Te Wānanga o Aotearoa Disability Action Plan 2025-2028

Ki Te Hoe – Hau Whaikaha

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About Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa was established in 1984 to provide educational opportunities for those whose needs were not being met by the mainstream education. We have gone on to become one of Aotearoa New Zealand's largest tertiary education providers, enhancing the skills and employment opportunities of more than 300,000 graduates.

At Te Wānanga o Aotearoa we seek to make a difference that reverberates through the lives of tauira and on to their whānau, their hapū, their community. Our vision, mission and values are our guiding lights by which we navigate.

Ko te Whakakitenga / Our vision:
He takapau mātauranga, he whānau huarewa / Whānau transformation through education

Ko te Uaratanga / Our mission:
Kia angitu te tauira / Tauira success

Our tauira must be at the heart of everything. They are the vehicle through which we achieve whānau transformation. They come from different backgrounds, but all come to better themselves and their whānau. The role of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa is to facilitate the transformation they seek by providing a Kaupapa Māori experience through high quality relevant education.

Ko ngā Uara / our values:
- Te Aroha- Having regard for one another and those for whom we are responsible and to whom we are accountable.
- Te Whakapono- The basis of our beliefs and the confidence that what we are doing is right.
- Ngā Ture- The knowledge that our actions are morally and ethically right and that we are acting in an honourable manner.
- Kotahitanga- Unity amongst iwi and other ethnicities; standing as one.

Ko te manu e kai ana i te miro, nōna te ngahere.
Ko te manu e kai ana i te mātauranga, nōnā te ao.
The bird who feasts on the miro berry, theirs is the forest.
The bird who feasts on knowledge, theirs is the world.

Disability Action Plan Overview

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa aim to overcome barriers to learning, and to meet the needs of all within the communities we serve, including tāngata whaikaha / disabled people.

This Disability Action Plan demonstrates our commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of tāngata whaikaha. The plan looks at disability within a Te Ao Māori context and takes a Te Ao Māori-centric approach to its creation. The experiences of tāngata whaikaha with a range of impairments have been central to the development of the plan and it is important that we acknowledge their contribution.

He aha te mea nui o te ao?
He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata!
What is the most important thing in the world?
It is people, it is people, it is people!

Defining disability at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

The New Zealand Disability Strategy and the Tertiary Education Commission use the term "disabled people" or "disabled learners" to explain that disability is not something people "have." Instead, people have impairments, which can be physical, sensory, neurological, mental health-related, learning-related, or other types. Disability happens when people with impairments face barriers in society, such as negative attitudes or lack of access to physical spaces, communication, or information.

Guided by a Te Ao Māori perspective, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa use the terms below to refer to disabled people, disabled learners and staff, and their whānau.

- Tāngata whaikaha – disabled people.
- Tāngata whaikaha Māori – Māori disabled people.
- Tauira whaikaha – disabled students.
- Kaimahi whaikaha – disabled staff.
- Whānau tāngata whaikaha – whānau of disabled people.

We also acknowledge that tāngata whaikaha are diverse, and some may not want to use these kupu to describe themselves. We respect the right of tāngata whaikaha to self-determine how they describe themselves.

Developing our Disability Action Plan

Our approach to planning, consultation, and creation of the Disability Action Plan aligns with the Kia Ōrite Toolkit, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa strategy plan Te Pae Tawhiti, and looks at disability from a Te Ao Māori context. Importantly, these all look to put people at the heart of everything we do.

An initial series of four online wānanga were conducted in June 2023, two for kaimahi (staff) and two for tauira (students). Forty individuals attended across these wānanga, including tauira whaikaha, whānau tāngata whaikaha, kaimahi whaikaha, and kaimahi who work with tauira whaikaha in student services. The lived experiences of these groups identified current barriers for tauira whaikaha and the barriers that kaimahi encounter when seeking to provide supports.

The second series of online wānanga was tauira whaikaha-centric and included both one-on-one kōrero and group wānanga. These were conducted five months after the initial series of wānanga, providing additional interview time with tauira whaikaha, and to ensure tauira voice was adequately and appropriately represented in the process.

The findings from these exploratory wānanga have informed the Disability Action Plan. We are grateful to all those who shared their experiences and whakaaro to help with the development of this plan.

Key findings from the exploratory wānanga

Tauira whaikaha across all interviews spoke highly of their learning experience at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, of their engagements with staff, and of their educational engagements. Tauira went to great lengths to explain how inclusive, supportive, and accessible much of their learning experiences had been with Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. For tauira with hidden disabilities, brain injuries, and neurodivergent needs, the learning styles, and inclusive practices they experienced at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa were conducive to learner success.

Our approach to Ako, grounded in our Kaupapa Matua, has been identified by our tauira whaikaha as a key strength in ensuring they receive support that reflects their cultural identity and connection to whānau and iwi—for both Māori and tauiwi. Tauira whaikaha have highlighted the accessibility of our delivery methods, the encouragement and support provided by kaimahi, and the flexibility offered, which often meets their diverse learning needs.

While our tauira believe our support is effective, several areas have been identified for refinement. These improvements are seen as enhancements to an already well-functioning approach rather than a need for fundamental change. These are grouped into six core areas:

1. The enrolment process and disclosure of need.
2. Disability support worker processes.
3. Accessing locations and learning resources.
4. Increasing disability-related knowledge.
5. Delivering programmes in diverse locations.
6. Measuring Tāngata Whaikaha participation, experiences and achievements.

1.0 The enrolment process and disclosure of need

A key barrier identified by kaimahi when seeking to support tauira whaikaha was the current enrolment process and associated system for disclosing and identifying disabilities and learning barriers. Alongside this, tauira were not always confident to disclose their needs, due to past negative experiences (not at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa) that brought feelings of shame and stigma around needing support.

There were a range of barriers and challenges identified by kaimahi and tauira in this area:

- Enrolment processes for disability disclosure are not mana enhancing and do not support a Māori centred approach to disability.
- Enrolment processes assumed a formal medical diagnosis with paperwork confirmation – this is not always possible due to barriers in the health system (e.g. a formal ADHD diagnosis is lengthy and expensive).
- Questions asked during enrolment are insufficient for determining level of support or what accommodations were needed.
- Enrolment processes do not always include an in-person follow up to determine what support is appropriate.
- Tauira whaikaha were not always aware of what accommodations were available.
- Tauira whaikaha who had disclosed their disability described a range of needed accommodations that were specific to their disability and did not always 'fit' into offered disability support. This left tauira whaikaha unsure who to talk to or who to ask regarding requesting accommodations that were different to requiring a reader/writer.
- When tauira whaikaha did disclose their disability to kaimahi, they found the kaimahi supportive and encouraging, but not necessarily knowledgeable about disability best practice.

2.0 Disability support worker processes

Related to the enrolment process were comments around the hiring of Disability Support Workers (DSW). Kaimahi and tauira alike found this process unhelpful, unworkable, and it did not always meet the specified need. A particular challenge is that the process of applying for, and receiving, the funding for DSWs is set by an external organisation. This negatively impacts on the learning outcomes for tauira whaikaha.

Additional barriers and challenges were identified by kaimahi and tauira in this area:

- Employing a DSW is presumed to be sufficient support.
- DSWs are not always suitable for what the tauira needs.
- DSW is more of a 'reader/writer' and may not understand disability.
- DSW is not employed until after the student starts the course, which, by the time they start is often too late for those on an 18-week course.
- DSW support does not 'roll over' for re-enrolling students, causing stress and insecurity for the student, DSW, and kaimahi alike.

3.0 Accessing locations and learning resources

While some Te Wānanga o Aotearoa locations and building sites were physically accessible for persons with mobility-related disabilities, others were not. Physical access was inconsistent across the motu. Physical mobility needs to be a key priority when considering locations and sites. Key issues were identified as:

- Wheelchair accessibility and access for those with mobility issues is not always a key priority when considering suitable sites.
- Accessible parking is not always sufficient.
- A building WOF does not equate to accessibility.

A related challenge is that Noho Marae learning experiences were not always conducted at marae with accessible facilities. This is particularly challenging for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, as marae are a core part of the learning experience yet, are owned and operated by external organisations to Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. Key issues identified are:

- Noho Marae are a compulsory part of the course but are not always held at accessible marae.
- Not everyone has the physical mobility to manage sleeping marae styles.
- Some forms of hidden disability mean sleeping on a marae is difficult (e.g. epilepsy, sleep apnoea).
- Transport to Noho Marae often assumed use of/or access to a car, which was difficult for tauira whaikaha who are unable to drive.
- Communication and planning around Noho Marae were not always clear; it was not obvious whether a marae was accessible.

4.0 Disability-related knowledge and information sharing

Kaimahi expressed a strong interest in providing an accessible education for all tauira. However, they were unsure where to go to find the knowledge they needed when they needed it. Subsequently, kaimahi felt ill-equipped to manage the breadth and depth of knowledge required to deliver needed access/supports for tauira whaikaha.

Findings from interviews with kaimahi on this theme are summarised below:

- Wanting to ensure their teaching practice was inclusive and supportive.
- Feeling inadequate due to not knowing how to best support tauira whaikaha.
- Being unsure what training was available or where to go to find this information.
- Unaware of external agencies / organisations that provide disability support.
- Not all tauira had a formal diagnosis or knew what accommodations they needed, making it difficult for kaimahi to know how to best support.
- Not knowing what language to use/questions to ask in order to provide needed supports and concerned about being unintentionally offensive.
- No training on undisclosed disability, hidden disabilities, or how best to proceed once this is made known.
- Unsure of the process to follow if tauira disclose a previously unknown disability.

- Request for specialist disability knowledge to be included in various training opportunities (e.g. how to ensure documents were accessible for blind and low vision whānau).

Disability is a complex topic; spanning many areas and accommodations can be highly specific and incredibly varied. This makes it challenging for kaimahi and creates an additional barrier in that, learning what a particular tauira whaikaha requires can necessitate a great deal of extra reading, and time-consuming research by the kaimahi. Kaimahi expressed a preference for being able to talk to knowledgeable others, knowing who they can ask, and knowing where to go to easily find the information they need, when they need it. This came through in interviews with tauira also. Tauira spoke positively and warmly of their relationship with kaimahi and the efforts being made. However, they also noted that kaimahi needed additional training in the area of disability delivery.

The area of accessible communications was also mentioned. This included the provisions of clear and direct communication for neurodivergent as well as ensuring accessibility for blind and low vision persons. Deaf attendees requested the inclusion of a LOOP system in all classrooms, and for sound projection to occur in all classrooms. The hard of hearing noted how hard it was to hear classmates and teachers alike when microphones were not used. Kaimahi expressed uncertainty regarding if communications (both generally from Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and those used in their classroom) were accessible for tauira whaikaha, and were unsure who to ask/where to go to check this in advance.

5.0 A national provider delivering programmes in diverse locations

A key challenge for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa is being a national provider of educational programmes that are delivered across a wide range of local sites by local people. Additionally, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa is unique in the tertiary provider space as it does not charge student fees to learn in most cases. Issues identified over time include:

- Multiple systems, with varying efficacy, to track the number of tauira whaikaha, their needs, or the resourcing required to support them effectively.
- Kaimahi (Kaiako, Kaitiaki, Kaiaromatawai, Tauira Support) may not have the necessary training, tools, or resources to provide adequate support for tauira whaikaha.
- Varying level of meaningful connections with iwi and hāpori Māori based support services.
- Significant investment required for accessibility improvements, with funding constraints delaying essential changes.
- Inconsistent infrastructure across sites, impacting accessibility for tauira with mobility, vision, or hearing disabilities.
- Limited accessibility of online learning platforms for tauira with vision impairments or neurodivergent needs, restricting their full participation.
- Programme delivery methods that may not adequately cater to the needs of tauira with neurodivergence or sensory disabilities.

Training in the area of disability and accessibility, as well as remedial work on sites will likely require significant resourcing. Further work is required to identify site-specific needs, determine resourcing levels, and secure appropriate funding sources.

6.0 Measuring Tāngata Whaikaha participation, experiences and achievements

Outside of the feedback given in the exploratory wānanga, it is also recognised that there is an opportunity for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa to review its data collection, insights and reporting processes related to tāngata whaikaha – in terms of participation, experiences and achievements. Key issues experienced include:

- There is an absence of robust systems to accurately track and report on the participation, experiences, and achievements of tāngata whaikaha, specifically.
- Outside of the wider organisational achievement targets, there are no established benchmarks or targets to specifically support outcomes for tāngata whaikaha.
- The absence of integrated, consistent data limits the ability to make informed, evidence-based decisions that directly respond to the needs of tāngata whaikaha.
- There is currently no structured way to determine whether support services and interventions are having a meaningful impact on tāngata whaikaha success.
- A lack of in-depth, systematic reporting makes it challenging to assess the effectiveness of current strategies and initiatives.

Improvements in these areas should reflect the impact of actions being implemented as part of the Disability Action Plan and represent key measures of progress and success.

2025-2028 Disability Action Plan

A range of suggested remedial actions have been identified to address the barriers and challenges experienced by tāngata whaikaha and kaimahi. Additional actions have been added to the plan around measuring the participation, experience and achievements of tāngata whaikaha to ensure measurable outcomes are taken, and feedback gained to help guide future mahi and improvements. Te Wānanga o Aotearoa will work on these actions according to the timeframes as set out in the plan below.

The Disability Action Plan has been endorsed by Ngā Pou Whakahaere (Executive Team), who understand the importance of a providing a genuinely inclusive, accessible environment and high-quality education for everyone at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, including tāngata whaikaha.

The overall responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of the Disability Action Plan is the Director National Delivery & Tauira Success, who will also ensure Ngā Pou Whakahaere is regularly updated with progress on the plan and recommend any adjustments if required. A range of other workstream owners will be responsible for the different workstreams within the plan and will report directly to Director National Delivery & Tauira Success:

- The enrolment process and disclosure of need – Director Tauira Engagement and Relationships.
- Disability support worker processes – Manager National Tauira Services.
- Accessing locations and learning resources – Director Operations.
- Increasing disability-related knowledge – Manager National Tauira Services.
- Delivering programmes in diverse locations – Director Takiwā Delivery and Director National Delivery & Tauira.
- Measuring Tāngata Whaikaha participation, experiences and achievements – Director Te Karumārama.

A Communications Plan will be developed to raise awareness and promote the Disability Action Plan amongst tauira and kaimahi.

An annual review process will be undertaken to gauge progress on the Disability Action Plan and to inform any adjustments if necessary. The evaluation programme will be overseen by Manager National Tauira Services, supported by the workstream owners, with the first review to be completed by Quarter 3, 2026.

Disability Action Plan

The plan proposes the following completion timeframes:

1. Mid-term: 1-3 years
2. Long-term: 5+ years

Mid-Term (1-3yrs)		Ongoing		Long-term change (5+yrs)		Responsibility (Lead)
1.0 The enrolment process and disclosure of need						
1.1	Review enrolment questions relating to disability disclosure.	1.3	Review process of communicating provision of disability support so that kaimahi and tauira know who to talk to with Te Wānanga o Aotearoa regarding providing disability support and needed accommodations. This information is available, but not necessarily known.	1.5	Implement a new enrolment process involving a one-on-one phone call with tauira who disclose a disability. The aim is to have an open, honest, and supportive conversation that will clarify the types of supports the tauira requires for learning success, communicate these to the kaimahi, and work alongside all three to assist with communication and implementation of accommodations and supports.	Director Tauira Engagement
1.2	Rewrite to be mana enhancing and strengths-based yet allow for direct communication and honest appraisal of learning needs and space to describe needed disability supports.	1.4	Review professional development offerings for kaimahi and consider ongoing disability responsiveness as an option.			
2.0 Disability support workers						
2.1	Review DSW employment processes to more accurately	2.3	Develop actions and policies around understanding the ways	2.4	Consider alternative options for DSW employment, such as	Director National Delivery & Tauira Success

reflect tauira learning needs. 2.2 Review DSW role to consider if fit for purpose and consider alternative options.	in which disabilities present in everyday life and how everyone can support and include. This is particularly pertinent to undiagnosed and/or undisclosed neurodivergence (e.g. autism, ADHD, learning difficulties).	long-term contracts and/or combine with disability training and awareness roles.	
3.0 Accessing locations and learning resources			
3.1 Include site and location accessibility for disabled persons in policies and procedures pertaining to hiring new sites and renewing contracts. 3.2 Access audits to identify barriers and solutions on locations/sites.	3.3 Accessibility included as a key priority in new builds/when securing new sites. 3.4 Work with kaimahi who plan and book Noho Marae to prioritise accessibility considerations.	3.5 Develop appropriate policies regarding tauira access needs and Noho Marae. 3.6 Work with local groups to improve marae accessibility.	Director Business Services
4.0 Disability-related knowledge and information sharing			
4.1 Develop mana enhancing process for reviewing teaching practice to ensure Kaiako are upskilled in delivery to meet best practice regarding disability inclusion. 4.2 As noted under enrolment, train and	4.3 Work with existing local disability advisors in various localities to provide training and support for kaimahi as part of their ongoing professional development. 4.4 Ongoing training and support for kaimahi so	4.7 Develop professional training plans which include disability as a matter of course. 4.8 As noted under enrolment, develop wider awareness across the whole of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa regarding the ways in which disabilities	Director National Delivery & Tauira Success

resource kaimahi to have mana enhancing conversations with tauira whaikaha who are the expert on their condition and know what they need.	they know where to go to find specialist knowledge and support. 4.5 Te Wānanga o Aotearoa communications to include accessibility for all national and regional. Communications. 4.6 Include disability/accessibility to policies.	present in everyday life, the shame and stigma that has been imposed, and the ways in which kaimahi and tauira can decolonise imposed colonial norms. 4.9 LOOP systems to be included as a matter of course in all classrooms.	
5.0 Delivering programmes in diverse locations			
5.1 Develop data collecting processes that are comprehensive, and which accurately track the level of resourcing required for tauira whaikaha. 5.2 Identify need and resourcing necessary for adequately equipping kaimahi. 5.3 Establishing partnerships with hapū and iwi to ensure culturally appropriate support for tauira whaikaha. 5.4 Advocate at national levels for adequate resourcing for accessibility.			Director National Delivery & Tauira Success

5.5 Undertake audit of current physical sites to determine levels of accessibility across the physical domains of disability (mobility, vision, hearing). 5.6 Undertake audit of current online programme delivery to determine levels of accessibility (vision, neurodivergence). 5.7 Undertake audit of current programme delivery to determine levels of accessibility across the neurological domains of disability (neurodivergence, sensory).			
6.0 Measuring Tāngata Whaikaha participation, experiences and achievements			
6.1 Review and enhance measurements, data collection and reporting around the participation, experience and achievements of tāngata whaikaha. 6.2 Benchmark key measures and set targets for improvement.	6.4 Ongoing measurement and reporting of participation, experience and achievements of tāngata whaikaha to help guide future mahi and improvements.		Director National Delivery & Tauira Success

6.3 Improve the SMS, Tauira Management System to provide consistent and integrated data.			

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa

Appendices

Relevant links:

Neurodiversity resources: https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/neurodiversity-resources/

Disability Action Plans – summary from Tertiary Education Commission: https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/disability-action-plans

Disability Action Plan guidance: https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Oritetanga/DAP-Guidance-for-TEOs-March-2024.pdf

Kia Ōrite Toolkit: https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/disability-action-plans/kia-orite-toolkit-achieving-equity-for-disabled-learners/

Tertiary success for everyone: https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/

New Zealand Disability Strategy: https://www.odi.govt.nz/about-us/programmes-strategies-and-studies/programmes-and-strategies/new-zealand-disability-strategy

Enabling Good Lives (EGL) principles: https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/egl-approach/principles/

Key articles from the UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples: https://www.tpk.govt.nz/docs/tpk-undrip-declaration-en-2021.pdf

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training: https://www.adcet.edu.au/
ADCET is Australia's leading resource on disability in tertiary education for disability practitioners, educators, and students.

Available training and supports:

Blind Low Vision NZ have accessibility guidelines and handy tips on their website: https://blindlowvision.org.nz/information/web-accessibility-tips/
https://blindlowvision.org.nz/how-we-can-help/businesses-and-professionals/accessible-documents-and-websites/

Web Accessibility Standards and Guidelines: https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/design-and-ux/accessibility/

Web Accessibility Standards and Guidelines: https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/design-and-ux/accessibility/

Access Advisors: A pan-disability digital accessibility consultancy with a mission to help New Zealand become more digitally inclusive. https://accessadvisors.nz/

CCS Disability Action have local access advisors who can do the following:
- Contracting to local authorities to undertake Street Accessibility Audits in partnership with MRCagney, which help to make footpaths, streets and parking safe and easy for everyone to use.
- Assessing plans for new building designs, footpaths and playgrounds.
- Supporting you through the consent process in the concept/planning stages.
- Advising on universally usable fixtures and fittings.
- Preparing an accessibility report of your existing building.
- Education and training for a broader audience on universal access, design and disability awareness.
- Breaking down attitudinal barriers to inclusion.

See https://www.ccsdisabilityaction.org.nz/access-advisory-services

Australian site with a collection of tools for checking your website and seeing if it is accessible: https://www.switchit.com/blog/accessibility/top-6-accessibility-tools-for-sites-that-work-for-everyone.aspx

American blog with examples of what works for web accessibility (and what doesn't): https://fuzzymath.com/blog/improve-accessibility-for-visually-impaired-users/

Access Matters Aotearoa: https://www.accessmatters.org.nz/

New Zealand Disability Employers' Network – training on accessible social media, documents, identifying barriers etc: https://nzden.org.nz/upcoming-trainings/

Achieve – Free training sessions for tertiary education: https://achieve.podia.com/