

Empowering learner agency in tertiary education: A path to lifelong learning and success

Introduction

Learner agency is a significant part of the Manako programme provided by Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence. The Manako programme, formerly known as the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Cultural Capability (ALNACC) programme, continues our partnership with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) to enhance educational capability across Aotearoa New Zealand. Embracing our roots and expertise in literacy, numeracy, and both Māori and Pacific cultural capability, the Manako programme expands our commitment to delivering inclusive and effective education, informed by the values and needs of all New Zealanders.

In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, learner agency – characterised by proactive, self-directed engagement – is increasingly vital, especially for adult foundation-level learners grappling with language, literacy, and numeracy challenges. This briefing paper focuses on elevating learner agency in Aotearoa New Zealand's adult foundation-level education, highlighting the critical role of tertiary educators. It advocates for professional development and reforms aimed at empowering educators to nurture learner agency. By doing so, adult learners can be better equipped to succeed in an evolving world. This paper outlines strategies for educators to foster this essential aspect of lifelong learning.

Understanding learner agency

Learner agency in adult education is the individual's ability to actively engage in their learning process, making informed decisions and taking responsibility for their educational journey. In Aotearoa New Zealand's adult foundation-level education, enhancing learner agency is crucial, particularly for those with limited language, literacy, and numeracy skills. These learners often face unique challenges that necessitate a heightened focus on developing their ability to direct and take ownership of their learning.



Barriers to learner agency

Adult learners, especially those with low skills, often encounter barriers that impede the development of agentic behaviours. These include limited access to resources, lack of confidence, and previous educational experiences that did not encourage self-directed learning. Educational organisations play a pivotal role in either fostering or hindering learner agency. Traditional teaching practices, which often prioritise content delivery over learner engagement, can inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of dependency and non-agentic learning.

Strategies for developing learner agency:

» **Developing enabling beliefs and affective responses**

Educators can foster a mindset shift in learners by promoting positive beliefs about their ability to learn and succeed. This involves creating a supportive environment that recognises and values learners' experiences and perspectives, thereby enhancing their confidence and motivation.

» **Developing self-learning skills**

To cultivate self-directed learners, educators should focus on developing metacognitive skills. This includes teaching strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning process. It also involves encouraging learners to set their own goals and reflect on their learning experiences.

» **Developing problem-solving skills for novel problems**

Equipping learners with the ability to tackle unfamiliar problems is key. This can be achieved by incorporating real-life, problem-based learning experiences that require critical thinking and adaptive learning strategies.

Future directions and recommendations

Ako Aotearoa will continue to lead the research and development needed to further understand and enhance learner agency in adult education in Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes exploring and sharing innovative teaching methods that place learners at the centre of their educational experience.

For policymakers, the Ministry of Education, the Tertiary Education Commission, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and Tertiary Education Organisation managers, the recommendations are clear:

Invest in professional development programmes focused on learner-centred pedagogies, and support initiatives that promote learner autonomy and engagement.

There is also a need for policy frameworks that encourage educational practices aligned with the principles of learner agency, ensuring that adult learners are equipped not just with foundational skills, but also with the capacity to be lifelong learners in an ever-evolving world.



Conclusion

This paper underscores the importance of nurturing learner agency in Aotearoa New Zealand's adult foundation-level education. Developing this agency promises significant long-term benefits, not only for individual learners but also for society at large, fostering a more engaged, adaptable, and skilled populace. It is imperative for stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and organisational leaders, to invest in and embrace strategies that cultivate learner agency. By doing so, we can ensure a future where adult learners are empowered to actively shape their educational paths and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

