Te Pūkenga

Te Rito

Insights from learners and staff – opportunities to enhance success for Te Pūkenga disabled learners

Part Three – Ākonga at the Centre research project – July 2021

Executive Summary

We are grateful to the current disabled learners and their support staff who provided valuable feedback about their experiences of vocational education in Aotearoa.

This very honest feedback has been divided into key insights to assist Te Pūkenga to find solutions to resolve the eight key barriers that disabled learners and support staff have identified.

It is exciting that disabled learners are now one of three priority learner groups alongside Māori and Pacific learners. For too long, disabled learners have been the forgotten group. Struggling in a 'disabling' education system that often doesn't consider their impairment related-learning support needs, despite 24 percent of our community having an impairment lasting six months or more.

By putting the needs of disabled learners at the very centre, Te Pūkenga has a real opportunity to finally ensure equity for disabled learners. However, this will only occur if we are willing to listen to what the disabled learners and their support staff have told us. We must take action to resolve the barriers that disabled learners face.

Disabled learners have told us in this report that when they receive the right impairment-related learning support it makes a huge difference to their academic achievement and life in general:

> **'I put my heart and soul into my assignments and received good marks. I now know I have good ideas and my voice and opinions are worth something.'**
>
> **'The biggest thing I've taken away from studying is that I am not dumb and incapable after all.'**
>
> **''People need to believe in me and see that I can do it.'**

Support staff think that for more disabled learners to have this opportunity:

> **'Disability needs to be more recognised as an equity group. It needs more focus on the system and how we promote disability achievement.'**

According to Stats NZ and the Tertiary Education Commission disabled learners are one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Aotearoa. However, in 2019 the Tertiary Education Commission found that if disabled learners get the right support they are equally likely to complete their post-secondary qualification as non-disabled people.

So why are so few disabled people attaining formal qualifications or accessing vocational and tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Learning environments are essentially designed for non-disabled students that create barriers for some academically capable disabled learners. If their impairment-related learning support needs are not considered in teaching, learning and assessment and there is no infrastructure to support them and their teaching staff, disabled learners will face barriers to their participation and achievement in vocational education.

> **'Despite struggling from the beginning of school right through until the end nobody picked up on my obvious difficulties … If this was picked up, support put into place, and accommodations made my life could have turned out very different.'**

The feedback received from current disabled learners and their support staff provides an honest insight into the barriers that they face and the solutions or enablers they suggest to create an inclusive vocational environment, where the staff who support them feel 'disability confident'.

This will only occur if people at all levels of the vocational education system take responsibility for supporting disabled learners. Historically, tertiary education providers have tended to delegate support of disabled learners to their staff within Disability Support Services.

There needs to be a top down approach to supporting disabled learners, otherwise:
- disabled learners will stay on the margins despite being one of the largest equity groups.
- Disability Support Services will become overwhelmed as the number of disabled learners enrolling in vocational education increases
- many teaching and other staff who support disabled learners will lack the 'disability confidence' to create a fully inclusive teaching, learning and assessment environment.

The analysis of feedback from current disabled learners and their support staff has identified the following barriers and enablers:

1. Lack of disability awareness from teaching and other staff

Enablers to Resolve this Barrier

a. Staff understand the educational barriers disabled learners face
b. Support from lecturers with inclusive teaching practice, learning support and assessment
c. Staff see the benefits of vocational training for disabled learners.

2. Issues impacting on disabled learners receiving the right learning support
a. Lack of learning support
b. Lack of Information about courses, academic requirements or learning support
c. Delayed learning support
d. Lack of learning support or flexibility with assessments and exams
e. Lack of learning support because of no diagnosis or funding for assessments
f. Inconsistent Covid-19 response and the difficulties with online learning
g. Disability Support Services (DDS) staff being overwhelmed by the increasing demand for their services
h. The difficulties of having part-time or limited DSS staff.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers
a. All staff taking responsibility for supporting disabled learners rather than delegating this to DSS Staff
b. All tertiary providers contacting disabled learners at enrolment
c. Providing the right impairment-related learning support
d. Focusing on what a disabled learner is good at
e. Staff valuing the skills of disabled learners.

3. Some disabled learners are reluctant to associate with DSS or provide impairment information
a. Being scared to provide personal information about their impairment or seek help
b. Fear that they will be treated similar to how they were treated at school.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

Creating a safe environment to associate with DSS or provide impairment information. The key to disabled learners providing personal information about their disability or impairment is creating a 'safe environment' for them to overcome their fear about how this information will be used, and how they will be treated if they provide this information. If disabled learners understand the purpose for asking for this information and how it will be used, they are far more likely to provide this information.

4. Some disabled learners are feeling overwhelmed
a. Feeling overwhelmed about their ability to do further study and some classroom activities
b. Lack of support from peers.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

a. More support for students experiencing mental health issues
b. More support from staff when a disabled learner is struggling
c. Assistance from staff with peer support.

5. Financial hardship and lack of funding for impairment-related learning support
a. Poverty and financial hardship for some disabled learners
b. Lack of funding for impairment-related learning support, particularly for those with high support needs.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

a. Increasing funding for learning support for disabled learners with high support needs
b. Supporting disabled learners with course fees and other costs, and better financial information to make informed decisions about studying
c. Considering Financial Allowances and withdrawal policies to meet disabled learner needs.

6. Lack of Employment Pathways for disabled learners
a. Lack of Academic Pathways leading to employment or further study
b. Lack of Employment Opportunities for disabled learners.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

a. Resolving the barriers to Academic Pathways for some disabled learners
b. Introducing more Employment Pathways through internships and course work placements.

7. Inaccessible Communication and Information
a. Lack of information about courses, academic requirements or available learning support for disabled learners in accessible formats
b. Inaccessible digital platforms and computer technology
c. Lack of access to computer devices, wifi and data can be a huge barrier for some disabled learners on low incomes.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

a. Accessing information and communication that considers that there are disabled learners who require information and communication in alternative formats
b. Developing the computer literacy skills of all disabled learners.

8. Inaccessible physical environment for disabled learners
a. Elevators can be an issue for some disabled learners and not all parts of campuses are accessible - heavy doors, inaccessible buildings, and steep sites.

Enablers to Resolve these Barriers

a. Disabled learners visiting a campus prior to enrolment to determine any barriers to physical access and access routes
b. Developing a Physical Access Plan and committing funds each year to a prioritised list of physical access provisions, in partnership with disabled learners and support staff
c. Completing regular physical access audits.

The Way Forward

The Kia Ōrite Toolkit has been developed by the Tertiary Education Commission and Achieve and includes a range of tools to assist tertiary education providers to develop Disability Action Plans. Until this occurs disabled learners will continue to experience the various barriers in the vocational education system that are described in this report.

Disability Action Plans should be developed in partnership with disabled learners with different impairments. These learners should be active partners in the development and review of design of buildings, course content, teaching practices, information and communication processes and learning support, which will save vocational providers time and money longer term. It will provide them with valuable insights that they may not have considered in their design and planning. Vocational providers that don't have mandated representative disabled student groups should be encouraged to establish these, rather than consulting with individual disabled learners.

Staff within vocational education should be provided with guidance and training on the use of non-discriminatory practices. These staff need to be aware of their legal obligations under the Human Rights Act, the Privacy Act and the Health and Disability Commission Code of Rights.

According to the Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman (2019), individual requests for reasonable accommodations must be considered constructively and careful thought should be given as to whether any modifications can be made to assist disabled learners to participate for example in a course of study. Every reasonable effort should be made to accommodate disabled learners, and in circumstances where this is not practical, alternative options should be explored.

To conclude, a fully inclusive and equitable vocational education system recognises and values disabled learners.

To achieve this, the following actions are recommended:

1. Develop and Implement Disability Action Plans at both the strategic and provider levels of the vocational education system, using the Kia Ōrite Toolkit.

2. Develop a consistent infrastructure across the vocational education system for supporting disabled learners. This should enable all staff to be 'disability confident' and make it easy to provide effective learning support for disabled learners with different impairments.

3. Require all providers in the vocational education system to ask questions at enrolment that identify those disabled learners who require learning support. Guidelines for creating a safe environment for disabled learners are also developed and implemented consistently.

4. Review whether disabled learners should require a diagnosis if they have obvious learning support needs.

5. Develop nationally consistent policies, procedures and guidelines for teaching and other staff for supporting disabled learners with online learning.

6. Require all providers to establish and work in partnership with representative disabled student associations and groups.

7. Review the funding model for paying for learning support for those with high support needs.

8. Negotiate national bulk assessment arrangements for those disabled learners who require an assessment or diagnosis.

9. Develop policies and procedures so disabled learners are not disadvantaged financially if they study part-time, withdraw or don't pass all their courses due to an impairment.

10. Complete further research and develop consistent systems for reporting information about current disabled learners from different impairment groups.

11. Require providers to implement the Ministry of Social Development 'Accessibility Charter' programme, as part of their Disability Action Plan,

12. Develop strategies to improve the digital and computer literacy skills and access to devices, wifi and data of disabled learners.

13. Require all vocational providers to develop a Physical Access Plan, complete regular physical access audits and commit funds to improve physical access; in partnership with disabled learners and disability support staff.

14. Recommend the Ministry of Education develops solutions to resolve the significant issues raised by some disabled learners about the lack of learning support and their treatment at secondary school. One remedy would be to require all secondary schools to develop a Disability Action Plan, based on the Kia Ōrite Toolkit.

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