



Supporting disabled tertiary learners in an online environment

Transcript of learning webinar held on 24 July 2020.

Sara Williams, Tertiary Education Commission

Aotearoa whenua.

Aotearoa atua.

Aotearoa pūkenga.

Aotearoa tangata.

Tēnā koutou.

Ko Sara Williams tōko ingoa.

E mahi ana ahau, ki Te Amorangi, Mātauranga Mātua.

Te wahanga Ōritetanga.

Kia ora and good morning to you all.

I hope that your day is as sunny as Wellington is today.

My name is Sara Williams and I work in the Learner Success team at the Tertiary Education Commission.

A huge welcome to you today, to our session 'Supporting disabled learners in an online environment'.

We're really glad you could take the time to join us today.

A couple of housekeeping points, as you may have seen from our previous screen, your audio and video are disabled but you can communicate with us via the chat and Q&A functions. Please make sure that you put any of your questions in the Q&A. You can up vote questions that you would like to know the answer to, and if you can use the chat function for sort of general comments, interactions. Or notifying us of any technical issues you might have.

So there's 50 or so of you today. And we've got a great team of people assisting us with you. Jackson is monitoring the chat. He will respond to you directly to assist with any technical problems. Pat is also monitoring the chat for themes that may emerge and to help with any misplaced questions. And Lisale is looking after our Q&A function.

Closed captioning is running for the session. If you need it you can enable it via your zoom window and the session will be recorded and made available with closed captioning and a full transcript on the TEC website within about a week.

So I don't want to take up any more of our time. I would like to hand over now to our fabulous presenters, Karen Hannay and Stephanie Houpt from Open Polytechnic's Learning Support Team. Karen and Stephanie will share their knowledge over the next 30 minutes or so. Following that we will open up for questions and answers. So without further delay, let me hand to Karen to get us underway. Karen, over to you.

Karen Hannay Open Polytechnic

Tēnā koutou katoa.

Ko Karen Hannay ahau.

Kei Waiwhetu e noho ana.

Ko te Whanganui a Tara tōku kainga me tōku tūrangawaewae.

He Kaiwhakahaere ahau o te Kuratini Tuwhera o Aotearoa.

No reira, tēnā koutou katoa.

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Karen Hannay, the Library and Learning Centre Manager at Open Polytech.

I'm here today with my colleague Stephanie Houpt, our Library and Learning Support Team Leader who will be speaking with you later in the session.

Together we manage the Open Polytechnic service for students with disabilities. Today we're going to tell you about how we support students with disabilities in an online environment.

I'm going to give you an overview of our students and the types of support we provide. I will also talk to you about the student journey and how students have different needs at different points of their study.

Steph is going to speak about some specific students who she has worked with and explore some of the challenges we've experienced. Finally, Steph will talk about possible future directions of the service.

Open Polytechnic is a specialist national provider of open and distance learning at the tertiary level, focusing on learner success for around 30 sorry, 30,000 students each year. We offer around 1,000 courses and 100 qualifications which are mainly certificates, diplomas and degrees.

Students access courseware online as well as support services including academic staff support, student mentors, library services and additional learning support. Courses are delivered on our iQualify platform which was developed in house and designed to deliver engaging learning experience on any device.

We have a different demographic to many of the regional polytechnics. Our students are mainly in full time work and studying around their employment and family commitments.

73 per cent of our learners are in employment, 88 per cent study part time, and 82 per cent are aged 25 or older. Of our 30,000 students, six per cent or around 1800 students identify themselves on their enrolment application as studying with a disability. We find that many students do not declare a disability on enrolment but are referred or seek support when issues arise during their study. Many students who identify as having a disability do not use any specific disability services available to them. And go on to successfully complete their qualification.

Currently, we're actively working with around 70 students with a disability. Some of these students need ongoing and intensive support throughout their student journey. Whilst others require occasional support as their specific needs arises.

At Open Polytechnic, disability services are coordinated by the Library and Learning Centre, primarily by Steph in her role as Team Leader. We work with learners to establish their individual needs and tailor services accordingly. Students are often referred to us by other polytechnic staff. Including academic staff, student mentors, and student advisers. We have information about our disability services on our website.

And we email students who have indicated on enrolment that they have a disability to let them know about the services available to them. Our Marketing and Communications Team also promote the service via Facebook and other communication channels.

Students who are new to the Open Polytechnic are contacted by student mentors in the early stages of their study as part of the on boarding process. During these conversations, students may disclose that they have a disability or learning difficulty. And this will trigger a referral to the disability service.

Open Polytechnic contracts another organisation called Vitae to provide services for learners with disabilities.

Vitae are a nationwide provider of workplace wellbeing and employee assistance. Vitae's role is to coordinate support for learners with disabilities by providing academic supporters to work directly with learners and advocate for learners when required. Because Vitae are a third party agency, we need to get permission from the student to pass on their contact details. As well as a brief outline of the help that they need.

Vitae have a number of staff around the country that work with the student in three ways. Firstly, they are a point of contact for the student and they touch base with the student regularly to see how they are progressing in their course work. And whether they need any further support.

Secondly, if required, they find an academic supporter in the student's community to work with them regularly to support them in their studies. Finally, Vitae report back to Open Polytechnic on the student's progress on a regular basis. Which is another opportunity to identify if any further support is needed.

The Open Polytechnic Learning Design Team works in conjunction with the iQualify team to design all online courses at Open Polytechnic. Courses are designed with accessibility in mind which means that students can use a keyboard or assistive device to navigate around the platform, know where they are within a course or a page, have headings and content read out to them, follow links and take quizzes.

The iQualify courses are compatible with screen readers and other devices. iQualify follow the web standards for accessibility and are working within compliance within the web content accessibility guidelines.

Additionally, alternative text is used for course material that contains images, diagrams and other pictorial content. All in house videos that are created on the iQualify platform have an accompanying transcript and there is the ability to add closed captions as well. The platform also allows for assessments to be carried out in a number of alternative ways, such as providing a recording rather than a written assignment.

All courses are tested for accessibility before they are published. Basic design principles such as layout, use of white space, best font type and colour are adhered to. And this benefits all students, not just those with disabilities.

I would now like to give you a better picture of a typical journey that our students experience.

The first stop on the journey is the pre-enrolment period when students are considering whether they will study at Open Polytechnic. Students with disabilities often like to talk to someone about how they will be supported throughout their course of study if they proceed with their enrolment. Many of these students are referred to Steph who outlines the support that is available to them.

Once she has had an initial conversation with the student, they may need to get more advice from another staff member about whether the course that they are interested in is right for them. They will also have to meet the requirements to be accepted into the course. This means that there is a delay from when the student first makes contact with the disability service to when and if they enrol.

Support during study is tailored to what each individual student needs. It works well when there is some communication between Steph and the academic staff member. So they have an understanding of the student's needs and how they can be accommodated. One of the main ways that we support a student is to provide an academic supporter to give one-to-one support to a student.

As I mentioned earlier, one of Vitae's roles is to assist in sourcing an academic support person in the student's community who can meet with them at a mutually agreeable time and location. To help them with whatever aspect of studying the student needs help with. The aim is to facilitate the student's participation in a course and their attainment of a qualification. The responsibilities of the academic support person will depend on the student's needs but some common tasks are assisting with reading comprehension, academic writing, time management, goal setting and motivation.

We review a CV of the supporter before approving them to work with the student. And we pay them for their time at a rate of \$25 an hour. Most students are offered two hours support per week initially, although this can be negotiated depending on the needs of the student.

One of the challenges can be finding someone in the student's community who is available. And has the right skills to work with the student. One of the challenges for academic supporters is that they are not Open Polytechnic employees. And, therefore, don't have the institutional knowledge of some of the internal polytechnic processes. And this can make it difficult when their student has questions about how to get extensions or what to do if they need exam assistance. Another challenge for the supporter is that they're not necessarily experts in the subject the student is studying. And they may need to find out information about the course from the tutor.

Just about all of the Open Polytech courses are online. However, if reading online is problematic for a student with a disability, they can have their course materials printed and sent to them to assist them in working through the course. A copy may also be provided for the academic support person. There are some additional work involved in doing this. As the course materials are designed to be used online and may include online activities, tasks and links out to websites and readings.

We are lucky to have staff who can do some work behind the scenes to take the content from the online course and put it into a readable document. Which is printed and couriered to the student. Materials can be printed in larger fonts and on coloured paper if this is helpful for the student.

As I mentioned earlier, the videos that we make in house are accompanied by transcripts. But many courses include external video content such as YouTube videos. While these usually include transcripts or captions, they can vary hugely in quality and can be inadequate for hearing impaired students. Furthermore, videos with te reo included are often not correctly translated. To rectify this, our administrator checks video transcripts for accuracy and creates alternative transcripts which are then passed on to the Learning Design team to be uploaded into the course. This is something we do proactively when we know a student with a significant hearing impairment is studying in a particular course.

Part of Vitae's role is to check in with the students who have been referred to them whether or not they have an individual academic support person in place. A Vitae staff member will phone or email the student to discuss their progress and any issues they're experiencing. Vitae provide a monthly written report to the Library and Learning Centre on student's progress. Additionally, they contact us to raise any significant concerns that we need to be aware of.

As with the academic supporters, Vitae are not always able to help students with matters that involve internal Open Polytechnic processes. So, again, there are times when the students' queries need to be directed back to Steph. Another common issue for students with disabilities is around getting extensions beyond those normally offered to students. This is where input from the academic registry is needed. Steph's role is to advocate on the student's behalf. But academic registry staff make the decisions which are governed by the regulations in the academic statute. This usually means there's a greater need for the student to provide evidence of their disability or circumstances.

Another time academic registry is involved is around accommodation for exams. While most courses don't have exams there are about 40 to 50 courses each trimester that do have an exam component. On average about 30 to 40 students will need assistance with exams each trimester. This can take the form of having additional time to complete the exam, sitting the exam at home or at an alternative venue, using a laptop to write the exam, and providing sign language interpreters. From time to time there is a need to provide the student with an alternative method of assessment.

One example of this was a student with severe anxiety who was required to deliver a pepehā on a Marae. After discussions with the academic staff member and academic registry it was decided that he could provide a recording of his pepehā instead of doing it in person.

For some students once their course is completed, they will move seamlessly to the next course but some will have decided that their course was not a good fit and will want to transfer to a different qualification. Careful consideration needs to go into how the student proceeds with their study. It's important for Open Polytechnic staff to know what the challenges were so they can take this into account before recommending a new program.

For example, a student who suffers from social anxiety and struggles interacting with others may be advised to avoid a course which involves group work with other students.

I'm going to hand over to Steph now to take you through some case studies of students.

Stephanie Hout, Open Polytechnic

Tēnā koutou katoa.

Ko Stephanie Hout ahau.

Kei Newtown e noho ana.

Ko Whanganui a Tara tōku kainga

Ko Peretaina tōku tūrangawaewae.

He kaimahi ahau o te Kuratini Tuwhera o Aotearoa.

No reira tēna koutou katoa.

Hi, everyone. I am the person who is directly responsible for the day-to-day coordination of the disability service. Now, I would like to talk to you about a few specific students to give you a bit more insight into how we work with them and just to let you know names and identifying details have been changed to protect their privacy.

The first student I would like to talk to you about is Anika. Anika is a highly motivated and positive student. She is blind and deaf. And lives in supported accommodation. Last year she completed her first course at Open Polytechnic. And now is part the way through a course in Communication and Relationship Management. Anika receives six hours of academic support a week from Mark.

When Anika and Mark first started working together, Anika taught him tactile sign language so they can communicate when they meet up. Communicating through tactile sign language is time consuming. And it takes Anika and Mark about three to four times longer to communicate than it would for hearing and sighted people.

When Anika and Mark first started working together they focused on how Anika could navigate around the online course. So it was the actual mechanics of finding her way around the course. And ensuring that it worked with her assistive software that was important at that point. This has changed now that Anika is more familiar with the layout of the courses. The support that Anika currently requires is more around the academic side of things as Anika hasn't studied formally since leaving school. Mark, her supporter, has also had to learn about the assistive technology that Anika uses and often has to work out ways of resolving technical problems. Such as ensuring e-books work with her assistive software.

Throughout Anika's study, Mark has advocated on behalf of Anika and has reported problems to course designers when there have been parts of the online courses not being compatible with Anika's assistive software. In addition to her visual and hearing impairments, Anika hasn't kept very good health this year and has been in hospital twice. She is now recuperating but this means that studying is tiring. And she can only do this for short periods at the moment. It's unlikely that Anika will be able to complete the course in the allotted period of time. And we will need to communicate with her tutor and the academic registry to make accommodations for this. Despite the setback, Anika is positive about studying and is receiving outstanding support from Mark.

The next student I would like to talk to you about is Cameron. Cameron started studying at Open Polytechnic this year. He has enrolled in a diploma level course and lives in Auckland. Cameron was encouraged to contact the Library and Learning Centre early on in his study by his course tutor. After he expressed anxiety about studying.

Initially, he worked with one of our Library and Learning Centre team who tried to allay some of his fears about study, as well as provide him with guidance around his course. At this time, Cameron was very anxious and was often calling or emailing a number of Open Polytech staff, including his tutor, one of the learning advisers and the subject librarian. Cameron came to my attention when the volume of his emails and calls became unmanageable and unproductive. It was not unusual for him to call several Open Polytech staff in one day. And his talk often took a downward spiral of negativity. Open Polytech staff felt unable to help him when he was in this state of mind.

After I talked to him, we agreed that it would be good to get a supporter to work with him. We also discussed how his workload was too high. And as a result he withdrew from two of his courses so he studied just one course per semester. Once we found a supporter to work with Cameron, I was a little worried as Cameron required more than just academic support. And whoever was working with him needed to be aware of this.

And have the skills to work with someone with a mental health condition. We were very fortunate to find someone with the appropriate skills to work with him.

The recent lockdown was a very difficult time for Cameron. And there was quite a lot of concern for him at this time. He expressed high levels of anxiety and depression and Vitae staff were in regular contact with him. Although, obviously, he wasn't able to meet with his supporter face to face at this time. I'm happy to say that Cameron has done really well in his first course. And has enrolled in another one this semester. His supporter reported that he's in a good space and now only asks for help around assignment time. So he's working more independently.

Cameron's case illustrates how the combined effort from people from different departments at the Open Polytech, staff from Vitae, and a highly skilled academic supporter has helped Cameron to succeed in his study.

I've found that working with other Open Polytech staff and academic supporters to be a really successful way of supporting students. By working together, sharing our knowledge and expertise we can decide on how best to help the student in a coordinated way.

The last case study I want to talk about is Carrie. Carrie is 25 and lives in Dunedin. She began her qualification in 2018. And is halfway through a degree program at Open Polytech. She is a very high achieving student. And doesn't require any academic support. But she is deaf and needs support in a couple of other ways.

When I first heard from Carrie we found that her course had quite a few videos embedded in them. As Karen mentioned earlier although videos may have transcripts and/or captions they're not always of a high quality.

We discovered that this was the case for some of the videos in the course that Carrie was doing. So our library administrator checked through these and created more accurate transcripts. As Carrie progresses through her study we're able to ensure that her other courses have accurate transcripts too. The program she's enrolled in has a number of face-to-face workshops, noho marae and practicum. Carrie requires a sign language interpreter so she can fully participate in these aspects of her course work.

I was first alerted to her need for an interpreter early last year before the first workshop on campus took place. We work with an agency called I sign who have sign language interpreters around the country. Booking sign language interpreters needs to be done well ahead of time, especially if the client has specific interpreter that they want to work with. Sign language interpreters work in pairs so that they can have frequent breaks as its very tiring. So an eight hour workshop would require 16 hours of interpreter time. In addition to travel and accommodation costs.

Prior to supporting Carrie in the workshop I needed to provide the interpreters with information about the workshop so that they could gain familiarity with the subject matter that would be discussed. Since then, we have booked interpreters for subsequent workshops and her practicum. And she's on track to complete her qualification.

Challenges.

So there are a number of challenges in supporting students with disabilities. And I'm going to talk about these now.

When students come to us the first issue is around timing. When students come to my attention late in their course they have often experienced difficulties with their study and may be feeling disenchanting or disengaged from their course work. Deadlines may have been missed or students have low grades for their assignments. It takes time to put support in place and if students are partway through their course it can be problematic arranging extensions or transferring them to another block of their course.

One example of this was a drain laying student who was referred to me by his tutor. The tutor called me saying the student hadn't been handing in his assignments. But he felt that with a bit of support with his writing he would have a good chance of succeeding. Although about half of the allotted course time had gone by we managed to get a highly organised supporter who motivated him to submit all his assessments. In this situation we were lucky that we had someone who lived close by that could help out with little notice.

The second challenge is multiple issues.

Many of our students experience bumps in the road during their student journey but for students with disabilities, problems can be much harder to overcome. One of our students had a computer break shortly before an exam. For many students this would be difficult but the student has bipolar and experiences anxiety. And for her it was devastating. And she didn't have the ability to manage the situation constructively.

It was a perfect storm. The student didn't have the skills to express her problem. The exam was looming, which is stressful for many people at the best of times. And her computer had broken with all of her notes on it.

It took several conversations with different people to come to the point where we could find a mutually satisfactory solution and she was able to sit the exam under special conditions.

Communication.

One of the difficulties for students who use a disability service is the number of people that they often communicate with. In the course of their study they may have talked to staff from enrolments, customer services, learning advisers, tutors, academic registry. And the list goes on. This can be confusing and time consuming for students and may mean that they have to explain their situation more than once.

Not only to Open Polytech staff but to other agencies such as StudyLink. I see it as part of my role to be a contact person to advocate for the student. And to reduce the number of staff that students need to interact with.

Issues such as isolation are also a barrier for students. Isolation can be an issue for many students when they are studying online. And it's a very common experience for people with disabilities. Having regular contact with an academic supporter or one of the Vitae staff can help to mitigate some of the isolation for students with disabilities. And provides them with a person who understands what they're going through.

Funding can be an added stress, especially for students with disabilities that require costly support such as sign language interpreters or people to physically support them with their study. Some funding is available from outside agencies such as Workbridge, and there are also scholarships available from Open Polytech.

Funding can be accessed from a number of agencies and working out whose funding to tap into can be challenging.

Where to next?

There are some areas that we would like to do more in.

One of these is making better use of technology and understanding the range of available software. In working with students to address their individual needs, we have investigated and supported students using software such as voice recognition software and read aloud software. We aim to learn from each student's experience about how that software is working for them so we have more information for future students.

Finding the time to keep up with new technologies is challenging with the pressure of day-to-day work.

Another way we can improve their disability service is to make use of the expertise available from other agencies. While we have worked with Blind and Low Vision NZ, Workbridge and Deaf Aotearoa in the past there is plenty of scope to develop closer ties with other organisations. This would not only help us get a greater understanding of our students' needs but also ensures we're getting up to date advice and expert information from experts in the field. To help us support our students.

Ensuring the online study is accessible for all can be labour intensive and time consuming. Adequate resourcing is required to ensure that this work is done in the course development stage. This needs to be considered in organisational planning. It's an investment that will pay off in the future enabling all students to experience success and independence in their study.

Thanks for your time.

And we will hand things back to Sara.

Sara. Thank you so much, Karen and Stephanie. That was a really fantastic presentation.

We appreciate you taking your time to talk about, not only Open Polytech's systems and processes but to put it in that learner journey, kind of space and to give us an idea of some actual case studies with your learners.

Karen, I will invite you to join us back on the screen at the moment. What we're going to do is move to our question and answer session. So attendees you will notice there's a question and answer box down the bottom of your screens. There's some questions coming in from you all already, which is great.

Keep those coming. What we will do is we will just start to work through some of those and Karen and Stephanie will offer their thoughts on those.

Any questions that we don't get time to cover today, we will respond to in writing. And those will be available as part of the webinar and transcript which will be loaded to the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) website. So if you don't get your question answered today, don't worry. You will get a response.

So I'm going to fade away again and leave you with Stephanie and Karen. And Stephanie and Karen, I will just pop a few questions your way.

So the first question we've got is 'do the academic supporters get any training, either from Open Polytech or Vitae in how to best support and work with disabled learners?'

Stephanie: Okay. I will answer that one.

Yeah, that's a really good question. At this stage there's no formal training for our academic supporters.

They are usually interested people. Often people that may have done a little bit of support before. They get some support from the Vitae staff member that contacts them. And they often, depending on the situation, there will be times when they will be working with me to get advice about how to manage a situation.

Yes.

So that would certainly be something that we could think of doing. We do send out some written information to the new supporters. But I would sort of see that as some an area of development. As I say, nothing formal at this stage. Have you got anything to add to that, Karen?

Karen: No, I don't think there's anything I can really add to that.

Sara: Thanks. Great. Thank you both.

So continuing on the sort of support topic we've had Lauren from MoE has asked us 'if there are any other providers aside from Vitae that people might be able to use? And if you would be happy to let us know why Open Polytech picked Vitae to support their disabled learners?' If you know the background of that.

Karen: I can probably speak to that one. So at the time we were looking for to put the support in place we had a relationship with Vitae.

You may know that Vitae are a provider of employee assistance programs.

And so Open Polytech already had a relationship with Vitae in that they are the supplier of our EAP program.

And we actually just got in touch with Vitae to see if this work was something that they would be able to pick up.

So we started off just by having quite informal conversations with Vitae staff to see if it was something that they would be interested in doing.

We felt that it was quite a good fit with the skills that they already had. Because they have a lot of trained counsellors on their staff.

So it was actually something that was new for Vitae staff as well. So we worked quite closely with them while we set up the arrangement.

So Vitae, from their side, they put together a team of four staff that we work with. So Steph is in quite close contact with those staff.

And if there's any issues, they know to contact us and we know who to contact at their end. That works quite well.

We have a small team of their staff that we work with. And they are the ones who do a lot of work to find academic support people for us.

So, yeah, the relationship really came about through us just approaching Vitae in the first instance and then working with them to set it up.

Sara: Fantastic.

And since we're on the support workers, we've also been asked whether they receive ongoing mentoring? And if they do, how often and from whom?

Karen: So would that be something Vitae do for them or that you do, or I would say perhaps it's not so much mentoring that we're providing.

There's a lot of communication, I think, that happens between the different parties. So the academic support people, if they have any issues, we encourage them to get in touch. And we just work through those issues as they arise.

So the key, I think, is to keep the communication going between all the parties. To make sure that the academic support person, you know, knows that they can contact us and we will help them resolve any issues that come up.

And also if Vitae are in that loop, that Vitae are speaking with us and speaking with the academic support person as appropriate.

I think we find most of the academic support people are really great in raising issues and going, "This is what's happening for the student."

This is what's happening in their life and how they're struggling. That enables us to get in and go, "This is how we can help support that student."

I don't know if Steph can add anything to that one.

Stephanie: Yes.

I mean, I think the important thing to emphasise is just the diverse range of support that's required. So with our students, they seem there are such a wide range of needs. That to provide any sort of mentoring on a group basis would be very difficult.

The needs and the problems really are quite individual. And I would say just about every day there's something different that comes up that we need to think about.

So, yeah, there are a couple of supporters that do have a number of students that they work with.

And those supporters I have quite a close contact with. Some of them have sort of quite high need students and need quite a bit of advice. Yeah, that's pretty much how things work.

They're certainly not just left to it.

Sara: Yeah. Great. That sounds like a sort of a wrap around approach, Stephanie.

We've got a lockdown related question.

So 'during lockdown were there any additional supports you found needed to be provided over and above what you already provided?'

Stephanie: Yes.

So lockdown was a bit challenging because obviously the face-to-face work with the students couldn't go on.

We did it did give us an opportunity to use Zoom. So some of our tutors were able to take on sorry, our academic supporters were able to see a number of students via Zoom.

We also had quite a number of our academic supporters have young children. In fact, one of them has four children. And so she was unable to she didn't have any capacity to be supporting students during that time.

So it was very interesting, it did provide the opportunity for us to use the technology so that students could still get a bit of support.

Yeah, that was kind of the main way we sort of carried on, other than ongoing just phone conversations with them.

Vitae were still working so they were still doing regular check ins.

Sara: Great.

A couple of questions sort of around accessibility of courses.

'Is there a team responsible in Open Polytech for checking the accessibility of your courses overall prior to their publication? And what support is available, I guess, within Open Polytech to ensure that the courses are accessible?'

I know you've talked a little bit about that when you said you would go and review papers when you knew maybe a student with extra needs was in that course. But I guess this question is asking: is that something that's sort of built into the course design or something you've been doing over time?

Stephanie: Yes.

So as Karen mentioned, our courses are on the iQualify platform. So it's iQualify's responsibility that team 2 make sure courses are accessible. My understanding is that they do that they do regular testing and they access different software. So to make sure that the courses work to a satisfactory level. So, you know, I think that the aim is, Karen mentioned that they follow the web content accessibility guidelines.

And so that guides their practice.

You know, I think probably things aren't absolutely perfect. There's always room for improvement. They're very responsive when there has been feedback saying, "Look, this bit isn't working for this student", and they are very keen to find out. Especially the student I was talking to you about who is blind and deaf, this has sort of been quite an interesting time for all of us just to overcome the issues that have come up.

So, yeah, I don't know if that sort of quite answers the question. It's obviously not something that Karen and I are directly involved in. This happens in a whole different department. And I'm really happy to get if there are more specific questions, I can answer those contact that team and get some more answers.

Sara: Thanks, Steph.

So I think if anyone has some specific questions about the technology that they're using or the accessibility or how they're assessing what's developed in course design, it would be good to let us know and we will get Stephanie to contact you with the right people to help you with that.

Here is an interesting one: 'how is support offered for learners who might be studying in the corrections setting?' Is that something that you are involved with?

Karen: Steph has handed that to me and I'm not actually sure if we have any students in corrections. So I might hand that back to her.

Stephanie: Students with disabilities in corrections. Is that the question?

Sara: Yes. That's how I read it.

Stephanie: Yes. Sorry. I thought we were talking about corrections students. I haven't had any referrals from the corrections services at all, actually. So no. That hasn't come up yet but I am sure it will.

Sara: Okay.

We will keep our ear to the ground out here too. If anyone else who is on the webinar today has experience with corrections.

Stephanie: Sorry, Sara.

I would say, in a number of the prisons there are prison tutors. So I would imagine certainly for people with learning disabilities that they would be getting some support in that way. Yeah.

Sara: Okay. Great. So another question.

'What kind of academic support do the Vitae workers provide in comparison, say, to a learning adviser?'

So I know you've touched on that a little bit. But what sort of level of academic support can they provide?

Stephanie: Vitae don't provide academic support. They are really they are really the sort of contact point for finding academic supporters out there. So if an academic if one of our academic supporters needs help supporting the student. They would be more likely to come to me or to contact the course tutor.

So they can get sort of an understanding of the course content.

But Vitae don't involve themselves in that way at all. They would be more likely to get involved if, perhaps, there's a student that someone is particularly worried about. Or they're having, you know, some sort of difficulty with communicating with them. But they don't really sort of enter into the academic side of things at all.

Sara: Okay, great.

So they are more a support person to enable to sort of help with the whole process of learning, rather than the specifics.

Stephanie: Exactly, and, again, because they have contacts around the country, they sort of know people in various areas that they can ask to be an academic supporter.

Sara: I actually have a question.

Do your team provide training within Open Polytech for academics and other staff in how they can best support and engage with and enable disabled learners in the Poly?

Stephanie: This is something again we could explore more of.

I've been involved in a staff training video which is for new staff members here at Open Polytech. And it's training them in a number of things but part of it is talking about, you know, how to support students with disabilities.

I'm also part of a community of practice where we there's a large group of people from the Polytechnic attend that. And coming up this year there will be I will be carrying out a session on supporting students with disabilities.

I must say, I have a lot of contact with the tutors. As, you know, it's a privilege of being in this position, actually, is just that I've got to know a lot of people here. Because I sometimes need to find out more with all the courses that are offered, I need to find out more about the courses. And how best to support students.

So as I said before, that collaborative approach is really helpful because we all have we're all privy to different bits of information that can be helpful for the student. No one of us is an expert in all the areas.

Does that answer your question?

Sara: Yes.

No, it really does.

Thank you. And I think you have given us really good information about how your team works across the organisation with all the different parts of the organisation that a learner interacts with right from when they first enrol through to that more advanced stages of their learning. And the way that you need to be in contact with each other so that people know what's going on.

Obviously, maintaining the student's privacy and so on within that which I think is also very important. I've just been asked if it's possible to circulate a copy of the presentation. Yes, the presentation will be up on our website within a week. And it will be available there permanently. And there will be a transcript of both the presentation and the question and answer session that has come afterwards with any additional questions answered.

We've had another question around the accessibility checks for the online courses as well, Stephanie.

We might need to pass this one to you to get your colleagues in that team to ask.

The question specifically is what aspects are you checking? Is that something you would like us to pass across to you and maybe you can come back to that question in writing once you've talked to that team?

Stephanie: Yeah. That will probably be better, Sara.

So my understanding from my very brief conversation with someone from Learning Design was I think it's just ensuring that someone can tab through. If someone is unable to use a mouse, that they can tab through the course if necessary. I think it's around background colour, font size. Yeah, but to get the full detail on that I can probably send you something. I've got some information that I can send on.

Sara: Okay.

That would be great. Well, what we will do is we'll get Steph to talk to her team and come back to us with some writing or contact details for people who are interested in finding out a bit more about that.

Now, I'm aware we're running towards the end of time. And people probably need to head off to other things.

We do have one more question, which I think would be interesting for everyone before we close out.

So we've been asked 'do you provide individual learning or access plans to teaching staff to support the learners with disabilities?'

Stephanie: No.

So you're thinking of things like you might have at school like individual educational plans. Is that

Sara: I'm not sure, sorry.

Stephanie: Right. We don't know who has asked that question.

Stephanie: No, there's nothing formal like that in place. Yeah, perhaps if the person who asked that question could explain a little bit more what it is that...

Sara: Kevin, if you're still with us, if you could provide a little bit more information around that. Alternatively, Kevin, if you would like to email Pat with your question with a bit more detail, we'll make sure that Steph and Karen can come back to you on that.

Right. Just aware of the time and everyone is probably heading off to one o'clock things. I would like to take this opportunity to really thank Karen and Steph for your incredibly thoughtful responses to those questions and for engaging in this webinar with us today.

Before we leave, it's been really great to have such amazing participation from the sector, and this webinar series. If you've missed the earlier two webinars around online delivery, we hope you take a chance to look at them on our website.

Have a wonderful afternoon everyone. Many thanks to our presenters again for sharing their knowledge and their time with us today. And thank you to all of you out here for being part of this important mahi and for joining us.

Kia ora tatou katoa.



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