated, to rely on UDL and the WCAG as catch-all default models for disability and access services can be unsatisfactory. Seale et al. (2022) suggest that these tools fall short in providing practical and pedagogical solutions in post-secondary online environments. Seale et al. (2022, p. 8) provide an overview and evaluation of a range of models of disability services developed in post-secondary environments, defining

models as "practical or conceptual representations of systems and processes" that support and contribute to successful outcomes for disabled learners in post-secondary education. Their paper also provides a framework for evaluating models, including features such as context, focus, validity, and efficacy. From the nine models analysed in their study, they conclude that more awareness of existing models, and of their strengths and weaknesses, can help to inform and enhance the development of new or similar models. They suggest that there may be benefit in adopting a "multimodel approach" (p. 23), combining elements from different models to inform decisions about accessibility services in post-secondary environments.

In our approach to enhancing our services, we explored theoretical perspectives of disability to inform our direction. Although the Social Model (Barnes, 2019; O'Halloran, 2015; Oliver, 1983) informs policy and provides the underpinning ideology for disability services in tertiary education, Universal Design (Goldsmith, 2000) was conceptualised in the physical world (Barnes, 2019), with no direct connection with its application in an online learning environment. Our work suggests that ODFL alignment with the Social Model has evolved in contradictory terms: disabled learners told us that ODFL can provide greater opportunities for access to post-secondary education because they don't need to navigate the built environment to access educational services. Those with certain neurodiverse conditions can experience greater access and freedom through ODFL, because assistive technologies give them the ability to choose and control their own physical and social learning environment. Conversely, disabled ākonga also told us that freedom and access can be compromised in ODFL because they can feel invisible, and their individual and unique needs are less likely to be met. This "invisibility" could be a preferred state—some disabled ākonga choose not to identify as disabled, either to avoid the possibility of perceived prejudice based on previous negative experience, or to emphasise the ableist aspects of their identity (Bollinger & Cook, 2018). Invisibility can also be imposed by institutional practices such as arduous disclosure processes and/or a lack of adequate and safe processes and information systems that facilitate ease of access for disabled ākonga. Therefore, as with the physical world, bringing the social model online requires embedding the understanding that disability is created by a disabling environment, with attention to the specific and varied needs of online learners. We further explored the underpinning theoretical perspectives of the Ecological Model, the Active Model, and Crip Theory, for their application and insights in the development of our model.

Ecological Model

The Ecological Model for disability, as defined by Ebersold & Evans (2003), maintains that disabled people's own narratives about their lives and bodies are valued alongside understanding the barriers inherent in the physical and social worlds. It offers a way to see disabled ākonga in the context of their own environments, acknowledging both individual and contextual experience and the way these interact with, or create, potential tensions or dependencies. When we apply this to the online learning environment, a learner's environmental context may include the actions of human actors in this ecosystem, such as educators, learning designers, support staff, and peers. In addition, it considers non-human actors such as the learning platform's capabilities, algorithms, the accessibility standards of websites and technologies, and the extent to which UDL principles are evident in the learning experience. Applying this model in the online learning space would mean fully interrogating how these human and non-human actors shape the experience of accessibility in ODFL.

Active Model

Levitt's (2017) Active Model complements the Social Model. Levitt argues that while other disability rights models have offered structural critique, there is not yet a model that focuses specifically on the actions of disabled people. This model emphasises a close link between a disabled person's actions, autonomy, and the technologies they rely on. Choice and control have

been embraced as key concepts in the New Zealand Disability Rights movement and within proposed changes to disability support, evident in the principles of Enabling Good Lives (Enabling Good Lives, 2023). This signals a shift to a highly individualised model, positioning the disabled person as the consumer of disability support services and the active employer of their own carers. The Active Model puts more emphasis on autonomy and aligns well with the principles of ODFL, in which multiple technologies—such as assistive technologies and artificial intelligence—can be key enabling tools.

A cautionary and counter argument to the advantages of the application of an active model is the potential for over-emphasising individual actions and autonomy while neglecting to address and negotiate structural barriers. Strict adherence to the Active Model potentially opens space for institutions (inadvertently or not) to abdicate responsibility for managing the success of support, while minimising intersectional, structural pressures in navigating education pathways. The Active Model should therefore be implemented as an element of a wider model, giving space to learn with assistive technologies alongside other enabling services.

Crip Theory

Crip Theory is a queering of disability—the term "crip" has been reclaimed in the same way as the term "queer". It borrows concepts from Queer Theory, positioning disability as an identity and culture with its own embodied norms (McRuer, 2016; Kafer, 2003; Clare, 2003). Importing insights from Crip Theory into an ODFL model would involve privileging learner stories of experience of disability as being of equal or greater value than medical evidence of disability. This requires open, fluid, and flexible systems of support to match the experience of disability that is itself recognised as fluctuating. It involves resisting the idea of disability as burdensome and reflecting this in the accessibility and culture of support systems, while minimising the labour of disclosure. Essentially and fundamentally, Crip Theory involves reflecting the value of disabled learners' experience as disabled people, viewing disabled people as cultural producers, and actively weaving disability knowledge into the online experience (Abes & Darkow, 2020).

The insights from these models that inform the enhancement of Disability and Access Services are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Insights from theoretical models

Social model	Ecological Model	Active Model	Crip Theory
The ODFL environment disables the learner. There is an organisational responsibility to recognise and remove barriers to access.	The learner is contextualised in the whole environment, influenced by human and non-human actors.	Services are individualised. The learner is a consumer of enabling tools and services.	Learner stories of experience are privileged and valued. Burden of disclosure is minimised. Disability and support of services are fluid and fluctuating, as is disability.

Linking theoretical insights with the ODFL environment

The Social Model uncovers and makes explicit the marginalisation of disabled people both in and from education as an issue rooted in the historic segregation of disabled people from wider society (Kearney, 2009). Disabled people's segregated schooling and segregation from wider society was reinforced by the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, and further reinforced by increasing interest in, and use of, IQ and standardised testing. These ideologies individualised and problematised disability, giving weight to an assumption of disabled people's

lower intelligence (Stace, 2007). This ideology is reversed in the Social Model—society has the burden of responsibility to remove and eliminate barriers for disabled people and in ODFL this becomes a critical, proactive approach to inclusive and accessible services and practices.

Understanding from the Ecological and Active Models highlights links between disabled people's marginalisation in society, the macro environmental influences on experience, and their experience in higher education. Disabled ākonga have told us that the ODFL context presents challenges relating to the complexities of their disability disclosure and access, and that critical relationships between them and disability support kaimahi actively help to mitigate these challenges. While relationship building between support kaimahi and disabled ākonga can be more difficult through the lack of face-to-face connection experienced in ODFL, it is strongly enhanced by the recognition of the learner as an active, autonomous consumer of tools and services. In this context, a successful interaction with disability services provides a sense of belonging for a disabled ākonga in the service itself and, importantly, it fosters this experience throughout the wider educational environment. In this case, "successful" means that disclosure of disability needs is safe, respected, well received, and does not compromise the individual's sense of dignity, ability, or autonomy. Information relating to needs and accommodation is shared transparently with those collaborating with ākonga along the steps of their learning journey. Placing ākonga at the centre of services means listening to their voice through a purposeful problem-solving process that recognises and responds to their unique needs (Rees, 2010). We reviewed the information we collected on the disclosure form, and invited disabled ākonga to provide feedback on their experience of completing the form. We aimed to identify and eliminate imprecise and unfriendly elements of the process.

The perspective of the Active Model directs attention towards the non-human actors in ODFL and the rapidly evolving nature and role of assistive tools and ākonga's own understanding and expectations of these technologies. For kaimahi, navigating exponential advances in assistive tools is an equally challenging experience when their own knowledge and training may be limited. From our experience, the introduction of effective assistive tools required considerable research and many hours of navigating their position and resourcing in the organisation. Justification is difficult when the existing learning platform and course design presuppose a UDL and WCAG approach. Here, as noted above, such default models can reduce the appetite for other enhancements (Seale et al., 2022).

The principles identified under Crip Theory determine that, for disabled ākonga, the initial decision to disclose their impairment is complex and strongly linked to identity. Ākonga raised questions about who they are disclosing to, and what and how much to disclose about an impairment's potential effect on their academic experience. In an online environment, where ākonga have no knowledge of how and with whom their information is shared, disclosure can be experienced as anonymous, impersonal, and intimidating. They may fear their disclosure could induce prejudgement of their capabilities and create barriers to accessing educational opportunities. Ākonga want their needs to be recognised by kaimahi concurrently with their ability and for one not to compromise the other (MacArthur & Kelly, 2004, p. 44). As Seale (2017, p. 153) puts it, "[There is a] tension that exist[s] surrounding the construction of disability and difference; constructions that can prevent an 'opening to the other' and can place institutions at odds with their students." Barnes & Oliver (1993) emphasise that *how* the questions are asked or framed can often make a difference to ease of access. The standard approach to questions in disability disclosure is often experienced as: "What is wrong with you?" A more effective approach is to frame disclosure questions as: "What is wrong with this environment for you?"

Again, with disabled ākonga feedback, we revised the questions and added two new elements to the disclosure process: a learner-initiated request to receive personal contact from a Disability and Access staff member on completion of enrolment, and a follow-up email to all ākonga who

disclosed a disability, welcoming them and providing details of contacts, services, and assistive tools.

Whether they are online or in person, ākonga may see academic environments as being culturally able-bodied and able-minded institutions. This is partly due to the historical exclusion of disabled people from mainstream education, and is currently reinforced by the kinds of "burdensome processes" (such as disclosure) that can render higher education inaccessible to disabled learners (Abes & Darkow, 2020, p. 223). Garland-Thomson (2002) has pointed to a dearth of models available to disabled people entering academia. This lack includes limited examples of those who have gone before and what supported their success, examples of how to "be disabled" in academic environments while carrying the effects of previous negative experiences of education, perceptions of the lower socio-economic status of the disabled community, and a glass ceiling (Kumari Campbell, 2009). The marginalisation of disabled people and the invisibility of disabled success can lead disabled ākonga to play down their disability related needs to access and navigate education, amplifying instead the able parts of their identity (Bollinger & Cook, 2018). When ākonga are focused on their academic identity as primary, preferred, and positive, disclosure of need is a jarring experience that serves to maintain the perception of disability as negative and deficit focused (Macartney, 2009). In response to this, our services model now includes the introduction of short film content of multiple disabled ākonga narrating their own stories of successful online learning experience. These video vignettes are posted on our website as examples of those who have gone before.

In all of these theoretical perspectives, relationships between disabled ākonga and disability and access kaimahi are seen as critical. These relationships become the means of facilitating entry and belonging for disabled ākonga in higher education. For kaimahi working in these services, the range and scope of their roles can be variable—from providing initial pastoral care and orientation, to having an ongoing relationship with ākonga. There can be concerns about their access to training and professional knowledge. Further, kaimahi motivation for working in disability support or as educators are highly personal and unique (Fossey et al., 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2016). These factors contribute to the overall experience of disabled ākonga.

Ākonga voice

The qualitative data that informs this paper is drawn from ākonga voice. The Kia Ōrite Toolkit (National Post Secondary Education Disability Network, 2021), states that it is essential for disabled ākonga with different impairments to be active partners in the development and implementation of services for disabled ākonga, while being mindful of possible intersections with other equity groups. The Toolkit encourages tertiary institutions to "ask disabled learners what would make the biggest difference for them" (2021, p. 23). Open Polytechnic formed a disability advisory group of volunteer disabled ākonga and kaimahi members. Ākonga included those with hearing, visual, and physical impairments, and the specific learning conditions of autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Kaimahi members worked across a range of aspects of the learning experience, predominately from the Learning Design and Learning Delivery directorates. Some of the kaimahi had their own impairment and all had a special interest and/or experience in supporting disabled people. The inclusion of ākonga and kaimahi in the advisory group served to build deeper relational connections across the organisation and bring awareness of the collective responsibility for disabled consciousness. In alignment with Kia Ōrite recommendations, a volunteer ākonga led the advisory group. This leader was also a member of the National Disabled Students Association (NDSA). Key Disability and Access kaimahi attended the meetings (ex-officio), reporting on service developments and recording insights from ākonga perceptions and experience in response to the focus question. The reference group met monthly over 1 year and responded verbally to questions relating to our organisation's learning support responsibilities as detailed in the Kia Ōrite Toolkit. There was a focus question at each meeting.

What would make the biggest difference?

For each meeting, members were asked for:

- insights into opportunities / barriers in ODFL (disabled ākonga) they already know about or experience
- suggestions for actions / strategies to resolve these barriers.

Ākonga and kaimahi were given a "takeaway task" at the end of each meeting: to continue to observe and record their experiences in relation to the focus question, and to present these observations at the next meeting. Disability and Access kaimahi and a contracted researcher who attended the meetings ex-officio, applied thematic analysis to organise insights from the recorded data and written feedback sheets. The most repeated phrases led to the identification of five themes that provided insights into the experience of disabled ākonga in ODFL and recommendations for the Disability and Access services specific to this context. Of note, the most common references to disability were to experience of neurodiversity—there were no direct references to experience of physical disability. Kaimahi who attended the meetings used language that demonstrated awareness of disability models; for example, the Social Model of Disability and terminologies such as "ableism", and "deficit discourses", whereas ākonga were more likely to reference specific experience, extending this to understanding or explaining the experience by referring to peers and others. They tended to avoid theory-based language. The five themes that emerged from the data describe disabled ākonga experience and needs in post-secondary ODFL. They are, in order of prevalence: disability confidence among staff, disclosure of disability, knowledge gaps, ensuring mana for disabled Māori learners, and critical relationships. The full recommendations for enhancing Disability and Access Services as they relate to each theme are summarised in Table 2.

Theme 1: Disability confidence among staff

The dominant theme from the learner voice data was a general perception that the teaching kaimahi lacked knowledge of specific types of disabilities. This lack of awareness was especially linked to references of neurodiversity and of how to support neurodiverse ākonga. The lack of disability confidence among teaching kaimahi who were interacting with ākonga created feelings of frustration, and reinforced negative past experiences of education: "I've been told that if I can't do it then I shouldn't be here." Lack of disability confidence or knowledge among kaimahi was perceived by ākonga as unwillingness to acknowledge or respond to individual needs, and the default attitude of "I treat everyone the same", a dearth of inclusive practices, inflexibility, and an inability to provide or recommend appropriate levels of support and accommodation. Knowledge of and practical application of UDL principles was identified as a significant and important aspect of kaimahi competence, with specific emphasis on assessment design.

Both kaimahi and ākonga identified or had experienced perceptions of negative attitudes towards disability and disabled ākonga. These attitudes were described as negative perceptions, lack of confidence in their own knowledge, and an active unwillingness to adapt to the needs of disabled ākonga. In ODFL, where ākonga are not physically seen by kaimahi, this is an important insight. This subjective, but none-the-less apparent, perception was experienced by ākonga as discrimination, and as a significant barrier to learning: "I felt like I had no right to be there." For kaimahi, the invisibility of impairment among ākonga creates a barrier to their awareness of need and may affect their ability to extend further support or services.

Theme 2: Disclosure of disability and access to accommodation

Ākonga and kaimahi identified an underlying unwillingness of disabled ākonga to disclose disability and/or to identify as disabled. "I didn't know whether disclosing my dyslexia might

mean I wouldn't get in; I was really worried about it." This fear of disclosure can then become a barrier to accessing services and having support needs met. The perceived attitudes of kaimahi, previous negative educational experience, the collective banding of multiple categories of impairment under the one label of disability (e.g., "learning disorder"), the fear of being denied access, and the perceived attitudes of peers were all factors acknowledged by ākonga to contribute to this unwillingness. Through this theme, the label "disabled" manifests as a stigmatised identity: "I've experienced this my whole life." This reluctance to disclose has implications for the service in creating a disparity between the numbers of ākonga who identify as disabled and the numbers of ākonga who could benefit from access to support services, contributing to the "invisibility" of disabled in ODFL. It has implications for the provision of funding, both for the service and for ākonga's access to resources.

This theme also highlighted that there were significant knowledge gaps among disabled ākonga about the services they could access. Many believed the enrolment process was the only entry point to access resources, services, and community. Disabled ākonga did not see opportunities to disclose disability retrospectively, or to identify themselves to tutors.

Theme 3: Knowledge gaps for disabled ākonga and kaimahi

While information about Disability and Access Services is available and promoted, disabled ākonga were broadly unaware of much of the learning support, accommodation, and technologies that they could access. One ākonga stated: "If I hadn't come to these meetings, I wouldn't know about any of this." In an ODFL environment, ākonga are less likely to be aware of disability and access services than on a physical campus where services are more clearly visible, associated with other student support services, housed in specific locations, and clearly signposted. Ākonga wanted more information about what was available; and they wanted it to be provided early; they wanted to find it autonomously and independently. It should be transferable, accessible across courses, and without a cost barrier. Although privacy was important, ākonga wanted key kaimahi to know of their needs without having to repeat the information with each new course or each new tutor. "Every time I start a new course, I have to explain my condition to the tutor again!" Ākonga who had disclosed their disability expected that kaimahi would know about their needs. Some ākonga and kaimahi felt that knowing who disabled ākonga were in courses could help to ensure needs were met. Ākonga and kaimahi indicated the importance of this information, highlighting the emphasis on self-determination for the disabled learner, consistent with an understanding of "nothing about us without us".

Theme 4: Recognition of intersections Whakamana i ngā tauira Whaikaha—Ensuring mana for ākonga Māori with impairments

Disabled ākonga Māori expect to see their dual identity as Māori and disabled reflected in Disability and Access services and more broadly across the organisation. Ākonga Māori with impairments pointed to situations where tikanga (customary practices) may clash with access needs—this is particularly relevant in programmes for which a noho marae (overnight stay) is a compulsory component. Ākonga Māori expressed the need to be able enter te ao Māori (how Māori define and experience the world) contexts with cultural confidence and access confidence.

The recommendations for enhancing Disability and Access Services related to this theme are summarised below.

Theme 5: Critical relationships

Ākonga expressed the view that the Disability and Access services needed more disabled kaimahi so disabled ākonga could see themselves reflected in the service. Having disabled people as kaimahi helps to enhance empathy and safety in the welcome, while bridging connections with

the non-disabled teaching kaimahi, fostering belonging and collective disability consciousness across the institution. Disabled ākonga told us that being met and greeted by another disabled person reduces the perception of tertiary institutions as "able-bodied" spaces, and increases the expectation of emotional safety, allowing them to express their needs openly without fear of judgement or discrimination. The advisory group also noted, that, in ODFL, the "invisibility" of impairment works both ways—for kaimahi and ākonga. Recruiting and hiring those with lived experience of impairment in support roles is counterbalanced by the virtual medium that also precludes direct observation.

Table 2 The full summary of recommendations for enhancing Disability and Access Services in ODFL

Disability confidence among kaimahi	**Disclosure of disability**	**Knowledge gaps for disabled ākonga and kaimahi**	**Intersectional equity:** **Whakamana i ngā tauira Whaikaha - Ensuring mana for ākonga Māori with impairments**	**Critical relationships**
Staff training both in anti-ableism training (structural) and disability awareness training (interpersonal). Review this continuous professional development regularly	Provide an online space for disabled learners which recognises disabled learners as an equity group and has clear, safe, supported, and moderated content	Information for and about disabled learners is easily accessible and easy to find (for all relevant people) Specifically, support, accommodations and assistive technologies are available and how can they be accessed	Articulate and develop an intentionally close relationship between Disability and Access Services and Kaihāpai Māori Services to actively collaborate in developing culturally responsive solutions for disabled ākonga Māori	Recruit for disability and access roles with experience of disability
Staff training in UD principles and evaluation of the application of these principles in Learning Design and Delivery Directorates	Provide imagery and stories of disabled people in website information and in courseware	Information is easy to update and edit regularly	Include bi-cultural leadership for Disability and Access services in recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi)	Disability and access mentor roles are scoped and offered as part time, flexible, and job share to increase the chances of disabled people applying
Include disabled learners in the development of training material so that learner voice is woven throughout the learning experience	Encourage and enable retrospective (post-enrolment) identification of disability	Information shared is respectful, accurate and provides relevant descriptions of learner needs.	Ensure Te Tiriti principles are integral to all levels of the service	Active recruitment of disabled people across the organisation with disability competency as an element of all recruitment
Regular updates for staff on Disability and Access Services, and resources and assistive tools available	Include questions in enrolment disclosure about preferred ways of learning that frame specific learning needs	Information is detailed enough to satisfy examination and reasonable accommodation requirements	Require that all Disability and Access staff access professional development in te ao Māori, te reo, and tikanga	Position description responsibilities include active connection with the wider disabled community and collaboration with services that can offer after-study employment pathways

Clear mapping of the intersections where general staff, teaching staff and Disability and Access staff responsibilities meet	Provide regular touchpoints, from enrolment to completion, where learners are prompted to share any updates or changes in need	Information shared is derived from an Individual Access Plan co-constructed by the learner and Disability and Access staff	Actively promote and celebrate Māori understanding of disability as part of Disability and Access services	
Actively invite diversity and disability in advertising for staff, tutor, and mentor positions	Include information about access to support as induction for new teaching staff	Data sovereignty principles underpin information sharing and are clearly communicated to learners at first engagement with Disability and Access Services	Use te reo Māori and NZSL naming for the service, in consultation with community	
Make disability competency part of recruitment questions for staff				
Provide space in online courses for learners and staff to introduce themselves				
Provide multiple avenues for learners to engage with tutors or access staff when they have specific access concerns				

Aspirational enhancements for Disability and Access Services in ODFL: The biggest difference

Through the interconnected aspirations of the themes summarised above, we understand that the biggest difference is the disability confidence of kaimahi across the organisation. Although there is some overlap with the themes of critical relationships and knowledge gaps, the theme of disability confidence caught the most attention and prompted the most recommendations from disabled ākonga. Disability confidence is displayed when kaimahi know about disability, about their responsibility to provision equitable services with inclusive practices, and about the services and accommodations they can offer. Lack of disability confidence in kaimahi results in practices that are discriminatory and further disabling. This finding connects to the Ecological Model but highlights the importance of human actors in eco systems compared with the non-human actors of algorithms, assistive tools, and learning design accessibility. While these tools are deemed necessary and helpful, they are now an expected part of the learning resources that ākonga will access, often autonomously and independently. Greater value is found in the responsiveness of kaimahi. The theme highlights the underlying requirement of a collective disability consciousness as disabled ākonga navigate the complexities of online learning from their own unique perspectives. As described by the Ecological Model and Crip Theory, the stories and narratives of disabled ākonga are vital for easing barriers to access and providing inspiration for those entering the institution. The findings also link to the Active Model in emphasising the importance of disabled ākonga having choice and control, from enrolment disclosure to access and availability of services at any time throughout the learning experience. This theme draws

attention to the contradictory application of the Social Model in ODFL. We noted that most references to negative experience related to neurodiversity, and fewest related to physical disability. The critical concern here is of the hidden nature of neurodiversity in the provision of ODFL education. There might be less concern about adapting the built environment for ākonga with physical impairments, but there must be more attention to services and accommodation for those with neurodiverse conditions.

Within the overarching principles of the Social Model, aspirational disability and access services are envisioned as flowing and changeable, moving with ākonga, adapting to fit their needs and pace, navigating, and removing obstacles and barriers as they emerge. Services are an integral part of the ODFL experience. Access is an accepted, embraced part of the learning environment, connected to the outside world of tertiary education and multiple future pathways. The experience of respect and empathy is central to disability and access services in ODFL, as is an understanding of the experience and sometimes multiple and invisible identities of ākonga, their navigation of the wider institution, and the complexities of disclosure. Facilitating a welcoming entry through a safe disclosure process is a first step, followed by strong relationship building where ākonga have agency and ownership of access to solutions. Information-sharing processes are safe and coordinated with ākonga actively involved in decision-making. Finally, services must be recognised as an institutional and collective responsibility with overt practices that demonstrate disability confidence across all kaimahi.

Successfully serving disabled ākonga needs in ODFL, Disability and Access Services is situated within an organisation and a wider social and political context that has high expectations and aspirations for disabled people. The findings of this research rest within this fluid context and are likely to shift in response to change. Questions raised in this paper are unresolved; for example, will addressing disability confidence close the knowledge gap and reduce the importance of critical relationships? How is the invisibility of further aspects of intersectionality (beyond that of ākonga Māori) analysed and addressed? How do we define or redefine the equity gap between disabled and non-disabled ākonga? This research also highlights the critical investment required in cultivating an access-positive culture that makes disclosure of disability and access needs straightforward, safe, supported, and stigma-free. Disability consciousness requires an access-first, UDL approach to learning design, teaching, assessment, and all processes of enrolment and orientation. Services must fund access adaptations from web design through to individualised technologies targeted to specific impairments. Disabled ākonga must see themselves represented in marketing, in courseware, in disability and access staffing, and in the disability-confident kaimahi of the institution where there is an ongoing and collective responsibility to ask disabled ākonga: “What would make the biggest difference?”

Implications and limitations

The intention of this paper was to describe a localised approach to enhancing disability and access services to reflect the needs and aspirations of disabled ākonga in the ODFL environment of Kuratini Tuwhera, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. This approach is informed by the underpinning theoretical understanding of the Social Model, the Ecological Model, the Active Model, and Crip Theory. It is further informed by disabled ākonga voice, gathered through a year-long advisory-group engagement with disabled ākonga and kaimahi. Through the five themes raised through this engagement, the paper details insights into the experience and recommendations of disabled ākonga in ODFL, across the spectrum of disability.

A key finding of this paper is that the biggest difference to disabled ākonga experience in ODFL is found in the disability confidence of the kaimahi they encounter during their learning experience. This finding is limited by the size of the disability advisory group which comprises a group of volunteers whose disabilities included hearing, sight, physical injury, and the

neurodiverse categories of autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. This group could not be considered representative of all Open Polytechnic disabled ākonga. The small size of the group results in a small data set, making it difficult to generalise the findings, which are most useful as an indicator of experiences and views of disabled ākonga studying in ODFL. Findings are further limited by the inability to measure the outcomes of this study. Vocational education and other external environmental turbulence have affected the full implementation of recommendations. Two years on, the Disability and Access Advisory Group is now solely ākonga led, without kaimahi.

Despite its limitations, this paper has implications for the development of similar services in ODFL and in tertiary or vocational education. The paper determines that disability and access in ODFL is a complex responsibility that presents challenges for disabled ākonga, kaimahi, and the institution. It determines that services developed for this environment must embrace this complex responsibility with openness to multiple and varied needs across the full spectrum of impairments: long term and short term—physical, sensory, neurological, psychiatric, or learning. It further determines that in a time of increasing pre-occupation with advancing technologies such as artificial intelligence, assistive tools, and other such smart products, a time when learning design is driven by alignment with UDL principles and WCAG, it is the human-to-human component of the ODFL learning experience that makes the biggest difference.

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