

Oho Mauri: Awakening Potential, Cultivating Futures - Alternative Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Introduction In an era where young people globally face unprecedented uncertainty, rangatahi (young people) carrying intergenerational trauma, exclusion, and socio-economic inequity need more than a pathway, they need a compass, a community, and an unshakeable sense of self. Too often, mainstream systems fail to reflect te ao Māori (the Māori world) or the depth of rangatahi lived realities.

Established in 2020, Oho Mauri is an Aotearoa-based charitable trust grounded in the intentional awakening of potential, supporting rangatahi to be ready, prepared, and living with purpose. Beyond a 12-week programme, Oho Mauri walks alongside each graduate through a three-year pastoral transitions framework. 263 rangatahi have been served to date.

Objectives This presentation illuminates how a kaupapa Māori-informed, theory-integrated model produces measurable, holistic outcomes for rangatahi previously excluded by mainstream schooling; demonstrates how a longitudinal pastoral care framework sustains engagement for three years post-programme; and contributes Aotearoa-grounded insights to the global conversation on culturally responsive career development, equity, and sustainability in alternative education.

Theoretical Foundation Our model was grown from the ground up, refined through post-programme review, data insights, and lived experience, reflecting established career development theory: self-belief grows through lived experience (Social Cognitive Career Theory); pathways match each rangatahi's strengths and aspirations (Person-Environment Fit); identity and agency are actively shaped (Life-Design Theory).

Four pou (pillars) hold this together: Manaakitanga (care, safe challenge), Whanaungatanga (relationships, belonging), Manawanui (resilience), Whakapono (belief, future focus). Culture and progress grow together, knowing who you are is what fuels where you are going.

Methodology An applied mixed-methods evaluation spans 17 cohorts from 2020 to 2025 (n=263). Quantitative indicators include attendance, progression toward driver licensing, and wellbeing/capability shifts. Qualitative data is drawn from pastoral engagement records, staff reflections, whānau voice, and referral contexts captured in our Graduate–Pastoral Transitions Database.

A traffic-light framework guides responsive support across the three-year transition window, enabling early identification of rangatahi at risk of disengagement and tailored follow-up grounded in relational trust rather than compliance.

Results Average attendance across 17 cohorts is 86 percent, with 2024 cohorts averaging 92 percent and individuals exceeding 95 percent, despite prior prolonged disengagement, some rangatahi having been absent from school for two years. 155 rangatahi have attained their Learner Licence, unlocking transport, training, and employment pathways.

Three years post-programme, 78 percent are in employment, training, further education, or actively seeking mahi (work); 8 percent remain inactive; 14 percent are uncontactable or facing circumstances outside programme control. Wellbeing screening of recent cohorts identified anxiety (100%), bullying (100%), previous suicidal

ideation (79%), and unsafe home environments (79%), reinforcing the non-negotiable role of hauora as the foundation of every educational outcome.

Conclusion and Implications Oho Mauri demonstrates that when hauora (holistic wellbeing), identity, experiential learning, and evidence-based practice are woven together, alternative education becomes transformative rather than remedial. By walking alongside rangatahi well beyond programme completion, we strengthen individuals, whānau (family), and communities across generations. Implications for practice and policy are clear: sustained investment in long-term, relational, culturally grounded approaches, alongside pastoral care, workforce capability, and community partnerships is essential to equitable outcomes.

For an international audience navigating the future of career guidance, Oho Mauri offers a replicable model proving that locally grounded solutions are globally relevant. In a world reshaped by inequity, technology, and uncertainty, the future belongs to those who know who they are and where they are going. Like kai grown from rich soil, rangatahi flourish when rooted in identity and nurtured by practice. Oho Mauri is the whenua from which their futures take root.