Disability Education in Aotearoa New Zealand University Sport and Exercise-related Programmes: Curriculum Positioning, Scarcity and Graduate Pathway Reliability

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Abstract

This thesis examines how disability education is incorporated within sport- and exercise-related programmes across Aotearoa New Zealand universities, and what curriculum and institutional mechanisms contribute to its scarcity. Disability education is understood as a pathway for developing graduates' disability-informed knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgement, instead of a single topic, awareness activity, or optional area of interest. Using an interpretivist qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine educators and curriculum leaders from seven of the eight New Zealand universities offering relevant programmes. Participants discussed curriculum positioning, learning outcomes, assessment, staffing, partnerships, authentic learning opportunities, and the programme-level conditions that shape disability-related provision.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by a cross-case comparison and curriculum-theory lens attentive to the intended, enacted, and experienced curriculum, hidden-curriculum signals, ableism, and institutional conditions. The findings indicate that disability education involves more than whether it is present or absent. Across the programme contexts described by participants, disability education was often implicit, episodic, weakly specified, optional, or folded into broader inclusion and equity language. Disability-related learning was evident in dedicated papers, threaded or infused content, guest teaching, placements, community engagement, and individual staff initiatives. Still, these forms did not always create a reliable pathway for all students.

Scarcity was produced through several interacting mechanisms: weak curriculum visibility; reliance on individual champions and uneven staff expertise; limited professional development; curriculum crowding, governance, and viability pressures; and uneven access to authentic learning, which depended on staff-held partnerships and community capacity. These conditions meant that disability education could be valued in principle while remaining fragile in practice.

The thesis argues that scarcity is best understood as reduced pathway reliability. Strengthening disability education does not require one uniform model across institutions, but the findings suggest that programmes are needed to make disability capability more visible, coordinated, assessed, and sustainable. The study does not assess students' competence or directly represent disabled students' experiences. Its contribution lies in providing an educator-informed account of how disability education is positioned within New Zealand tertiary sport- and exercise-related programmes, and in offering curriculum-focused language for future programme review, development, and research.

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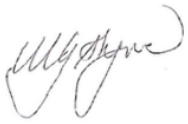

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis began in my professional practice. Over the past 15 years, my work in disability-inclusive strength and conditioning has repeatedly raised the questions this research investigates. I manage a company in Aotearoa New Zealand that provides strength and conditioning services to more than 500 disabled people each week. The work is challenging, practical, and deeply satisfying. It has shown me that inclusive sport and exercise is not merely an aspiration. It happens, or fails to happen, through everyday professional decisions: how coaches, trainers, and educators use language, adapt movement, judge safety, build trust, and work alongside disabled people and their whānau.

As the business grew, an issue became glaringly obvious. While managing staff, I experienced persistent difficulties finding coaches with the knowledge, skills and confidence to work effectively with disabled people. This was concerning. More surprising, however, was not just the lack of experience, but the consistent absence of any formal disability education in most new graduates' backgrounds. I had assumed that graduates with degrees in sport- and exercise-related programmes would be expected to undertake some form of disability education as part of their professional preparation. Yet, time and again, new graduates entered my field without such training. Where training had occurred, it was often brief, inconsistent or contingent on whether students had chosen an elective within their degree programmes.

This experience led to the central concern of this thesis. If graduates from sport and exercise degree programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand are entering workplaces across community sport, health, performance, recreation, education, and physical activity contexts, and if they are likely to serve disabled people in those contexts, then disability education cannot reasonably remain optional. The ability of sport and exercise professionals to work appropriately with disabled people is therefore not a specialist concern, but a matter of access, equity, professional competence, and social responsibility. In 2023, 17% of people living in New Zealand households were identified as having a disability, equivalent to approximately 851,000 people (Stats NZ, 2025).

1.1 Aotearoa New Zealand context and the curriculum challenge

In turning to the disability sport and adapted physical activity literature, the scarcity identified in this thesis is not unique to New Zealand tertiary sport and exercise programmes. In North American and U.S. kinesiology/ Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) contexts, adapted physical activity and adapted physical education have been described as historically neglected, often limited to elective or single-course provision, and uneven in course content, practicum exposure, and curricular framing (Case et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2022, 2025; Park, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). Similar concerns are evident beyond universities in coach education, where formal coach education has been found to play only a minor role in many Parasport coaches' development, generic coaching frameworks rarely include disability, and disability-specific coach education remains ad hoc or absent across tertiary and sport-specific pathways (Huntley et al., 2026; Townsend et al.,

2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, sector reviews and recent initiatives similarly point to the need to build system-wide coach and workforce capability for disability inclusion, with disability-specific resources developing alongside, instead of being consistently embedded within, sport-specific accreditation pathways (Paralympics New Zealand, n.d.; Sport NZ, 2024; Sport NZ et al., 2018; University of Waikato, 2022).

Graduates of sport- and exercise-related programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand work across a wide range of contexts, including strength and conditioning, coaching, community sport, exercise prescription, health promotion, physical activity programmes, sport leadership, recreation, and performance pathways. In these roles, graduates are likely to work with disabled people whose access and support needs vary across physical, sensory, communication, cognitive, intellectual, mental-health, social, pain, and fatigue-related domains (Stats NZ, 2025; Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.). Disability education is therefore a fundamental part of the professional knowledge required for inclusive sport and exercise practice, particularly in a national context where disabled people continue to experience inequalities in play, active recreation, and sport (Sport NZ et al., 2018; United Nations, 2006).

This thesis treats disability education as a curricular problem because universities are responsible for defining what counts as important and relevant knowledge within degree programmes. University curricula do more than transmit knowledge. They also communicate values, professional priorities, and judgments about what is important enough to be taught, practised, revisited, and assessed. When disability education is embedded in curricula through skills such as adaptation, advocacy, ethics, communication, and inclusive design, sport and exercise education moves beyond a general commitment to inclusion and into professional preparation.

Where disability education is optional, brief, or absent, students' preparation for disability-inclusive practice is likely to vary across courses, years, programmes, and institutions. Skills that require repeated practice, feedback, and reflection, such as adaptation, communication, ethical judgement, and relational competence, are unlikely to be equally developed among all graduates if they are left to chance. This issue is especially significant in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the higher education sector is relatively small, and universities vary in size, staff capacity, institutional identity, and connections to disability-sector organisations. These differences shape whether students engage meaningfully with disabled people or disability organisations, and whether such engagement is treated as part of their professionalisation.

This thesis is therefore not concerned only with whether disability education is present. It concerns how disability education is integrated, sustained, and made reliable. Two core concepts guide the study. First, disability education is treated as a pathway issue. This means the study examines where students encounter disability-related knowledge within degree programmes, how that knowledge develops across the degree, whether it is consistent across learning environments, and whether it is assessed as a genuine skill set. Second, scarcity is understood as an outcome of curriculum processes. It results from routine decisions about what content is essential or optional, who is responsible for

teaching it, what resources are available, and whether pedagogical practices can be sustained.

1.2 Purpose and objectives of the study

The study was deliberately scoped to be manageable within the requirements of a Master's thesis. Its focus is therefore narrow and restricted to the perspectives of educators in sport- and exercise-related programmes. It does not include the perspectives of disabled students, which lie outside the bounds of this thesis. Nor does it evaluate the effectiveness of particular teaching methods. Instead, the study provides a foundational account of how disability education fits within current sport- and exercise-related programme designs at universities in Aotearoa New Zealand. It identifies where disability education in sport and exercise is absent, potentially inconsistent, or dependent on particular conditions.

By exploring educators' perceptions, the study examines existing programme architecture, how teaching is implemented, and the conditions that shape curriculum content across several university programmes. Its central focus is on how programmes currently aim to prepare students to acquire disability-related knowledge and skills, rather than measuring whether that preparation has succeeded. This emphasis on curriculum explanation is necessary for generating cross-case insights that may support future curriculum development and research.

More specifically, the study asks whether curriculum design contributes to the scarcity of disability education. It examines how disability-related knowledge is selected, named, sequenced, assessed, resourced, and sustained within sport and exercise degree programmes. This includes attention to whether disability education is positioned as core or elective, explicit or implicit, assessed or unassessed, and whether responsibility for it is held at programme level or left to individual staff, placements, guest contributors, or student choice.

1.3 Why the disability curriculum problem matters

The scarcity of disability education in the curriculum has both practical and political dimensions. Practically, graduates of sport and exercise programmes enter roles in which they may need to work safely and responsibly with disabled people whose access and support needs vary across physical, sensory, communication, cognitive, intellectual, mental-health, social, pain, and fatigue-related domains (Stats NZ, 2025; Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-a). They may be required to teach students or participants; plan inclusive activities; lead fitness sessions or workshops; demonstrate physical techniques; adapt movement tasks; communicate with whānau and support people; liaise with service providers; and work alongside community organisations. Disability education is therefore not a specialist extra, but part of the professional knowledge required for inclusive sport and exercise practice, particularly in a national context where disabled people continue to experience inequalities in play, active recreation, and sport (Sport NZ, 2024; United Nations, 2006).

Politically, curriculum decisions matter because they communicate what a field treats as legitimate, necessary, and assessable professional knowledge. Choices about learning outcomes, assessment tasks, paper structures, placements, and programme requirements shape what future practitioners are expected to know, value, practise, and demonstrate (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Biggs et al., 2022; Young, 2008). Young's curriculum work is useful here because it draws attention to how formal education selects, organises, and legitimises particular forms of knowledge, while leaving others less visible or less protected. In this thesis, that idea is used to ask whether disability education is protected as part of core professional preparation, or whether it remains optional, informal, weakly assessed, or dependent on the personal initiative of individual lecturers.

A curriculum in which disability appears only through an optional paper, one-off workshop, single lecture, incidental example, or unsupported placement may implicitly teach students that disability is peripheral to mainstream sport and exercise practice. This is true even where institutions use inclusive language in mission statements, graduate profiles, or programme descriptions. The hidden curriculum is relevant here because students learn not only from what is formally taught, but also from what programmes repeatedly prioritise, assess, omit, or leave to chance (Jackson, 1968). This is why the study examines whether curriculum design itself contributes to scarcity: not because disability education is naturally absent, but because curriculum decisions shape whether it becomes visible, reliable, and assessable within students' professional preparation.

1.4 Language and respectful terminology

This thesis uses the term "disabled people", following the language adopted in Aotearoa New Zealand disability policy and advocacy contexts. In New Zealand guidance, "disabled people" is preferred because it reflects the view that people have impairments, but are disabled by attitudinal, physical, social, environmental, and institutional barriers that restrict participation (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.; Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-a). The term "people with disabilities" is used only where it reflects participants' own language, institutional naming conventions, or the categories used in specific programmes. Because participants came from varied disciplinary and occupational backgrounds and used different terminology, interview quotations are reproduced verbatim to preserve meaning, context, and nuance.

This language choice also reflects a broader distinction between medical, social, and social-relational understandings of disability. The medical model tends to locate disability within the individual body or mind, framing it primarily in terms of impairment, diagnosis, treatment, cure, rehabilitation, or functional limitation (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Ministry of Social Development, n.d.; Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-a). By contrast, the social model shifts attention to how environments, systems, attitudes, communication practices, and institutional arrangements disable people by creating barriers to participation (United Nations, 2006; Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-a). The World Health Organization's ICF (International Classification of Function, Disability and Health) terminology is also useful here because it distinguishes between impairments, activity limitations, participation restrictions, and environmental factors, showing that participation

is shaped by both individual functioning and the context in which activity occurs (World Health Organization, 2001). This thesis does not deny the material realities of impairment or support needs. Rather, it draws on social and social-relational understandings of disability to examine how sport and exercise education can either reproduce disabling barriers or prepare graduates to recognise, challenge, and reduce them (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Thomas, 2004).

Disability education in this thesis is oriented toward inclusion rather than deficit. This distinction is important in sport and exercise disciplines, where graduates must make practical decisions about how to work with disabled people in real-life sport and exercise contexts. Disability education, therefore, involves practitioners learning how to adapt and include, alter environments, communicate respectfully, manage risk and safety, and relate in ways that value disabled people's independence, agency, and expertise (Charlton, 1998; United Nations, 2006). Recasting disability education away from deficit and toward capability asks educators to move beyond what disabled people cannot do and to consider how environments, programmes, and professional practices can be designed to enable participation (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Thomas, 2004).

The Aotearoa New Zealand context is also significant. Disability education intersects with Te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi and with the Crown's obligations to recognise and protect the rights and interests of Māori as tangata whenua (Williams et al., n.d.). This thesis does not claim to resolve these complex intersections. More appropriately, it acknowledges that inclusive curriculum development does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by university histories, professional and disciplinary norms, societal expectations, and relationships across the sector.

1.5 Research question and sub-questions

RQ: How is disability education incorporated within sport- and exercise-related programmes at New Zealand universities, and what curriculum and institutional conditions shape its visibility, coherence, and reliability?

SQ1: What forms does disability education take, where is it located within programme structures, and which students are required or able to encounter it?

SQ2: What mechanisms shape the scarcity or fragility of disability education, such as staffing expertise, curriculum crowding, partnerships, institutional incentives, and student demand, and how do these mechanisms operate across programme contexts?

The full set of guiding questions used can be found in Appendix D.

1.6 Dataset overview (ABC1-ABC9)

The study was informed by nine semi-structured interviews with staff who taught courses in sport, exercise science, physical education, kinesiology, outdoor recreation, and related

programmes at seven of the eight New Zealand universities offering these qualifications. Participants included senior lecturers, lecturers, programme leaders, Heads of School, and staff involved in curriculum design and delivery. To protect anonymity, participants are referred to as ABC1–ABC9.

The interviews elicited accounts of each programme's curriculum pathway, the location and signals of disability education, which papers included disability content, how learning outcomes were assessed, and what authentic learning experiences were available. This included discussion of placements, links with organisations, community-level disability involvement, guest teaching, and practice-derived learning. While broad in scope, the analysis centred on programme structure and the conditions participants identified as enabling or constraining disability education.

The data were sufficient to address the study's research aims. The nine participants are not intended to be statistically representative of all academics in relevant programme areas at New Zealand universities. However, their roles gave them first-hand experience of curriculum design, delivery, coordination, and programme management. Participants described not only what disability content existed, but also how it came to be included, what constrained it, and what helped sustain it. In a small national context, combining breadth across programme contexts with depth from participant roles enabled the study to examine recurring curriculum patterns while attending to the particular decisions that shaped each programme pathway.

1.7 Reading guide: how the chapters connect

This thesis progresses from the research's contextual and conceptual foundations to the methodology, findings, discussion, implications, and overall contribution.

Chapter Two, the literature review, establishes the context and reviews academic literature on disability education, inclusive practice, and professional preparation in sport and exercise. It also develops key concepts and theories that inform the study, including curriculum theory, scarcity, pathway reliability, and curriculum-making conditions.

Chapter Three introduces the methodology. It explains the qualitative research design, participant sampling and recruitment, data collection methods, analysis process, ethical considerations, and scope of the study. Together, Chapters Two and Three establish the research problem, the analytical framework, and the methodological approach for investigating it.

Chapter Four presents the findings from interviews with nine educators and programme leaders across seven New Zealand universities. The chapter is organised around four themes: the implicit, episodic, and weakly specified positioning of disability education; dependence on champions, staff expertise, and fragile continuity; the influence of curriculum crowding, governance, and market pressures; and the value but uneven availability of authentic learning and community partnerships. The chapter concludes by integrating these themes and showing how scarcity is produced through the interaction of

curriculum and institutional conditions. Chapter Four reports and analyses participants' accounts but reserves the fuller comparison with previous research and the development of programme implications for Chapter Five.

Chapter Five provides the discussion and conclusion. It interprets the findings in relation to the literature and explains what the study confirms, extends, and complicates in previous research. The chapter develops the concept of pathway reliability through the dimensions of visibility, reach, sequencing, assessment, ownership, and continuity. It also applies curriculum and institutional theory to examine how formal rules, professional expectations, disciplinary assumptions, legitimacy, competing institutional logics, staffing arrangements, and partnership capacity shape disability education. The discussion identifies what appears distinctive about the Aotearoa New Zealand context and develops staged, fit-for-context implications for programme review and development. The chapter concludes by outlining the thesis's empirical, conceptual, theoretical, and practical contributions, clarifying their scope, and identifying directions for future research.

Although each chapter serves a distinct function, the thesis develops a coherent argument: disability education may be present within a programme yet remain unreliable as a graduate pathway. Its scarcity is therefore understood not simply as an absence of content, but as an outcome produced through interacting decisions about curriculum visibility, assessment, responsibility, staffing, institutional priorities, and access to authentic learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter purpose and approach to the review

This chapter reviews academic literature and related sector sources that help explain the position of disability education within tertiary sport and exercise programmes. The review is concerned not only with whether disability-related content appears somewhere within a degree, but also with whether students are provided with a coherent and dependable pathway through which disability-informed knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgement can be integrated into their professional preparation. This distinction matters because graduates enter fields such as coaching, exercise science, sport development, physical activity, strength and conditioning, education-related practice, and community movement contexts, where they may be required to make decisions about participation, communication, adaptation, access, safety, and dignity.

Existing research suggests that disability-related education, including adapted physical activity and adapted physical education, is often limited, optional, unevenly specified, or concentrated within a small number of courses or experiences (Case et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2022, 2025; Wilson et al., 2022). The significance of this pattern lies less in the simple quantity of content than in its curricular status. A lecture, workshop, guest session, placement, or optional paper may provide valuable learning, but its presence does not demonstrate that all students have developed disability-informed capability. In this chapter, scarcity is therefore considered a problem of both curriculum reliability and content availability.

The review is organised into a set of connected themes. First, it establishes the conceptual foundations for disability education through rights-based, social-relational, and ableism-focused perspectives. Second, it examines evidence of scarcity across university preparation, physical education, adapted physical activity, kinesiology, and coaching. Third, it considers how students may move from exposure to professional capability through aligned learning outcomes, teaching, assessment, reflection, and applied experience. The review then examines educator expertise, professional socialisation, experiential learning, ethical partnership, policy-practice gaps, and the hidden curriculum. Finally, curriculum theory and institutional theory are brought together as an analytical lens for examining how disability education is selected, legitimised, enacted, assessed, and sustained.

Documents, policies, strategies, and toolkits are handled with caution throughout. They may establish expectations or provide resources, but they do not by themselves demonstrate what students are taught, what they experience across a programme, or what they can do at graduation. The review therefore distinguishes between formal commitments and educational enactment, drawing on work concerning curriculum design, constructive alignment, intended and experienced curriculum, knowledge selection, and hidden curriculum (Biggs et al., 2022; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Goodlad, 1979; Jackson, 1968).

The argument developed in this chapter is that the literature provides strong ethical, conceptual, and professional reasons for disability education but offers less evidence on how such education can be made reliable within sport and exercise degree pathways, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. This gap supports the present study's focus on the forms disability education takes, where it is positioned, who contributes to it, and what curriculum and institutional conditions shape its continuity or fragility.

2.2 Conceptual foundations for disability education

The distinction between knowing about disability and being prepared to practise inclusively is central to this thesis. Awareness may increase students' recognition of disability as a social and professional issue, but awareness alone does not equip graduates to identify barriers, communicate respectfully, adapt activities, reason about risk, collaborate with participants and support networks, or make defensible decisions in complex settings. Disability education is therefore better understood as professional preparation involving knowledge, action, values, and situated judgement.

Rouse (2006) frames inclusive practice through the connected dimensions of knowing, doing, and believing. Knowledge is necessary, but it becomes professionally meaningful only when it informs action and is supported by dispositions that recognise responsibility for inclusion. Shulman (2005) similarly argues that professional education requires students to understand, perform, and act with integrity in the service of others. These perspectives position disability education as more than the coverage of a topic. They require attention to what graduates understand, how they apply that understanding, and how they approach people and situations in which established procedures may be insufficient.

A rights-based perspective provides an important starting point. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes participation, accessibility, and non-discrimination as matters of rights rather than charity or optional goodwill (United Nations, 2006). This shifts attention from an individual's effort to participate towards the responsibilities of systems, organisations, and professionals that mediate access to sport, exercise, and physical activity. For professional education, the implication is that graduates should not regard disability inclusion as relevant only upon entering a specialist setting. It forms part of the broader responsibility to provide equitable and dignified opportunities for participation.

Rights-based commitments, however, do not determine how a coach should adapt a session, how an exercise professional should assess access needs, or how much curriculum time to devote to disability-related learning (Hammond, 2022; Townsend et al., 2022). Rights explain why inclusion matters and why exclusion requires scrutiny, but curriculum still has to translate those commitments into forms of knowledge, practice, and assessment. The educational question is therefore not settled by affirming rights. It concerns how rights are interpreted through programme design and professional preparation.

Social-relational approaches deepen this analysis by asking where barriers are located. A narrow medical framing may direct attention primarily to diagnosis, impairment, or

functional limitation. A social-relational framing considers how impairment effects interact with social, environmental, organisational, and relational conditions (Thomas, 2004). In sport and exercise settings, participation may be shaped by facility design, rules, equipment, communication, assessment practices, staff expectations, transport, time, cost, and assumptions about independence or performance. An activity may be experienced as inaccessible not because sport or exercise is inherently unsuitable for a disabled participant, but because it has been organised around a restricted account of how bodies should move, communicate, learn, or progress.

This perspective is relevant to curriculum because models of disability influence what students are taught to notice. Haegele and Hodge (2016) argue that disability models can shape educational approaches, including whether teaching centres diagnosis and limitation or directs attention to environments, relationships, and professional practice. If disability is treated mainly as a deficit located within the individual, students may learn to approach inclusion as a set of compensatory adjustments for an exceptional participant. A social-relational approach instead encourages them to examine how ordinary professional decisions can produce or reduce barriers.

This does not require the material effects of impairment to be denied. Rather, it avoids assuming that the individual carries sole responsibility for every difficulty encountered. Disability education can therefore include relevant knowledge of bodies, movement, health, communication, and support needs while also requiring students to examine the environments and practices through which participation is organised. This balance is particularly important in sport and exercise, where technical knowledge and risk management can be necessary but may become exclusionary when presented as universally applicable to a single assumed body.

Ableism provides a further conceptual foundation by identifying how standards of normality are produced and maintained. It draws attention to the ways educational and professional systems may privilege non-disabled bodies, forms of movement, communication styles, and measures of performance. In sport and exercise education, ableist assumptions may be reproduced when examples, facilities, assessments, or teaching methods consistently treat one body type or participation pattern as the norm. These assumptions can remain influential even where institutions and educators express support for equality or inclusion.

Lyons (2013) shows how inclusion and exclusion can be embedded in language and apparently progressive practices. Peers et al. (2022) similarly, demonstrates that ableism may persist in adapted physical activity teaching materials through the examples, images, categories, and assumptions used to represent disabled people. Such work is useful because it shows that the presence of disability content does not guarantee a critical or inclusive curriculum. Disability may be represented in ways that remain deficit-based, exceptionalising, inspirational, or detached from ordinary professional responsibility.

A social-relational and ableism-focused approach therefore changes what counts as meaningful disability education. It is not sufficient for students to learn lists of impairment categories or to encounter disability through isolated stories. They also need opportunities to examine how norms are constructed, how barriers are reproduced, and how professional

decisions affect participation. Inclusive pedagogy is relevant here because it treats learner difference as ordinary rather than as a reason to divide people into normal and special categories (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Rouse, 2009). In applied sport and exercise fields, an equivalent orientation would position variation as an expected feature of professional practice, for example, client or person-centred care/programming.

This conceptual foundation also clarifies the limits of goodwill. Positive attitudes are valuable, but they do not substitute for knowledge, practice, feedback, and accountability. A graduate may support inclusion in principle while lacking the ability to recognise inaccessible design, communicate appropriately, adapt an activity, or justify a decision. Hammond (2022) shows that policies are interpreted through coaches' perceptions and organisational contexts, while Tinning (2010) and Shulman (2005) emphasise that the values of professional practice require explicit educational attention. Disability education must therefore connect moral commitment with the practical and critical work of professional preparation.

Taken together, rights-based, social-relational, and ableism-focused perspectives establish why disability education belongs within sport and exercise curricula. Rights locate inclusion within professional and institutional responsibility. Social-relational approaches direct attention to the interaction between impairment, environment, organisation, and relationships. Ableism scholarship examines the norms through which some bodies and forms of participation are treated as ordinary and others as peripheral. These perspectives do not prescribe a single curriculum model, but they provide a basis for evaluating whether programmes prepare students to recognise and respond to disability as a routine dimension of professional practice.

2.3 Evidence of scarcity in sport and exercise graduate preparation

The literature suggests that disability education is not consistently established as core professional preparation across sport, exercise, physical education, kinesiology, and coaching. Scarcity can take several forms. Disability-related content may be absent, concentrated in an elective or single introductory course, weakly specified in learning outcomes, separated from assessment, or encountered mainly through placements, workshops, guest teaching, and individual staff initiatives. These forms of provision may be educationally valuable, but their distribution raises questions about whether all students have comparable opportunities to develop disability-informed capability.

Research in university-based preparation provides the most direct evidence of this concern. Studies of adapted physical education, adapted physical activity, physical education teacher education, and kinesiology describe disability-related content as unevenly specified, limited in scope, or concentrated in isolated courses (Case et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2022, 2025; Wilson et al., 2022). Case et al. (2025) indicate that adapted physical activity and adapted physical education are not commonly required across undergraduate kinesiology curricula. McNamara et al. (2022) report that instructors of introductory adapted physical education recognised the limitations of relying on a single course, while Wilson et al. (2022) identify variation in course content, practicum exposure, and instructional approach.

Lieberman et al. (2024) similarly emphasise the importance of clarifying essential content in introductory adapted physical education.

This literature does not demonstrate that every isolated course is inadequate. Specialist papers can provide concentrated conceptual and practical depth that may be difficult to achieve through brief references distributed across a programme. Disability studies, adapted physical activity, and adapted physical education can enable sustained consideration of disability models, activity modification, communication, risk reasoning, practicum-based learning, and the design of participation environments (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Lieberman et al., 2024; Linton, 1998; Morton et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). The problem arises when specialist provision is the only location of disability education and is available mainly to students who have already chosen that pathway.

The alternative of infusing disability content throughout the mainstream curriculum also carries risks. DePauw and Karp (1994) argued for integrating disability-related knowledge across physical education curricula, and subsequent work in kinesiology and sport management similarly supports broader integration (McNamara et al., 2025; Pate et al., 2023; Shapiro et al., 2012). Infusion can make disability relevant to areas such as biomechanics, physiology, coaching, exercise prescription, pedagogy, and practicum. However, where content is distributed without coordination, it may become shallow, repetitive, difficult to identify, or absent from assessment. The literature therefore presents a tension rather than a simple choice: specialist provision can provide depth but remain marginal, while distributed provision can broaden relevance but become difficult to evidence.

This tension is important because debates about specialist and mainstream provision can otherwise become overly binary. A dedicated paper does not preclude addressing disability elsewhere, and curriculum-wide attention does not eliminate the need for specialist leadership. The literature more strongly supports examining how different forms of provision relate to one another: whether students have a clear foundation, whether ideas are reinforced in relevant disciplinary contexts, and whether later learning assumes or develops earlier knowledge. These are questions of coordination and progression rather than a choice between one paper and complete infusion.

Research on school physical education and adapted physical education illustrates why this question matters for professional preparation. Wilson et al. (2020) found that physical education and adapted physical education teachers encountered inadequate support, unqualified staff, and difficulties including students with severe disabilities. Haegele et al. (2021) identify teacher knowledge, attitudes, environmental conditions, equipment, policy, and personnel support as influences on inclusion in integrated physical education. Tarantino et al. (2022) similarly report that knowledge, preparation, experience, professional development, collaboration, and support shape teachers' readiness for inclusive practice. Although these studies focus on schools and teacher education rather than New Zealand sport and exercise degrees, they show that inclusion is enacted through complex professional decisions rather than achieved through endorsement alone.

Inclusive teacher education provides a wider programme-level parallel. This literature argues that inclusion cannot depend only on positive attitudes, policy endorsement, or isolated awareness-raising. It requires attention to values, professional competence, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional capacity (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Florian & Rouse, 2009). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) are particularly relevant because they frame inclusive pedagogy as extending what is ordinarily available to learners rather than adding separate provision only after difference has been identified. Although teacher education cannot be treated as a direct proxy for exercise science, coaching, or sport development, it demonstrates that inclusion becomes a programme concern rather than the property of a single course or educator.

The comparison among university preparation, school physical education, and coaching must nevertheless remain bounded. Studies of teachers describe the consequences of professional preparation in school settings, while coaching studies often examine learning after entry into practice. Neither literature maps the complete curriculum of New Zealand sport and exercise degrees. Their value lies in identifying recurrent concerns limited formal preparation, dependence on experience, variable support, and uncertainty about responsibility that warrant examination within the tertiary programmes studied here.

The coaching literature identifies a parallel problem. Townsend et al. (2022) argue that formal coach education has played only a minor role in the development of many Parasport coaches and that disability-specific coach development remains limited. Hammond (2022) shows that disability-inclusive policies do not translate automatically into coaching practice because coaches interpret policy through their own perceptions and organisational settings. Wareham et al. (2019) identify the organisational, policy, recruitment, and support demands associated with coaching elite disabled athletes. Taken together, this literature suggests that disability knowledge is often acquired informally, through personal experience, mentoring, relationships with athletes, or local communities, rather than through a reliable formal pathway.

Informal learning is not inherently deficient. Coaching knowledge is frequently social and situated, and experience with athletes and other practitioners can be highly valuable (Culver et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2014). The concern is that access to such learning may depend on personal history, motivation, networks, or chance. Lorimer and Holland-Smith (2012) show that motivation and personal experience influence coach development. Where disability education is optional, students with prior interest or personal connection may pursue it, while others may complete the same qualification without comparable exposure. Optionality can therefore preserve individual choice while producing uneven professional preparation.

Aotearoa New Zealand sector sources reinforce the relevance of workforce capability. Sport NZ et al. (2018) identify the need for a skilled and confident workforce capable of supporting high-quality sport and recreation opportunities for disabled people. Sport NZ, (2024) and Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People (n.d.-b) similarly position disability inclusion as a sector responsibility. These sources establish expectations for inclusive practice, but they do not show how tertiary programmes translate those expectations into

teaching, assessment, and graduate capability. The national curriculum evidence base remains limited.

The practical stakes of uneven preparation are significant. Graduates may enter coaching, exercise prescription, community sport, recreation, physical activity promotion, performance, strength and conditioning, and education-related roles. In these settings, they may be required to make decisions about communication, access, adaptation, safety, risk, grouping, equipment, and participation. Where formal preparation is limited, graduates may rely on informal advice, trial and error, avoidance, or assumptions drawn from experience with non-disabled participants. This does not establish that graduates will necessarily practise poorly, but it identifies a vulnerability in professional preparation.

This vulnerability is important because disability-informed practice is not confined to a narrow occupational destination. Graduates who do not identify themselves as disability specialists may still work with disabled participants in mainstream gyms, schools, clubs, community programmes, health-promotion settings, and performance environments. The professional question is therefore not how many graduates will enter designated disability roles, but whether ordinary graduate preparation recognises human variation as part of ordinary practice. The absence of that recognition can shift responsibility onto participants, families, community organisations, or the small number of practitioners who have acquired specialist experience elsewhere.

The literature also suggests that the meaning of scarcity extends beyond the number of courses offered. Barnett and Coate (2005) and Young (2008) show that curriculum involves the selection, protection, assessment, and legitimation of knowledge. Disability-related content may therefore be marginal not because educators reject inclusion, but because programmes are organised around established disciplinary priorities, accreditation demands, curriculum time, staffing, resources, and assumptions about what counts as core knowledge. Scarcity can be produced through ordinary curriculum processes in which disability remains weakly classified, weakly assessed, or assigned to a specialist area.

This point requires careful calibration. Limited or fragile provision may reproduce ableist assumptions by positioning disability as exceptional, peripheral, or relevant only to specialists (Campbell, 2009; Dolmage, 2017). However, the literature does not justify treating every instance of optional or staff-led provision as direct evidence of institutional ableism. A more defensible interpretation is that such arrangements may allow ableist norms to persist when disability is not structurally recognised within learning outcomes, assessment, staff development, and programme responsibility (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Nieminen & Pesonen, 2022; Peers et al., 2022).

The Aotearoa New Zealand context adds cultural and relational dimensions to this issue. Inclusion is shaped by power, institutional histories, cultural safety, and judgements about whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate (Curtis et al., 2019; Gerdin, 2022; Linnér et al., 2022; Morton et al., 2023). The literature reviewed here rarely brings disability, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and tertiary sport-related education together. This thesis does not attempt to resolve those intersections, but it recognises that disability education cannot be treated as a

culturally neutral technical addition. Its place within curriculum is connected to wider questions of equity, relationship, responsibility, and knowledge selection.

Across university preparation, physical education, coaching, and sector policy, a consistent concern emerges: disability inclusion is valued more widely than it is reliably specified in formal preparation. The existing literature demonstrates the relevance of disability-related learning and identifies weaknesses in single-course, elective, informal, or uneven provision. It does not, however, provide a detailed account of how disability education is currently organised across Aotearoa New Zealand university sport and exercise programmes. This limits understanding of where provision sits, who encounters it, and which conditions make it more or less stable.

2.4 From exposure to disability-informed capability

A recurring concern across professional education is how students move from encountering an idea to using it responsibly in practice. In disability education, this progression cannot be assumed. Students may attend a lecture, read a policy, complete a reflective task, or hear a lived-experience account without learning how to identify barriers, adapt an activity, redesign an exercise progression, communicate respectfully, evaluate access, or justify decisions in context. The presence of content is therefore not equivalent to the development of capability.

Inclusive capability can be understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and situated judgement (Epstein & Hundert, 2002; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Rouse, 2006; Shulman, 2005). Knowledge includes disability concepts, rights, barriers, ableism, models of disability, inclusive sport structures, and relevant policy (Campbell, 2009; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; United Nations, 2006). Skills include communication, adaptation, activity design, risk reasoning, collaborative planning, and evaluation of practice (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Hutzler, 2007; Lieberman et al., 2024). Dispositions include respect, humility, openness, critical reflection, and willingness to challenge exclusionary assumptions. Judgement concerns the ability to bring these dimensions together when circumstances are uncertain, varied, or imperfect (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Shulman, 2005).

These dimensions are connected but should not be collapsed into a single measure. The literature frequently refers to attitudes, confidence, self-efficacy, preparedness, competence, and capability. Bandura (1997) provide a basis for understanding self-efficacy as belief in one's capacity to act. Research in physical education teacher preparation associates coursework and practicum experience with students' confidence and beliefs about inclusive practice (Block & Rizzo, 1995; Hodge & Jansma, 2000; Taliaferro et al., 2015). Confidence may support action, but it is not evidence of competence. A graduate may feel confident while lacking the knowledge or judgement required for safe and respectful practice, while another may remain cautious despite being well prepared. Confidence is therefore better treated as one possible outcome of preparation than as proof that preparation has occurred.

Inclusive pedagogy provides a useful orientation for this progression. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe inclusion as extending what is ordinarily available rather than creating separate provision only for learners identified as different. Slee (2018) similarly challenges approaches that affirm inclusion without addressing the structures that reproduce exclusion. Applied to sport and exercise, this suggests that graduates should learn to expect human variation and design participation with variation in mind, rather than waiting until a disabled participant appears before considering adaptation.

The curriculum design literature helps explain how such a capability might become visible within a programme. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) account of backward design begins with the learning students are expected to demonstrate and then identifies appropriate evidence and teaching experiences. Biggs et al. (2022) similarly emphasise constructive alignment between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment. These frameworks do not specify a universal disability curriculum, but they provide a basis for asking whether programmes name disability-informed capability, create opportunities to develop it, and require students to demonstrate it.

Assessment is particularly important because it communicates what a programme regards as legitimate knowledge. If disability is discussed but never assessed, students may reasonably interpret it as supplementary. If it appears only in a brief or low-weighted reflective task, its professional status may remain weak. The authentic assessment literature argues that assessment should resemble the kinds of tasks graduates will encounter and require situated judgement rather than the reproduction of information (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gulikers et al., 2004; Villarroel et al., 2018). In disability education, relevant evidence might include identifying barriers, adapting activities, evaluating accessibility, communicating decisions, or justifying an inclusive approach. The literature does not establish a single assessment format that all programmes should adopt, but it does support the examination of whether disability-related capability is assessed in a defensible, practice-relevant form.

Ajjawi et al. (2023) further emphasise authenticity, feedback, and opportunities to learn through assessment. This is relevant because an assessment can include disability without being educationally sound. A poorly framed task may reproduce stereotypes, ask students to simulate impairment without critical context, or place inappropriate demands on disabled contributors. A stronger task would require students to draw on evidence, attend to participant preference, consider environmental barriers, explain adaptation choices, and reflect on the limits of their own knowledge. The key issue is not simply whether disability appears in an assessment brief, but what kind of professional reasoning the task invites and rewards.

Assessment also has a prospective function. Boud and Falchikov (2006) argue that it should prepare students for future learning and professional judgement rather than measure only immediate recall. This is especially relevant to disability because graduates cannot be taught every impairment, access requirement, sport, facility, or participation context. A checklist may support action, but it cannot replace inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and context-sensitive judgement. Graduates require a framework for learning with participants and adapting their practice as circumstances change.

The literature on adapted physical education and professional preparation indicates that repeated and applied opportunities are important. Coursework, practicum, feedback, and reflection can influence preservice educators' self-efficacy and preparedness for inclusion (Block & Rizzo, 1995; Hodge & Jansma, 2000; Taliaferro et al., 2015). Sato et al. (2022) show how practicum, mentoring, and reflection may contribute to professional learning in adapted physical activity and education. These findings support a progression beyond initial exposure, although much of the evidence comes from teacher education rather than the full range of sport and exercise degrees considered in this thesis.

A coherent pathway does not necessarily require every student to complete the same specialist paper or every programme to use an identical sequence. Sport and exercise graduates enter different vocational areas, and the application of disability-informed capability will vary across coaching, exercise science, community sport, physical education, performance analysis, health promotion, recreation, and further study (Fitzgerald, 2005; Sherrill, 2004). A coaching pathway may emphasise communication, task design, and athlete relationships; a sport- and exercise-related programmes pathway may place greater emphasis on adapted exercise design and risk reasoning; and community sport may require stronger attention to programme access and partnership. These differences do not remove the need for a common foundation. They indicate that foundational knowledge and dispositions require contextual application.

Work on adapted physical education standards and kinesiology curricula illustrates the continuing concern with baseline preparation. Rich (1993) They link professional preparation to the development of qualified personnel, while McNamara et al. (2025) consider how adapted physical activity might be promoted within undergraduate kinesiology through an RE-AIM perspective. These sources arise from different contexts and do not establish standards for New Zealand programmes. They do, however, reinforce the distinction between specialist expertise and the minimum capability expected of graduates whose work may include disabled people.

The literature therefore raises an unresolved question for sport and exercise programmes: what minimum disability-related capability should all graduates develop, and how should that capability be distinguished from specialist disability expertise?

Curriculum mapping offers one way to examine whether such a pathway exists. Harden (2001) argues that mapping can identify where learning is introduced, reinforced, assessed, or omitted. Dyjur et al. (2019) similarly describe curriculum mapping as a means of identifying relationships, gaps, overlaps, and patterns across programme components. Applied analytically, mapping can show whether disability-related learning is concentrated in one paper, distributed across several papers, repeated over time, connected to assessment, or dependent on optional experience. Its value in this thesis lies not in prescribing a solution, but in making curriculum claims open to examination.

The distinction between formal and experienced pathways is important. A programme may include disability in a paper outline or graduate profile without ensuring that students encounter it meaningfully. Conversely, a committed educator may provide substantial

learning that is not visible in formal documentation. Goodlad's (1979) distinction between intended and experienced curriculum helps explain why neither documents nor individual examples are sufficient evidence of programme-wide capability. A reliable pathway requires attention to the relationships among what is intended, what is taught, what is assessed, and what students are likely to encounter throughout the degree.

The idea of student entitlement is useful here. Students graduating with the same qualification may reasonably be expected to share a defensible minimum level of preparation, even though their electives and professional interests differ. Optional papers and placements can extend learning, but they should not be mistaken for a common pathway if only a small or self-selecting group participates. The literature does not define the precise minimum for every degree; it does support asking which disability-related learning is expected of all students and which is genuinely additional or specialist.

Professional identity is also relevant. Trede et al. (2012) connect professional identity formation to educational experience, while Sato et al. (2022) show how mentorship and practicum can shape learners' understanding of their future roles. If disability is repeatedly positioned as specialist knowledge belonging to others, students may learn that inclusive practice sits outside their professional identity. If it is encountered in the course of ordinary professional decision-making, responsibility is more likely to be understood as shared across the field. The curriculum therefore contributes not only to what students know, but also to the kind of practitioner they imagine themselves becoming.

Reflective practice contributes to this formation because professional work rarely consists of applying fixed rules to predictable situations. Schön's (1983) account of reflection-in-action describes judgement developed in response to uncertain, situated practice. Its relevance to disability education lies in the need for graduates to notice when an established activity, communication method, or risk assumption is not working and to revise their approach with the participant rather than simply applying a standard protocol. Reflection should therefore move beyond expressions of empathy towards examination of evidence, assumptions, power, and the consequences of professional decisions.

Relational competence is equally important. Vargas et al. (2019) show that parents may evaluate coaches working with children with hidden disabilities based on communication, trust, well-being, and responsiveness rather than technical knowledge alone. Thomas (2004) also draws attention to relational and emotional dimensions of disablement. These perspectives indicate that capability involves asking rather than assuming, negotiating goals and risk, recognising participant expertise, and involving families or support networks where appropriate. Technical adaptation without relational judgement may still produce exclusion.

Lived-experience narratives can contribute to this process, but they require critical framing. Best (2022) illustrates how sport may be transformative following spinal cord injury, including effects on identity, belonging, and perceived capability. Such accounts can deepen students' understanding, but they should not be used only to inspire or generate empathy. Professional learning requires analysis of the conditions that enabled participation, the barriers that were removed, and the roles played by coaches, organisations, facilities, and

relationships. This moves lived experience from passive testimony towards a source of critical and professional reasoning.

The literature therefore supports treating the movement from exposure to capability as a curriculum problem rather than as an automatic consequence of contact with disability-related content. It points to the importance of explicit expectations, repeated opportunities, applied learning, feedback, reflection, assessment, and professional identity formation. At the same time, it leaves an empirical gap. There is limited evidence about whether sport and exercise programmes define disability-informed graduate capability, how learning is sequenced, whether assessment is used to evidence it, and how different parts of the curriculum connect. These questions are examined in the present study rather than answered in advance by the review.

2.5 Educator expertise, professional socialisation, and curriculum responsibility

The development of disability-informed graduates depends partly on the expertise and support available to educators. Haegele et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of qualified and competent educators with a strong knowledge base in adapted physical activity. Haegele and Hodge (2016) similarly highlight the role of educators who can connect disability concepts to practical cases and learning situations. Staff capability includes disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical skill, confidence, and cultural responsiveness; it is not limited to familiarity with disability terminology.

This matters because staff expertise affects what can be designed, taught, supervised, and assessed. A programme may value disability education but struggle to provide depth if staff lack relevant knowledge, confidence, time, or access to professional development. Peiris-John et al. (2021), writing in the field of health professional education, identify gaps in communication, practical engagement, and disability-informed teaching. Health sciences and sport and exercise are distinct fields, but both prepare graduates to work with diverse people and bodies. The comparison suggests that curriculum time, staff confidence, practical exposure, and assessment structures are connected rather than separate concerns.

Haegele et al. (2020) also emphasise that educator preparation involves more than content knowledge. Educators require pedagogical competence and cultural responsiveness to facilitate critical discussion, connect theory to practice, and evaluate students' application of inclusive principles. Huynh et al. (2024) similarly resist reducing inclusion to technical performance. These perspectives are important because disability education can be weakened not only by absence of specialist knowledge, but also by teaching that presents disability as a fixed set of categories or adaptations without attention to context, culture, and relationship.

Staff development is therefore part of the problem with the curriculum. System-level inclusion literature cautions against relying on individual goodwill alone (Ackers, 2018; Brussino, 2021). If disability-related teaching rests mainly with one knowledgeable lecturer or an external contributor, the provision may remain vulnerable to workload pressures, role

changes, staff turnover, or loss of partnership capacity. This does not diminish the value of individual leadership. Committed educators often create important opportunities and specialist expertise may be necessary. The concern is whether that expertise is supported, shared, and connected to programme structures.

Professional development may take several forms, including collaboration with disability-sector organisations, co-teaching, mentoring, peer review of curriculum, and engagement with adapted physical activity or inclusive pedagogy scholarship. The literature does not establish which form is most effective across disciplines. It does indicate that asking staff to include disability without time, support, or access to expertise risks producing superficial coverage. Faculty preparation therefore affects both the quantity and quality of what students encounter.

A related tension concerns ownership. When disability education is assigned to one specialist, other staff may regard it as outside their area of responsibility. However, when it is described as everyone's responsibility without clear coordination, it may become diffuse, shallow, and difficult to locate. Inclusive teacher education literature therefore helps distinguish distributed responsibility from unspecified responsibility: inclusion requires shared programme-level commitment, but that commitment must be supported through curriculum design, staff capability, assessment, and institutional capacity rather than left to goodwill or assumed coverage (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Florian & Rouse, 2009). Inclusive capability may require contributions across several papers and professional contexts, while still benefiting from clear coordination and access to specialist knowledge.

External experts and community contributors may strengthen this arrangement by bringing lived experience, current practice, and specialist knowledge into the programme. Their contribution is not a substitute for faculty responsibility. Staff still need sufficient capability to prepare students, connect the contribution to wider learning, facilitate critical discussion, and assess what students have learned. Where external input is treated as a self-contained solution, disability education may remain detached from the rest of the curriculum.

Professional socialisation extends this issue beyond formal teaching. Sport and exercise graduates learn through the cultures, examples, and routines that surround their education. Coaching literature shows that practitioners develop knowledge through experience, observation, mentoring, and interaction with other coaches (Culver et al., 2009; Lorimer & Holland-Smith, 2012; Wareham et al., 2019). Townsend et al. (2022) argue that formal education has often played a limited role in the development of Parasport coaches. Taylor et al. (2014) similarly describe Parasport coaching expertise as developing through reflection, adaptability, relationships with athletes, and learning with others.

Sato et al. (2022) add that professional socialisation during adapted physical activity practica can be shaped by mentorship and opportunities to become a reflective learner. Trede et al. (2012) connect such experiences to professional identity formation. These studies suggest that students learn who is responsible for disability inclusion as well as how to practise it. If inclusive work is consistently associated with a small specialist group, students may

interpret it as a separate career identity. If it is represented across ordinary professional contexts, it is more likely to be understood as part of the field's shared obligations.

These forms of learning can be powerful, but they also shape what becomes recognised as legitimate practice. If students repeatedly encounter examples centred on non-disabled athletes, conventional performance measures, and standardised methods, those arrangements may become naturalised as universal. Disability can then appear as an exceptional case requiring separate expertise. Professional socialisation may therefore reinforce or challenge the formal curriculum, depending on the bodies, contexts, and forms of practice that students routinely see represented.

The coaching literature also demonstrates that inclusive practice is relational as well as technical. Wareham et al. (2019) identify organisational and support demands in elite disability sport, while Vargas et al. (2019) emphasise communication, trust, wellbeing, and less visible needs in parents' accounts of coaches working with children with hidden disabilities. These studies broaden the meaning of competence. Adaptation of equipment or exercise may be necessary, but inclusive practice also depends on listening, negotiation, respect, and the ability to avoid assumptions about capacity or preference.

Taylor et al. (2014) also challenge the view that Parasport coaching consists only of minor technical adjustments for a different category of athlete. Their work emphasises adaptability, accessible communication, reflective learning, and sustained relationships. This matters for tertiary curricula because separating disability coaching too sharply from 'mainstream' coaching can reinforce the idea that ordinary coaching knowledge is built for non-disabled athletes. A more inclusive account of professional competence begins with variation while retaining access to specialist advice where needed.

Hidden and non-apparent disabilities add further complexity. Coaches and exercise professionals may work with participants whose conditions are not disclosed or immediately visible, including people with chronic health conditions, neurodiversity, mental distress, pain, fatigue, sensory requirements, or learning support needs. Vargas et al. (2019) indicate that wellbeing and trust may be overlooked when coaching knowledge is defined too narrowly. Disability education should therefore avoid presenting inclusion only through visible impairment or elite Parasport. A broader professional orientation is required, although programmes will differ in the specific contexts through which it is developed.

This literature does not imply that every educator must become a specialist in every impairment or that every graduate must master every possible scenario. Florian and Rouse (2009) provide a more sustainable principle: inclusive practice involves developing responsive pedagogy rather than creating a separate method for each person classified as different. In sport and exercise, this means graduates need a foundation that enables them to recognise variation, communicate, adapt, seek advice, and collaborate when specialist expertise is required.

Educator expertise and professional socialisation are therefore connected to curriculum responsibility. Staff knowledge influences what learning is available, while the wider professional culture influences how students interpret its relevance. The literature identifies

risks where disability education depends on isolated expertise, informal networks, or personal interest, but it does not show how these risks are managed within Aotearoa New Zealand programmes. The present study examines how educators describe responsibility, staff capability, and the conditions under which provision is maintained.

2.6 Experience, practicum, and ethical partnership

Experience is an important component of professional learning in sport and exercise. Students commonly learn by observing practice, participating, seeking feedback, reflecting, and engaging with communities of practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Kolb (2014) describes experiential learning as movement between concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. Billett (2011) similarly emphasises that workplace and practice-based learning depend on both the opportunities available and the learner's engagement with them.

In disability education, experience can make barriers, communication, adaptation, and relationships visible in ways that classroom discussion alone may not. Students may have opportunities to work with disabled athletes, participants, coaches, organisations, or community programmes and to test their assumptions against practice. However, contact does not automatically produce inclusive learning. Without preparation, guidance, feedback, and reflection, an experience may confirm existing assumptions or encourage students to generalise from a small sample.

The literature therefore supports scaffolding rather than relying on exposure alone. Taliaferro et al. (2015) connect coursework and practicum with preservice teachers' self-efficacy, while Sato et al. (2022) show how mentoring, one-to-one coaching, and reflection can shape professional learning. These studies suggest that practice is most educationally useful when it is linked to conceptual learning and supported interpretation. A placement or community event may provide experience, but its contribution depends on how students are prepared, what responsibilities they are given, what feedback they receive, and how learning is connected to programme outcomes.

Preparation before engagement is important because students may enter disability-related settings with uncertainty, stereotypes, or limited vocabulary. During the experience, supervision can help them distinguish productive discomfort from unsafe or disrespectful practice. Afterwards, structured reflection can connect the encounter to disability models, professional standards, and future action. Without these links, students may remember an event without understanding the curriculum knowledge it was intended to develop.

Equity of access is a further concern. Disabled people often face unequal access to physical education, sport, and physical activity because of limited adapted provision, inaccessible programme design, and uneven organisational capability (Liu et al., 2025). At the same time, tertiary students' access to disability-related practice may also be uneven. Where placements, events, or projects are optional, limited in number, or dependent on local relationships, some students may receive extensive experience while others receive little. Fraser and Greenhalgh (2001) argue for professional preparation that enables practitioners

to adapt and continue learning. From this perspective, optional experience may enrich learning, but it cannot by itself establish a common graduate expectation.

Partnership ethics are central to this discussion. Disabled people and community organisations should not be treated merely as resources through which non-disabled students gain experience or complete assessment. Oliver (1990) and Shakespeare (2013) caution against objectification and the tendency for others to speak for disabled people. If disabled contributors are invited only to share personal stories, students may be encouraged to empathise without recognising them as experts. If community organisations provide repeated teaching, access, emotional labour, or supervision without adequate recognition or resourcing, universities may reproduce inequitable relationships while presenting the activity as inclusive.

Reciprocity therefore matters. Ethical partnership requires attention to purpose, preparation, consent, recognition, workload, payment or resourcing where appropriate, and benefits for community partners as well as students. Disability-centred learning should enable disabled people to contribute knowledge and shape the terms of engagement rather than being positioned as passive examples. Culver and Werthner (2018) demonstrate the value of centring a Paralympian's experience, while Peiris-John et al. (2021) show how communication with people with varied experiences can challenge stereotypes in health education. The educational value of such engagement depends on how it is framed and supported.

These arrangements also teach students about power. When disabled contributors are recognised as knowledgeable partners, students encounter an account of professional practice based on collaboration. When contributors are treated mainly as bodies on which students can practise, the hidden curriculum may suggest that marginalised communities are available for others' educational benefit. Ethical partnership is therefore not separate from learning outcomes; it models the relationships and responsibilities that programmes claim to teach.

Universities also have responsibilities towards organisations that host placements or facilitate contact. Partnership work may involve recruitment, accessibility planning, risk management, staff time, transport, communication with participants and whānau, and follow-up after an activity. Treating this labour as an informal favour can make it difficult to sustain valuable experiences. The literature supports examining not only the quality of student experience, but also the institutional support surrounding the partnership.

The distinction between contact and learning is especially important. A single narrative cannot represent the diversity of disabled people's lives, and inspirational framing can obscure the social and institutional conditions that shape participation. Students can instead be encouraged to analyse what enabled or constrained the person's involvement, how power operated, whose expertise was recognised, and what responsibilities belonged to practitioners and organisations. This approach treats lived experience as a source of professional and critical knowledge rather than emotional motivation alone.

Technology can supplement some aspects of applied learning. Ng et al. (2021) identify challenges associated with distance learning in adapted physical education, while Cushion and Townsend (2019) show how technology can support elements of coach development. Video cases, virtual interactions, and digital simulations may broaden access to examples and support preparation when in-person opportunities are limited. They can help students practise analysis and decision-making, but they do not fully reproduce the relational, embodied, and context-specific dimensions of working with disabled people.

Technology may also improve flexibility for disabled students and contributors when travel, facilities, fatigue, communication, or scheduling create barriers. Its use should therefore not be judged solely by how closely it imitates face-to-face activity. The relevant question is which learning purpose it serves and whose access it supports. A blended approach may use digital cases for preparation and analysis while reserving in-person activity for forms of interaction and feedback that require embodied participation.

Experience should therefore be understood as curriculum infrastructure rather than as an isolated event. Its educational value depends on staffing, supervision, partnership capacity, accessibility, ethical processes, conceptual preparation, reflection, and assessment. Accessibility must also include disabled students within the university cohort. A placement, practical class, simulation, or assessment designed to teach inclusion can undermine its own purpose if disabled students cannot participate safely, equitably, or without disproportionate disclosure and additional labour. The design of disability education should therefore be consistent with the inclusive principles it seeks to develop.

The literature establishes the importance of these conditions but offers limited evidence about how they are organised across New Zealand university sport and exercise programmes. The present study consequently examines not only whether applied opportunities exist but also how educators describe their availability, connection to the curriculum, and sustainability.

2.7 Policy-practice gaps, ableism, and the hidden curriculum

Disability inclusion is supported by international rights frameworks, national strategies, institutional commitments, and sector resources. However, policy and toolkit literature also illustrates a persistent translation problem: formal endorsement does not determine what students are taught, how learning is assessed, or whether disability-informed capability is sustained across a programme. A policy may establish expectations, but it cannot by itself produce educational practice.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a broad framework for participation, accessibility, and non-discrimination (United Nations, 2006). Within Aotearoa New Zealand, Sport New Zealand's sector documents and disability-planning work identify inclusion as a priority in sport and physical activity (Sport NZ, 2024; Sport NZ et al., 2018). Whaikaha's policy guidance also provides language and tools for considering disability in policy development (Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-

a). Together, these sources create an external expectation that graduates entering sport and exercise fields should be prepared to work inclusively.

These sources do not specify what every undergraduate should learn, who should teach disability-related content, how much curriculum time it requires, or how capability should be demonstrated. Universities must interpret broad commitments through decisions about programme requirements, staffing, learning outcomes, assessment, resources, and review. Hammond (2022) makes a related point in coaching by showing that disability and inclusion policies are enacted through coaches' perceptions and organisational contexts. Ainscow (2020) similarly argues that inclusion requires change to systems and structures rather than additional statements of principle.

Toolkits and guidance documents have educational value but similar limitations. They can offer terminology, planning prompts, case material, and practical frameworks. World Health Organization (2011) resources and Whaikaha toolkit materials can support students and educators in identifying barriers and considering disability in policy and practice (Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.-b). However, access to a resource does not establish that students have engaged with it, understood it, or applied it. From a constructive alignment perspective, a resource becomes part of education when it is connected to learning outcomes, teaching activity, feedback, and assessment (Biggs et al., 2022).

The policy-practice gap is therefore also a curriculum gap. The Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 identifies continuing difficulties in implementing inclusion despite policy development (UNESCO, 2020). Programme documents may contain inclusive language while leaving disability representation in teaching and assessment weak. Conversely, meaningful work may occur through staff and partnerships without being visible in formal documents. Neither the presence of policy nor the absence of documents provides a complete account of the enacted curriculum.

A curriculum may also be considered a product, a process, and a practice. As a product, it appears in programme documents, learning outcomes, and assessment schedules. As a process, it is negotiated through meetings, review, student feedback, workload allocation, and decisions about programme viability. As practice, it is enacted in classrooms, laboratories, gymnasia, online spaces, placements, and interactions with community partners. Policy may influence all three dimensions, but not necessarily in the same way. Inclusive language can be visible in the product while remaining weak in practice, or staff may enact inclusion without formal protection in the product.

Quality assurance processes can influence whether a priority becomes formally protected. Graduate profiles, programme regulations, paper outlines, learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, review processes, and workload decisions all help determine what is visible and what endures. Harvey and Green (1993) connect quality in higher education with the purposes and processes through which learning is defined. If disability education is formally connected to programme outcomes and assessment, it may be more resilient during staffing or curriculum change. If it remains informal, its continuity may depend on local commitment and circumstance.

Formalisation is not automatically beneficial if it produces only symbolic compliance. A programme may add disability language to an outcome without changing teaching, assessment, or staff support. Equally, requiring evidence can create useful accountability by making responsibility visible. The issue is the relationship among formal statement, enactment, and student experience rather than the presence of documentation alone.

This translation problem is closely connected to ableism. Ableist assumptions need not appear as explicit hostility. They may be reproduced through routine choices that position non-disabled bodies, communication, movement, and performance as standard. Lyons (2013) shows how apparently inclusive language may coexist with continued able-bodied norms, while Peers et al. (2022) identify ableist representations within adapted physical activity teaching materials. A curriculum can therefore mention disability while continuing to frame it as a deficit, an exception, an inspiration, or a specialist concern.

The hidden curriculum provides a way to analyse these indirect messages. Jackson (1968) argues that students learn through routines, priorities, silences, and institutional arrangements as well as through formal content. Bernstein (2003) and Young (2008) further show that curriculum communicates value through the classification, organisation, and assessment of knowledge. In sport and exercise programmes, students may learn that disability is peripheral if non-disabled bodies and conventional performance measures dominate examples, practical tasks, facilities, and assessment, even where inclusion is affirmed elsewhere.

The emphasis on performance, measurement, efficiency, safety, correction, and progression within sport and exercise is not inherently ableist. These concerns are often central to professional practice. They become exclusionary when taught as though all participants move, communicate, learn, recover, or engage in the same way. The relevant question is therefore not whether programmes should abandon technical knowledge, but whether its assumptions and applications are examined across varied bodies and participation contexts.

Responsibility is another aspect of translation. System-level accounts of inclusion suggest that change cannot depend solely on isolated enthusiasm (Ackers, 2018; Brussino, 2021). Márquez-González et al. (2025) identify the risk of inclusive practice resting with individual lecturers rather than being integrated institutionally. In sport and exercise education, a committed lecturer, guest contributor, placement provider, or community partner may create valuable learning. Yet if that work is not connected to programme structures, its continuation may be vulnerable to workload pressures, staff turnover, partnership capacity, or curriculum review.

The literature therefore supports a distinction between the visibility of inclusion and the institutionalisation of education. Policies, resources, and individual initiatives can make disability visible, but programme reliability depends on how those elements are translated into curriculum. This is not an argument that every commitment must result in a separate paper or uniform assessment. It is an argument that broad policy language should not be treated as evidence of student learning without examining enactment.

These issues are especially relevant to the New Zealand evidence gap. Sector commitments indicate that disability inclusion is a recognised public and professional concern, but little published research maps how sport and exercise degree programmes interpret that concern. The national context also includes responsibilities associated with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, equity, and culturally responsive practice. Literature in health, physical education, and teacher education shows that inclusion is shaped by relationships, power, institutional history, and decisions about whose knowledge is legitimate (Curtis et al., 2019; Gerdin, 2022; Linnér et al., 2022; Morton et al., 2023). Disability education cannot therefore be treated as a culture-free technical package, although the available literature provides limited guidance on how these intersections are addressed within sport and exercise curricula.

It remains unclear whether disability is named in outcomes, located in compulsory or optional learning, assessed, supported through partnerships, or sustained through programme-level responsibility. Policy-practice literature, ableism scholarship, and hidden curriculum theory help identify the mechanisms that may matter, but empirical examination is required to understand how they operate in this setting.

2.8 Curriculum and institutional theory as the analytical lens

This thesis brings curriculum theory and institutional theory together to examine how disability education is positioned within tertiary sport and exercise programmes. Curriculum theory focuses on how knowledge is selected, organised, sequenced, taught, assessed, and experienced. Institutional theory helps explain why particular curriculum arrangements become legitimate, stable, or difficult to change. Together, these perspectives move the analysis beyond the actions of individual educators and towards the programme and institutional conditions that shape educational provision.

Curriculum is not limited to a written syllabus. The formal or intended curriculum includes programme regulations, graduate profiles, paper outlines, learning outcomes, and assessment requirements. The enacted curriculum includes what educators teach, the examples and activities they use, the feedback they provide, and the opportunities they arrange. The experienced curriculum concerns what students are likely to encounter across their degree, including whether disability-related learning is compulsory, repeated, assessed, optional, or dependent on circumstance (Goodlad, 1979; Kelly, 2009).

This distinction is important because formal inclusion and educational experience may diverge. A programme may express an intention to address disability while staff lack the time, confidence, expertise, or resources to enact it consistently. Disability may be mentioned in a paper without being assessed, or taught strongly in an elective that many students do not take. Conversely, an educator may provide substantial learning that is not visible in programme documentation. The analysis must therefore avoid treating either documents or individual examples as complete evidence of a programme pathway.

Constructive alignment provides a focused way to examine the relationship between intention and enactment. Biggs et al. (2022) argue that learning outcomes, teaching

activities, and assessment should support one another. In this thesis, constructive alignment is not used to prescribe a particular disability curriculum. It is used to ask whether disability-informed capability is named, supported through learning activities, practised in relevant contexts, and evidenced through assessment. A programme may value inclusion, but if that value is not connected to the structures through which students' progress is measured and assessed, its curricular status remains uncertain.

The hidden curriculum complements this analysis. Students learn from what programmes repeatedly prioritise, display, reward, and omit (Jackson, 1968). If examples, case studies, practical activities, and assessment consistently centre non-disabled bodies, disability may be understood as marginal even without an explicit statement to that effect. Hidden curriculum analysis is therefore relevant to the study of scarcity because absence, optionality, and weak assessment can communicate the limits of what a field regards as core professional knowledge.

The politics of knowledge selection further explains why adding content is not a neutral process. Bernstein (2003), Young (2008), and Barnett and Coate (2005) draw attention to the classification and legitimation of knowledge and to the relationship between curriculum, action, and identity. Degree programmes cannot include every possible topic. They make judgements about what deserves compulsory time, specialist depth, assessment, staffing, and protection. Disability education, therefore, competes with and interacts with established disciplinary priorities, professional expectations, programme identities, and resource constraints.

This perspective also prevents scarcity from being explained only as an accidental gap. Omission may result from explicit decisions, but it may also emerge cumulatively when disability is repeatedly deferred to an elective, absorbed into broad inclusion language, assigned to external contributors, or assumed to be addressed elsewhere. No single decision needs to appear decisive. Over time, however, these choices can produce a pathway in which access to disability-related learning is uncertain. Curriculum reliability therefore concerns the cumulative relationship among visibility, reach, sequencing, assessment, ownership, and continuity.

Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) show that curriculum may be understood in different ways, including as a programme structure, a learning experience, and a dynamic process. These meanings are useful in the present study because disability education may be visible at one level and weak at another. It may appear in programme rhetoric but not in student experience, or emerge through practice without formal recognition. A curriculum pathways perspective highlights the relationships among these levels rather than reducing the question to a count of papers.

Curriculum mapping offers an analytical means of making these relationships visible. Harden (2001) describes mapping as a way to identify where learning is introduced, developed, assessed, and omitted, while Dyjur et al. (2019) emphasise its value for identifying gaps, overlaps, and connections. The present study does not conduct a comprehensive document-based curriculum audit. However, the logic of mapping informs questions about where participants locate disability education, whether it is compulsory or optional, how it is

assessed, and whether students encounter a connected pathway or a set of isolated experiences.

Institutional theory extends the analysis by focusing on the rules, norms, meanings, routines, and resources that shape curriculum decisions. In this thesis, an institution is not understood only as the university organisation. It also includes the formal requirements, disciplinary expectations, professional assumptions, and taken-for-granted meanings that guide action over time. Scott's (2013) distinction among regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements is useful for organising these influences.

The regulative dimension includes programme approval, quality assurance, accreditation, workload models, assessment requirements, and formal review. These mechanisms can protect a curriculum priority or make its inclusion difficult. The normative dimension concerns beliefs about what responsible professionals and credible degree programmes should provide. It includes disciplinary and professional expectations about the knowledge a sport and exercise graduate requires. The cultural-cognitive dimension concerns assumptions that become taken for granted, including ideas about normal bodies, standard movement, employability, performance, risk, and whether disability belongs within mainstream or specialist knowledge.

These dimensions help explain how disability education may remain scarce without assuming that educators oppose inclusion. A programme may be shaped by formal requirements that leave little room for additional content, normative expectations that privilege established scientific or professional areas, and cultural assumptions that position disability as a specialist domain. Staff may support disability education while operating within arrangements that make it difficult to formalise, assess, or sustain. Institutional analysis, therefore, directs attention to conditions rather than to individual blame.

Legitimacy is central to this process. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organisations may adopt formal structures that reflect external expectations without those structures necessarily transforming everyday practice. Applied to curriculum, inclusion may appear in strategic plans, graduate attributes, or policy language without becoming strongly connected to teaching and assessment. This does not mean formal commitments are meaningless. It means that their educational significance depends on how they are enacted.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) account of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures provides another way to consider programme similarity and change. Accreditation requirements, professional body expectations, institutional strategy, student demand, market viability, disciplinary traditions, and perceptions of competitor programmes may all influence the curriculum. These pressures can encourage innovation, but they may also preserve established content. Disability education may gain legitimacy through equity and professional expectations, yet remain difficult to protect when other pressures dominate.

Institutional logics help describe these competing priorities. A professional logic may emphasise graduate readiness and ethical responsibility. An equity logic may emphasise access, rights, and participation. A disciplinary logic may protect established sport science knowledge, while a market logic may emphasise enrolments, programme viability, and

employability. These logics need not be mutually exclusive, but they may pull curriculum decisions in different directions. Cai and Mountford (2022) use institutional logics to examine how higher education responds to competing demands, while Robertson et al. (2022) and Washington and Patterson (2011) demonstrate the relevance of institutional analysis within sport organisations and sport management.

The interaction among these logics is likely to be more important than any one logic in isolation. Disability education may be defended as ethically necessary and professionally relevant, yet still face questions about staffing, credit allocation, enrolment demand, or its fit with established disciplinary identities. It may also align with several priorities at once, for example when inclusive capability is presented as graduate readiness, community engagement, and equity. Institutional theory allows these negotiations to be examined without reducing curriculum decisions to either prejudice or simple resource shortage.

This theoretical framework is used selectively in the present thesis. The analysis does not attempt to test every concept within institutional theory. It focuses on the ideas most relevant to the research question: curriculum visibility, knowledge selection, intended and enacted provision, assessment, legitimacy, responsibility, governance, staffing, resource conditions, and competing programme priorities. These concepts support interpretation of how disability education becomes established, marginal, or fragile.

Selective use is important because an overly expansive theoretical framework could obscure rather than clarify the empirical analysis. Concepts such as isomorphism and institutional logics are included only where they help interpret participants' accounts of governance, programme viability, professional expectations, and established disciplinary practice. Likewise, constructive alignment and curriculum mapping are used as analytical prompts rather than as standards against which programmes are mechanically scored. The framework is intended to support explanation while preserving attention to context and variation among programmes.

Bringing curriculum and institutional theory together enables the examination of scarcity as a produced outcome rather than an accidental omission. Curriculum theory helps identify where disability education appears, how it is connected across a degree, and whether it is assessed. Institutional theory helps explain why those arrangements may persist through rules, norms, resources, professional expectations, and taken-for-granted assumptions. The combined lens therefore supports questions about both form and mechanism.

The analytical questions arising from this framework include: What formal status does disability education have? Where is it located and how is it described? Is it connected to learning outcomes, teaching, and assessment? Which students are likely to encounter it? Who is responsible for its delivery and coordination? What roles do staff expertise, partnerships, governance, workload, programme viability, and disciplinary expectations play? How do formal commitments relate to enacted provision? These questions guide the empirical analysis without presuming that one curriculum model is appropriate for every programme.

2.9 Synthesis, research gap, and link to the present study

The literature provides a strong rationale for including disability education within the professional preparation of sport and exercise graduates. Rights-based frameworks emphasise access, participation, and non-discrimination (United Nations, 2006). Social-relational approaches show that disability is produced through interactions among impairment, environments, relationships, and institutions (Thomas, 2004). Ableism scholarship identifies the norms by which non-disabled bodies and forms of participation may be privileged, even when inclusion is supported (Lyons, 2013; Peers et al., 2022). Together, these perspectives establish disability education as a professional and curricular responsibility rather than an optional expression of goodwill.

Research in inclusive education, adapted physical education, adapted physical activity, kinesiology, coaching, and health professional education also shows that exposure alone is insufficient. Disability-informed capability involves knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgement and is supported by practice, feedback, reflection, assessment, and appropriately prepared educators (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Haegele et al., 2020; Lieberman et al., 2024; Rouse, 2006; Shulman, 2005; Taliaferro et al., 2015). Specialist courses, infused content, placements, guest teaching, and community engagement may all contribute, but the literature does not support assuming that any one format guarantees a coherent graduate pathway.

The review also identifies mechanisms through which inclusion may remain weakly translated into education. Policy and strategy can establish expectations without determining curriculum practice. Toolkits can support learning without demonstrating that it has occurred. Staff expertise can create valuable opportunities, but the provision remains vulnerable if it depends on isolated individuals. Applied experience can deepen learning, yet it is unevenly available and ethically demanding. The hidden curriculum can position disability as peripheral through routine examples, assessments, and silences. These concerns suggest that scarcity is not captured adequately by a present-or-absent distinction.

Curriculum reliability provides a useful way to bring these issues together. Disability education may be scarce not only when it is absent but also when it is weakly specified, optional, unassessed, fragmented, dependent on particular staff or relationships, or disconnected from the wider degree pathway. Curriculum and institutional theory help examine these conditions through the concepts of intended, enacted, and experienced curriculum, constructive alignment, hidden curriculum, knowledge selection, legitimacy, responsibility, and competing institutional pressures (Biggs et al., 2022; Goodlad, 1979; Jackson, 1968; Kelly, 2009; Scott, 2013).

The research gap is both descriptive and explanatory. Descriptively, there is limited published evidence showing where disability education is located within Aotearoa New Zealand university sport and exercise programmes, what forms it takes, whether it is compulsory or optional, and how it relates to assessment and applied learning. It is unclear whether students across the same or different programmes receive comparable opportunities or whether their exposure depends on paper selection, staff expertise, placements, partnerships, or personal interest.

This descriptive gap matters because broad claims about absence or inclusion can conceal substantial variation. A programme may have no dedicated paper but include disability in several compulsory contexts; another may offer a strong specialist elective that most students do not take. A national account, therefore, requires attention to position, reach, sequencing, and assessment rather than to course titles alone.

Explanatorily, adjacent literature identifies staff capability, curriculum crowding, policy-practice gaps, ableism, professional socialisation, partnership capacity, governance, and uncertainty about responsibility as potentially important. Less is known about how these conditions operate within the New Zealand university context or how educators understand their influence on provision. Existing studies do not provide a detailed national account of how disability education is positioned, sustained, constrained, or made fragile across sport and exercise programmes.

The present study addresses this gap by drawing on educators' accounts of programme structures, teaching, assessment, staffing, partnerships, and curriculum decision-making. It does not evaluate students' competence, audit every programme document, test the effectiveness of particular teaching methods, or directly represent disabled students' experiences. Its purpose is to examine how disability education is currently incorporated, and which curricular and institutional conditions participants identify as shaping its scarcity.

This scope is deliberately narrower than a complete evaluation of educational quality. Educator accounts can illuminate programme history, local decisions, constraints, and forms of provision that may not be visible in documents. They cannot establish what every student experiences or whether graduates are competent. The study therefore uses those accounts to investigate curriculum positioning and perceived mechanisms, while recognising the need for future research involving students, disabled communities, assessment evidence, and programme documents.

By framing disability education as a curriculum-pathways issue, the study moves beyond merely counting instances of disability mention. It examines how disability-related learning is made visible, connected, assessed, and sustained, or how it remains outside the core student pathway. This framing also keeps the literature review from assuming the study's conclusions in advance. The literature identifies plausible forms of scarcity and the mechanisms through which they may arise; the empirical chapters examine whether and how those patterns appear in the programme contexts described by participants. The following chapter explains the qualitative research design used to investigate these questions across Aotearoa New Zealand university sport and exercise programmes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodological design used to investigate how disability education is incorporated into sport- and exercise-related programmes across Aotearoa New Zealand universities, and the factors participants identified as contributing to its scarcity. The chapter first outlines the qualitative interpretivist design and the study's use of cross-case comparison across programme contexts. It then describes the Aotearoa New Zealand higher education context; sampling and recruitment; data collection, management, and anonymisation; and the approach to analysis. The chapter concludes by addressing researcher positionality, ethics, trustworthiness, and the study's methodological boundaries.

The study was designed to generate an interpretive account of curriculum provision rather than to benchmark universities, evaluate individual educators, or measure student outcomes. Its focus was on how educators understood the location, visibility, assessment, delivery, and constraints of disability education within their programme contexts. Although the analysis was informed by the curriculum theory discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter focuses on how the research was conducted and how the findings were produced.

3.2 Research design and paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design. Interpretivist research is concerned with how people understand, interpret, and make meaning within particular social and institutional contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Schwandt, 2015). This approach was appropriate because disability education in university sport and exercise programmes cannot be understood solely by counting courses or reviewing formal programme documents. Instead, the study required attention to how educators interpreted curriculum priorities, described teaching and assessment practices, and understood the institutional conditions that enabled or constrained disability-related provision.

A qualitative design was also appropriate because the study sought explanation rather than measurement. The research question was not whether a predefined intervention improved student outcomes, but how disability education was currently incorporated and why it appeared scarce or fragile in particular programme contexts. Participants were therefore treated as knowledgeable informants who could describe both formal curriculum structures and the less visible conditions shaping curriculum enactment, including staffing, expertise, workload, partnerships, assessment, programme identity, and institutional priorities.

The study used a multi-site qualitative interview design with cross-case comparison across programme contexts. The term "multi-site" refers to the fact that participants were based across seven New Zealand universities offering relevant sport- and exercise-related programmes. However, the universities were not treated as bounded institutional cases, and the study does not claim to provide a full institutional audit of each university. Instead,

participants' accounts were used to examine how disability education was described, positioned, and constrained within particular programme contexts.

In this thesis, cross-case comparison refers to analytic comparison across anonymised participant/programme contexts. It was used to identify recurring patterns and points of variation in how disability education was incorporated, whether it was compulsory or optional, how visible it was in learning outcomes and assessment, and what conditions made provision sustainable or fragile. This approach supported comparison across a small national sector without ranking universities or treating any single institution as a complete case. The study was therefore descriptive and explanatory: descriptive because it examined the forms disability education took, and explanatory because it investigated the mechanisms participants perceived as shaping its scarcity.

Curriculum theory served as a sensitising lens, an alternative to a rigid coding framework. It directed attention to the distinction between intended, enacted, and experienced curriculum, and to the ways in which learning outcomes, assessment, teaching practices, staffing, and institutional conditions shape what students are likely to encounter. This lens helped the study move beyond asking whether disability appeared somewhere in a programme, toward asking whether disability education was visible, assessable, sustained, and connected across the student pathway.

3.3 Aotearoa New Zealand higher education context

The study was conducted within the Aotearoa New Zealand university sector, where the number of institutions offering sport and exercise-related programmes is relatively small. This context mattered methodologically because participants often worked in programmes identifiable by distinctive combinations of staff expertise, programme focus, regional partnerships, or curriculum structures. As a result, confidentiality, anonymisation, and careful reporting were central to the research design.

Sport and exercise-related programmes commonly include science-intensive areas such as biomechanics, physiology, motor learning, and performance analysis, alongside applied professional areas such as coaching, physical activity, pedagogy, placements, health promotion, recreation, and sport development. Some programmes also include social science, policy, equity, or inclusion-related content. This breadth was treated as a contextual feature relevant to the study because participants were asked to explain how disability education was positioned within already complex and crowded degree structures.

The sector's small scale also supported comparison across programme contexts. In a larger system, institutional differences might be more easily separated and compared. In Aotearoa New Zealand, however, programme histories, staff appointments, local partnerships, and institutional priorities can strongly influence what students encounter. Cross-case comparison was therefore used not for numerical comparison or institutional ranking, but to examine how similar curriculum pressures were negotiated differently across programme contexts.

3.4 Sampling and participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. This approach was appropriate because the study required participants capable of providing information-rich accounts of curriculum design, teaching, assessment, programme coordination, and institutional decision-making (Patton, 2015). The aim was not to generate a statistically representative sample of all academics in sport and exercise education, but to recruit participants whose roles gave them direct insight into how disability education was incorporated, constrained, or sustained within programme structures.

Nine participants, identified as ABC1–ABC9, took part in the study. They were based at seven of the eight New Zealand universities that offer relevant sport- and exercise-related programmes. Participants included senior academics, lecturers, programme leaders, and staff involved in curriculum design, coordination, and delivery. Their areas of responsibility included sport and exercise science, physical education, coaching, pedagogy, applied practice, professional preparation, outdoor recreation, and inclusion-related learning.

The sampling strategy was guided by information power instead of sample size alone. Malterud et al. (2016) argued that the adequacy of a qualitative sample depends on factors such as the specificity of the study aim, the relevance of participants' experience, the quality of the dialogue, and the analytic strategy. In this study, the sample was suitable because participants were closely connected to the curriculum problem under investigation and were able to describe not only whether disability education appeared, but also how it was positioned, who delivered it, how it was assessed, and what conditions affected its provision.

Sampling also supported comparison across programme contexts. Participants occupied different roles in teaching, coordination, programme leadership, and curriculum delivery, allowing the analysis to examine how disability education was understood from different positions within sport- and exercise-related programmes, as highlighted in Table 1. This was important because disability education may appear differently depending on whether it is viewed from the level of a paper, a programme pathway, an applied learning opportunity, or a broader institutional structure.

Table 3.1
Anonymised Overview of Participant Role Bands

Code	Role
ABC1	Professor/senior academic
ABC2	Senior academic/programme staff
ABC3	Programme staff/lecturer
ABC4	Lecturer/programme staff
ABC5	Programme staff
ABC6	Programme staff
ABC7	Programme leader/senior lecturer
ABC8	Lecturer/inclusion paper lead
ABC9	Head of school

3.5 Recruitment and consent

Participants were invited to take part through email recruitment and professional networks within the Aotearoa New Zealand sport and exercise higher education sector. The recruitment process was designed to reach staff with relevant curriculum, teaching, coordination, or leadership responsibilities while avoiding any pressure to participate.

Before each interview, participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, what participation involved, the expected time commitment, confidentiality arrangements, and their rights as participants. These included the right to decline to answer particular questions and to withdraw from the study within the conditions stated in the information sheet. Written consent was obtained before interviews were conducted.

Recruitment required particular care because the national sector is small and some staff roles, programmes, and partnerships are distinctive. For this reason, recruitment and consent procedures emphasised confidentiality from the outset. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions about anonymity, the reporting of findings, and the level of detail that might be included in the thesis. This was important because the interviews asked participants to discuss potentially sensitive topics, including curriculum gaps, staffing limitations, programme priorities, and institutional constraints.

3.6 Ethics and confidentiality

Ethics approval, HREC (Health) 2024#68, was obtained from The University of Waikato's ethics committee on 25 February 2025. A copy of the ethics approval is available in Appendix A. Data collection commenced in March 2025. The study's ethical commitments included informed consent, voluntary participation, secure data storage, participant anonymity, institutional confidentiality, and careful reporting of potentially sensitive information. These commitments were particularly important because participants discussed curriculum gaps, staffing pressures, institutional priorities, and relationships with community or disability-sector partners.

The small size of the Aotearoa New Zealand university sport and exercise sector created additional confidentiality risks. Specific institutions, programmes, staff roles, or partnerships could potentially be identifiable even if individual names were removed. For this reason, the thesis uses pseudonyms, broad role descriptions, and generalised contextual details. The aim was to retain enough information for readers to understand the curriculum mechanisms being analysed while reducing the risk of participants or institutions being identified.

The study also required careful reporting of partnership-related data. Disabled people, disability-sector organisations, and community partners were sometimes discussed by participants, but they were not themselves participants in this study. For this reason, the thesis does not report detailed information that could identify those people or organisations. Where partnerships are discussed, the focus is on their curriculum function: how they supported student learning, how they were resourced, and how their sustainability was affected by staff capacity and institutional arrangements.

These decisions were not only procedural. They shaped how the analysis could be written. Qualitative confidentiality requires balancing rich description with protection from harm, especially where findings may have reputational consequences (Kaiser, 2009). In this study, that balance meant reporting mechanisms and patterns rather than providing details that could expose individuals, programmes, or partners.

3.7 Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they provided sufficient consistency to address the research question across participants while also allowing them to explain the specific curriculum and institutional contexts in which they worked. This flexibility is important in qualitative interviewing because participants may hold different roles, have different forms of curriculum knowledge, and interpret the research topic through different professional experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The interview guide included questions about where disability education was situated within programmes, whether it was compulsory or optional, how it was connected to learning outcomes and assessment, what applied or authentic learning opportunities were available, who taught disability-related content, and what factors enabled or constrained its provision. Participants were also asked about programme-level conditions such as staffing, workload, expertise, curriculum review, partnerships, and institutional priorities.

The interviews were designed to elicit both descriptive and explanatory accounts. Descriptively, participants were asked to identify the forms disability education took within their programmes, such as dedicated papers, embedded content, guest teaching, workshops, placements, or informal examples. Explanatory questions were asked to prompt reflection on why provision took those forms and what made disability education more or less sustainable. This approach is consistent with qualitative research in sport, exercise, and health, where interviews are often used to explore how participants interpret practices, relationships, meanings, and institutional conditions within their field, as highlighted in the work by Sparkes and Smith (2013).

Interviews were conducted between March 2025 and November 2025 via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and in person, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using the online meeting tools, with iPhone memo recordings as a backup. I used OtterAI to transcribe the recordings, checked each transcript against the original recording, and corrected transcription errors before analysis. The transcripts were not returned to participants.

3.8 Data management and anonymisation

Interview data were managed in accordance with the conditions of ethics approval. Transcripts and related research materials were stored securely, and identifying details

were removed or softened during analysis and writing. Participants were assigned pseudonyms from ABC1 to ABC9. Institutions, programme names, specific job titles, and partnership details were also anonymised where they could increase the risk of identification.

Anonymisation was treated as both an ethical and methodological issue. Qualitative research often requires sufficient contextual detail for readers to understand the meaning of participants' accounts, but excessive detail can compromise confidentiality, particularly in small sectors (Kaiser, 2009). This tension was especially important in the present study because participants discussed curriculum gaps, staffing limitations, programme priorities, and relationships with external partners.

A conservative approach was therefore used. Broad role descriptions, such as lecturer, programme leader, senior academic, or Head of School, were retained where they helped interpret participants' perspectives. More specific titles, unusual combinations of responsibilities, distinctive programme names, or identifiable partnership arrangements were removed or generalised. This allowed the findings to be reported in meaningful curriculum patterns without exposing participants or institutions to unnecessary reputational risk.

The same principle was applied to discussion of disability-sector organisations and community partners. These organisations and individuals were not participants in the study, although they were often mentioned in relation to placements, guest teaching, authentic learning, or partnership work. Where these relationships are discussed, the analysis focuses on the role of partnerships in the curriculum rather than on identifying particular organisations or individuals.

3.9 Data analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by cross-case comparison and informed by the curriculum theory lens developed in Chapter 2. Reflexive thematic analysis was appropriate because the study aimed to identify patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while recognising that coding and theme development are interpretive processes instead of mechanical procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021).

3.9.1 Reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to develop themes that explained how disability education was positioned, enacted, constrained, and sustained across programme contexts. The analysis followed the broad phases described by Braun and Clarke: familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). These phases were not treated as a rigid sequence. Instead, analysis moved back and forth between transcripts, codes, analytic memos, cross-case summaries, and draft findings.

The first stage involved reading all transcripts closely and recording initial impressions. Attention was paid to where disability education appeared, how participants described its visibility or absence, which forms of teaching or assessment were mentioned, and which conditions participants identified as enabling or constraining the provision. Initial coding used descriptive labels such as disability content, assessment visibility, optionality, guest teaching, placement exposure, staff expertise, champion dependence, curriculum crowding, partnerships, governance, and programme identity.

The second stage involved grouping and refining codes into broader candidate themes. This process moved the analysis from description toward explanation. The purpose was not only to identify whether disability education was present, but to understand how scarcity was produced or reduced through curriculum arrangements. For example, comments about optional placements, reliance on particular staff, weak assessment signals, or informal partnerships were initially coded separately. Through comparison, these codes were interpreted as part of a wider pattern concerning the fragility and unevenness of disability education.

The third stage involved reviewing themes against the dataset. Candidate themes were checked for coherence, overlap, and explanatory strength. The curriculum theory lens helped focus this review by directing attention to the intended curriculum, the enacted curriculum, assessment signals, the hidden curriculum, curriculum-making conditions, and programme-level sustainability. However, the lens was not used as a fixed coding framework. Themes were developed from participants' accounts and then interpreted in relation to the theoretical concerns established in Chapter 2.

The final stage involved writing and refining the analysis. Writing was part of the analytic process because it required decisions about how themes related to one another, what evidence best represented them, and how to report findings without compromising confidentiality. This iterative process helped produce themes grounded in the interview data while also addressing the study's broader concern with disability education as both a curricular and an institutional issue.

3.9.2 Cross-case comparison matrix

A cross-case comparison matrix was used as an analytic display rather than as a separate method from reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis generated the themes through iterative engagement with the interview data, while the matrix helped compare how those themes appeared across anonymised participant/programme contexts. This distinction is important because the matrix did not replace thematic interpretation; it supported transparency, organisation, and comparison.

For each participant/programme context, the matrix summarised where disability education was reported to appear, whether it was compulsory or optional, how it was signalled through learning outcomes or assessment, what applied learning opportunities were described, who was involved in teaching or supporting provision, and what enabling or

constraining conditions were identified. The matrix also recorded patterns related to staff expertise, champion dependence, partnership capacity, curriculum crowding, governance, and programme identity.

The matrix enabled examination of convergence and variation across programme contexts. This helped avoid over-reliance on particularly vivid or detailed interviews and allowed the analysis to check whether an emerging theme appeared across several contexts or was more localised. Matrices are widely used in qualitative analysis to organise complex data and support systematic comparison across programme contexts or settings (Miles et al., 2014). In this study, the matrix strengthened the comparative logic of the analysis while remaining consistent with the interpretivist and reflexive approach.

3.9.3 Analytical orientation

The analysis was guided by two linked questions. First, how was disability education incorporated within sport and exercise-related programmes? Second, what factors contributed to its scarcity or fragility? These questions required attention to both the curriculum's form and its conditions. Curriculum form referred to where disability education appeared, how visible it was, whether it was compulsory or optional, and whether it was connected to assessment or applied learning. Curriculum conditions referred to the staffing, workload, expertise, partnerships, governance processes, institutional priorities, and disciplinary assumptions that shaped provision.

The analysis moved between descriptive mapping and explanatory interpretation. Descriptive mapping identified the forms through which disability education was described as appearing across programme contexts. Explanatory interpretation examined how participants accounted for the presence, absence, visibility, or fragility of those forms. This distinction was important because the study did not treat scarcity as something that could be understood solely by counting content. Instead, the analysis focused on how participants described the curriculum and institutional conditions that shaped disability education within their programme contexts.

This analytical orientation helped keep the study focused on curriculum mechanisms rather than individual blame. Participants' accounts were interpreted as situated descriptions of work being done under particular constraints. The analysis therefore examined how disability education was shaped by ordinary programme processes, rather than assuming that limited provision reflected a lack of concern among educators.

3.10 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

I approached this study as a practitioner already involved in disability-inclusive sport and exercise. My professional work gave me practical familiarity with the problem under investigation, including the difficulty of finding graduates with disability-related knowledge, confidence, and applied skill. It also meant that I entered the research with existing

assumptions about the importance of disability education and about the kinds of curriculum provision that might be desirable.

My position also created a potential tension. I am not a detached observer of this field. I have professional experience, relationships, and commitments related to disability-inclusive practice, and I am sometimes invited to contribute to disability-inclusion learning in tertiary or sector settings. This insider knowledge helped me understand participants' accounts of staffing, partnerships, applied learning, and curriculum constraints. At the same time, it required reflexive care because I could have been tempted to interpret limited provision too quickly as failure, or to privilege the forms of disability education that align most closely with my own professional experience.

Reflexivity was therefore used throughout the study. I used memo writing, repeated transcript reading, and cross-case comparison to examine how my assumptions were influencing interpretation. I paid particular attention to moments of surprise, disagreement, or discomfort because they helped identify where my professional expectations might not fully align with participants' accounts. I also checked whether emerging themes were supported across the dataset rather than relying on isolated comments that confirmed my own views.

This reflexive stance was important because the study addresses an issue with ethical and political significance. My aim was not to criticise individual educators or institutions, but to understand how disability education is positioned, constrained, and sustained within programme structures. Reflexivity helped me interpret participants' accounts with care, including where they described genuine commitment to inclusion alongside significant institutional, staffing, or curriculum constraints. In this way, reflexivity supported both the ethical conduct of the study and the credibility of the analysis highlighted in the work by Finlay (2002).

3.11 Trustworthiness

The quality of this study was pursued through credibility, transparency, reflexivity, and contextualised transferability. In qualitative research, trustworthiness does not depend on statistical representativeness or replicability in the same way as quantitative research. Instead, it depends on whether the research design is appropriate to the question, whether the data and analysis are handled carefully, whether the researcher's interpretive role is made visible, and whether the claims are proportionate to the evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Credibility was supported by recruiting participants with direct knowledge of curriculum design, teaching, coordination, or programme leadership. Participants were able to speak about both formal curriculum structures and the practical conditions affecting disability education. Credibility was also supported through repeated transcript readings, iterative coding, analytic memo writing, and cross-case comparison.

Transparency was supported by making the analytic process explicit. The chapter describes how data were generated, how participants were sampled, how transcripts were coded, how themes were developed, and how the cross-case matrix was used. This allows readers to understand how the findings were produced instead of treating them as a simple summary of interview content.

Reflexivity was supported through acknowledgement of my professional position in disability-inclusive sport and exercise. Instead of attempting to remove this position, I treated it as part of the research process and used reflexive memo writing to examine how my assumptions shaped interpretation. This is consistent with reflexive qualitative approaches in which the researcher is understood as actively involved in knowledge production in place of a neutral instrument (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002).

Transferability was supported through contextual description and careful reporting of patterns across programme contexts. The study does not claim that its findings are statistically generalisable to all universities or all sport and exercise programmes. Instead, it offers an analytically transferable account of curriculum mechanisms that may be relevant to similar contexts in higher education. This approach is consistent with sport and exercise qualitative methodology, where generalisability is understood through concepts such as transferability, analytical generalisability, and naturalistic generalisation, rather than numerical representativeness (Smith, 2018). Smith and McGannon (2018) also caution against applying rigid quality criteria mechanically in sport and exercise qualitative research, which supports the use of reflexive and context-sensitive quality judgements in this thesis.

3.12 Scope and methodological boundaries

This study was not designed to produce statistical generalisations about all sport and exercise programmes. Its contribution is interpretive and explanatory. It identifies patterns, mechanisms, and curriculum conditions that may be analytically transferable to similar higher education contexts. The sample was selected for relevance to the research question instead of representativeness, and the study prioritised information-rich accounts from educators involved in teaching, coordination, and programme leadership.

Several boundaries follow from this design. First, the study relies on educator accounts and excludes disabled students' experiences. Second, it does not evaluate student competence or the effectiveness of specific teaching methods. Third, it does not systematically audit every paper outline, assessment brief, handbook entry, or programme document across all universities. Fourth, confidentiality requirements in a small national sector limited the level of institutional and programme detail that could be reported.

These boundaries do not invalidate the study, but they define what the study can and cannot claim. The findings should be read as a comparative account of how disability is described, positioned, and constrained within current programme contexts, instead of a comprehensive audit of all curriculum content. They also identify directions for future research, including studies involving disabled students, curriculum document analysis, assessment design, and closer investigation of graduate capability.

This framing avoids presenting the study as “limited” simply because it is qualitative. Qualitative research has different standards of contribution from quantitative research, and in sport and exercise research, transferability and analytic generalisation are more appropriate concepts than statistical generalisation for studies of this kind (Smith, 2018).

3.13 Chapter summary

This chapter has explained the study’s methodological design. It has described the qualitative interpretivist approach, the multi-site qualitative interview design, participant sampling and recruitment, data collection through semi-structured interviews, data management and anonymisation, and the analytical approach. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate themes, while a cross-case comparison matrix supported comparison across participant/programme contexts. The chapter also addressed researcher positionality, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and the study’s methodological boundaries.

The following chapter presents the findings. It examines how disability education is currently incorporated within sport and exercise-related programmes, where it is positioned within curriculum structures, and what mechanisms participants identified as contributing to its scarcity or fragility.

Chapter 4: Findings and analysis

4.1 Overview of the findings

This chapter presents four themes developed from interviews with nine educators and programme leaders in sport- and exercise-related programmes at seven New Zealand universities. The data do not support a simple present/absent account of disability education. Instead, provision was unevenly positioned and legitimised: explicit in some contexts, implicit in others, subsumed within broader inclusion and equity language, dependent on individual staff, or encountered mainly through placements, guest teaching, and community engagement.

The central finding is that scarcity is better understood as a condition of curriculum reliability than as an absence of goodwill. Participants generally valued disability education, but it was not consistently visible in learning outcomes, assessment, programme structures, staff development, or compulsory student pathways. Disability-related learning could therefore be present within individual papers or experiences while remaining fragmented or inaccessible across the wider degree.

The chapter is organised around four themes. Theme 1 examines how disability education is positioned as implicit, episodic, or weakly specified. Theme 2 considers the reliance on champions, staff expertise, and fragile continuity. Theme 3 analyses how curriculum crowding, governance, and market logics shape what becomes legitimate and protected in degree design. Theme 4 examines authentic learning, including placements and community engagement, as a valued but uneven form of disability education. The chapter concludes by interpreting these themes together, arguing that scarcity is produced through curriculum structures, institutional conditions, and dispersed responsibility.

4.2 Theme 1: Disability education is implicit, episodic and weakly specified

Theme 1 concerns how disability education is positioned within programme and paper structures. Across the interviews, disability education was often described as being present somewhere, but not necessarily as a visible, assessed, and deliberately planned curriculum pathway. The issue was therefore not only absence. It was ambiguity: disability education could be embedded without being named, included under broad equity language, delivered through individual papers, or assumed to be addressed elsewhere.

This theme shows that disability education was frequently devolved instead of coordinated. Participants often suggested that disability content might be located in another paper, another service, another staff member's area, a placement, or a wider inclusion agenda. This is relevant because when disability education is positioned as "somewhere" in the programme, responsibility can become dispersed. Disability may then be acknowledged in principle while remaining weakly protected as core professional knowledge.

The theme is interpreted through curriculum theory because the issue is about visibility, classification, and legitimacy. Curriculum theory helps show how programmes communicate what counts as important knowledge through learning outcomes, assessment, sequencing, and formal programme structures (Bernstein, 2003; Biggs et al., 2022; Young, 2008). In this theme, disability education often appeared as an implicit or episodic concern opposed to an explicit capability expected of all students.

4.2.1 Disability as "somewhere" in the curriculum

Participants described considerable uncertainty about where disability education sat within their programmes. Some could identify specific papers, examples, guest sessions, or applied experiences in which disability was discussed, but fewer described a clearly coordinated programme-level pathway. ABC1 captured this uncertainty by explaining, "given the size of our faculty and the papers, it is hard for me to know what everybody does." This comment is important because it is not limited to a lack of information. It points to a wider curriculum problem: disability education may be present in isolated places without being visible as a shared programme responsibility.

Several participants described disability education as embedded instead of being formalised. ABC3 stated that "disability is not a formal part of the degree" and that "there are no papers that specifically focus on disability", but also explained that disability was "woven through the vast majority of the core papers." This tension is analytically important. On one hand, it suggests that disability may appear across a degree. On the other hand, if disability is woven through papers without being formally specified, mapped, assessed, or coordinated, it becomes difficult to know whether students encounter it consistently or develop capability over time.

Other accounts were more direct about the lack of explicit design. ABC2 stated, "Straight up, it's not well integrated," while ABC9 described undergraduate disability content as "dependent on staff interests" instead of explicitly designed into the curriculum. These accounts suggest that disability education often remains at the level of localised provision. It may be present because particular staff value it, because it fits a paper topic, or because it emerges through examples and applied contexts, but this does not necessarily make it a programme-level expectation.

This positioning has consequences for students. If disability education is not formally integrated, students may experience it as an occasional topic or an alternative part of their professional preparation. The hidden curriculum is relevant here because students learn from what is repeatedly named, assessed, prioritised, and left unspoken (Jackson, 1968). When disability is present but weakly specified, the curriculum may implicitly teach that disability inclusion is valuable but not central.

4.2.2 Inclusion and equity as umbrella terms

A second pattern was that disability education was often located within broader inclusion, diversity, or equity language. This sometimes created space for disability to be discussed, but it also risked diluting disability as a distinct curriculum concern. ABC5 explained that "inclusion language may not always capture disability explicitly." This is noteworthy because inclusion and equity can be interpreted in multiple ways. Unless disability is named, students and staff may reasonably focus on other forms of marginalisation while assuming that disability has been covered.

ABC5 clarified the ambiguity regarding learning outcomes, explaining that programmes may use terms such as "inclusion" and "equity", but these terms could be interpreted in different ways. This comment should not be read only as a technical point about outcomes. It highlights a broader curriculum ambiguity: disability can be folded into a general moral vocabulary without being developed as specific professional knowledge. In such cases, students may learn that inclusion matters, but not necessarily how disability shapes participation, communication, adaptation, safety, or professional judgement in sport and exercise contexts.

This pattern also appeared in accounts where disability was described as implicit. ABC7 noted that "inclusivity expectations were implicit as opposed to explicit", while ABC5 stated that "disability could be missed without explicit learning outcomes." These comments suggest that broad inclusion language may support disability education only when it is connected to visible curriculum expectations. Without that connection, disability can become one issue among many and may disappear into the umbrella term.

Constructive alignment is useful for interpreting this finding. Biggs et al. (2022) argue that learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment need to work together. In the context of this study, the focus is not on requiring every paper to assess disability in the same way. Comparatively, the data raises the question of whether disability-related capability is visible enough for students and staff to recognise it as something all graduates are expected to develop.

4.2.3 Threading, infusion and episodic inclusions

Participants also described a distinction between disability education that is deliberately threaded through a programme and that which appears episodically. This distinction connects with earlier work in physical education that argued for the infusion of disability-related knowledge across kinesiology and physical education curricula, instead of locating disability only in specialist or isolated spaces (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Rizzo et al., 1997). In the present study, however, the data suggest that "threading" was used in different ways and did not always mean coordinated curriculum design.

For some participants, threading referred to an intentional attempt to place disability or inclusion across several papers. ABC3, for example, described disability as "woven through the vast majority of the core papers." This account suggests a form of curriculum infusion, in

which disability may be encountered across different contexts instead of being confined to a single paper. However, the same participant also stated that disability was “not a formal part of the degree” and that there were “no papers that specifically focus on disability.” The analytical point goes beyond the fact that threading exists; it can be both a strength and a risk. It may broaden relevance, but it may also make disability harder to evidence if there is no programme map, shared expectation, or assessment signal.

Other accounts suggested a more fragile form of threading. ABC5 noted that “disability appears implicitly across courses”, while ABC6 described disability education as “haphazard and piecemeal across the curriculum.” These comments point toward what might be called accidental threading: disability appears in several places, but not necessarily because the programme has deliberately sequenced and reinforced disability-related capability. In this form, threading can become another version of episodic provision.

ABC8 provided a contrasting example of more explicit curriculum movement, describing an inclusive practice paper “that had been core for one pathway and was being made core for all majors from 2026.” This example matters because it shows that disability and inclusion can be made more visible through curriculum redesign. However, it should be treated as a specific case of emerging practice as opposed to evidence that the wider sector has resolved the issue. Across the dataset, the more common pattern was that disability education appeared as fragments, implicit references, or staff-led inclusions rather than a clear, coordinated programme-level thread.

4.2.4 Optionality and uneven student exposure

Optionality was one of the clearest mechanisms through which disability education became uneven. Participants described disability-related learning as something students could encounter if they chose a particular paper, selected a particular placement, worked with a particular staff member, or already had an interest in disability. ABC2 described this pattern directly: “It’s limited unless students seek it out or identify it as a priority.” Similarly, ABC5 noted that “students could choose disability placements through service learning”, but also stated that “there were no compulsory disability placements.”

This warrants attention because optional provision can create two different student pathways within the same degree. Students who already value disability inclusion may seek out disability-related papers, placements, or projects. Students who do not yet see disability as relevant to their future practice may avoid those opportunities altogether. Optionality therefore does more than organise student choice. It communicates what the programme considers central and what it considers specialist, additional, or peripheral.

When disability education is optional, the curriculum can implicitly position disability as relevant only to students who already have an interest in disabled people, disability sport, inclusion, or adapted practice. These arrangements may allow ableist curriculum norms to persist by treating disability as a niche pathway rather than as an ordinary part of sport and exercise professional preparation. In curriculum terms, what is compulsory is protected; what is optional can be bypassed. The data therefore suggest that optionality is not a

neutral design choice. It shapes what students understand as legitimate professional knowledge.

4.2.5 Summary for Theme 1

Theme 1 shows that disability education was commonly positioned ambiguously within programme structures. Across accounts, disability was often implicit, folded into broader inclusion or equity language, located in particular papers, or dependent on optional experiences. The issue was not always that disability was entirely absent. More appropriately, disability education was frequently weakly specified and difficult to trace as a coherent student pathway.

This theme is therefore illustrative of the curriculum-level conditions that shape scarcity. Disability education may be present through examples, guest teaching, equity discussions, service-learning opportunities, or staff interests, but unless it is made visible through programme-level expectations, learning outcomes, assessment, and sequencing, it remains vulnerable. The data suggest a dispersal of responsibility: disability is treated as something that may be handled elsewhere, by another paper, another lecturer, a placement, a guest speaker, a disability support service, or the wider inclusion agenda.

Taken together, this points toward the marginality of disability at the institutional curriculum level. Disability was valued in principle but not consistently protected as core professional knowledge. At the level of findings, this suggests that ableist norms can persist through ordinary curriculum arrangements: not necessarily through overt exclusion, but through ambiguity, optionality, weak visibility, and the repeated positioning of disability as peripheral to the main business of sport and exercise education. Chapter Five returns to this pattern through ableism, hidden curriculum, and institutional theory.

4.3 Theme 2: Disability education depends on champions, expertise, and fragile continuity

Theme 2 concerns the people-related conditions that shaped disability education. Participants repeatedly described disability education as dependent on particular staff members, personal expertise, lived experience, research interests, relationships with disability-sector organisations, or individual willingness to advocate for inclusion. This theme overlaps with Theme 1, but it has a distinct focus. Theme 1 showed how disability education is positioned in the curriculum. Theme 2 shows how that positioning becomes dependent on people.

Across the data, staff commitment was both an enabling condition and a source of fragility. Disability education often appeared because individual staff cared about it, had relevant expertise, or had built relationships with community partners. However, when provision depends on a small number of people, it becomes vulnerable to staff turnover, workload, contract status, retirement, and shifting programme priorities. This theme therefore shows

that champion-led provision can create important curriculum openings while also revealing a lack of institutionalised responsibility.

4.3.1 Champion-led provision

Participants described disability education as strongly shaped by individual initiative. ABC4 stated that “no one has championed this area,” linking the absence of disability education to a lack of internal leadership. In contrast, ABC7 described situations in which “some staff proactively brought disability expertise into their teaching.” These accounts suggest that disability education often enters the curriculum through the work of individuals instead of through programme-wide expectations.

Champion-led provision can be productive. It can create papers, invite guest contributors, develop placements, introduce case studies, and keep disability visible in programmes where it might otherwise disappear. However, the data also show that champion-led provision is structurally fragile. ABC5 noted that “a previous disability course ended after staff retirement.” ABC9 similarly identified a risk that “disability content could disappear when key staff leave.” These comments suggest that the problem is not only whether champions exist, but whether their work is embedded into programme architecture.

This distinction matters because reliance on champions can allow institutions to appear inclusive without distributing responsibility. Disability education may be present while the conditions that sustain it remain informal and personalised. From a curriculum perspective, champion-led work becomes precarious when it is not supported by learning outcomes, recognition of workload, staff development, succession planning, or shared programme responsibility.

4.3.2 Expertise, confidence, and staff development

Participants also connected disability education to staff expertise and confidence. Several accounts suggested that staff may support inclusion in principle while feeling underprepared to teach disability-specific content. ABC1 identified “limited formal staff training in disability education”, while ABC4 stated that “staff lacked disability expertise.” ABC5 made this issue plain: “A lot of us will just not feel like we have the expertise.”

This finding is important because disability education cannot be sustained only through positive attitudes. It requires staff who can teach disability concepts, support applied learning, design relevant assessment, manage ethical engagement with disabled communities, and respond to students’ uncertainty. Literature on adapted physical activity and inclusive education supports this point, emphasising that staff capability and pedagogical preparation shape the quality of disability-related teaching (Haegele et al., 2020; Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

The data also show that staff capability is unevenly distributed. ABC2 described staff preparation as “depending on whether people actively sought it out or had someone

supporting them." ABC6 similarly identified "no systematic staff training in disability inclusion." These accounts suggest that professional development was not consistently embedded in programme structures. As a result, disability education could remain at the level of awareness, brief examples, or broad inclusion language because deeper teaching required confidence, time, resources, and expertise that were not always available.

4.3.3 Relationship work as curriculum labour

Relationship work was another major people-related condition. Participants described disability education as strengthened through links with disability-sector organisations, guest contributors, community groups, and placement providers. However, those relationships were often informal and dependent on individual staff. ABC3 noted that "established relationships made it easier to bring the same people into teaching each year, while also reporting staff turnover and ongoing work to build relationships." ABC6 described partnerships as "informal and under-resourced", and ABC7 reported "no formal partnerships with disability organisations."

This relationship work should be understood as curriculum labour. It involves identifying partners, building trust, negotiating roles, preparing students, supporting external contributors, and sustaining contact over time. Hargreaves' (1998) work on emotional labour is useful here because it helps show that teaching and curriculum work involve relational and emotional demands, not only technical delivery. In this study, relationship work was not an add-on to disability education. It was one of the main conditions that made authentic disability-related learning possible.

The problem is that this labour was not always institutionally recognised. Where relationships were owned by individuals instead of programmes, they were vulnerable to workload pressures, staff turnover, and role changes. ABC9 captured this fragility by describing "reliance on staff members as opposed to a systematic university approach." This means that relationship continuity and curriculum continuity are connected. If the relationship disappears, the learning opportunity may disappear with it.

4.3.4 Summary for Theme 2

Theme 2 shows that disability education was strongly shaped by people-related conditions. Across programme contexts, participants described disability education as dependent on particular staff members, individual expertise, personal commitment, lived or professional experience, and relationships with disability-sector or community partners. These conditions enabled disability education to appear in programmes where it might otherwise have been absent. However, they also made provision fragile because disability education was not always protected through programme-level structures.

The cross-case pattern reflects more than some programmes having champions and others not. The data suggest that champion-led provision created both opportunity and risk. Where committed staff were present, disability education could be introduced through

papers, examples, guest teaching, placements, research links, or community relationships. Where those staff were absent, left their roles, lacked time, or were not replaced by others with similar expertise, disability education became vulnerable. This indicates that disability education was often sustained through individual labour rather than shared institutional responsibility.

Staff expertise and confidence were also uneven. Participants described varying levels of disability-related knowledge, limited structured professional development, and uncertainty about responsibility for disability education. This is relevant because inclusive curriculum cannot be sustained by goodwill alone. Staff need confidence, pedagogical support, and programme-level recognition if disability education is to move beyond isolated examples or broad language of inclusion.

Relationships with external partners were another important part of this theme. Participants valued community links, guest contributors, placements, and disability-sector involvement, but these relationships were often informal and personally held. Where partnerships depended on individual staff members, they were vulnerable to workload pressures, staff turnover, and partner capacity constraints. This suggests that relationship work functioned as curriculum labour, even when not always recognised as such.

Overall, Theme 2 shows that the scarcity of disability education is partly produced by fragile staffing and expertise arrangements. Disability education may be present because individuals make it happen, but when provision depends mainly on champions, informal relationships, or isolated expertise, it remains precarious. The theme therefore points to a wider institutional issue: disability education is more reliable when responsibility is distributed, recognised, and sustained at programme level rather than resting with a small number of committed individuals.

4.4 Theme 3: Curriculum crowding, governance, and market logics shape legitimacy

Theme 3 examines the structural conditions that shaped whether disability education could be integrated into the formal curriculum. Participants did not describe curriculum design as a simple matter of choosing important content. Instead, they described a constrained process shaped by limited credit space, staffing capacity, approval processes, student demand, financial pressures, programme identity, and competing institutional priorities.

This theme should be read through the lens of institutional and curriculum theory. Curriculum decisions are not neutral; they reflect what programmes treat as legitimate, viable, and central to graduate preparation (Bernstein, 2003; Young, 2008). In higher education, these decisions are also shaped by market pressures and institutional priorities. The data suggest that disability education was more likely to be protected when framed as central to professional capability, and more likely to remain marginal when framed as an additional equity interest, specialist topic, or low-demand paper.

4.4.1 Curriculum crowding and competing priorities

Curriculum crowding was described as a major constraint. Participants explained that adding disability education required finding space within programmes that were already full. ABC5 described "there is limited contact time across the degree", while ABC6 identified "a crowded curriculum as restricting the depth of disability-related learning." ABC7 also noted "a lack of time for strategic thinking." These accounts suggest that scarcity was not solely due to disagreement about the value of disability education. It was also produced by the practical problem of fitting new or expanded content into existing degree structures.

However, curriculum crowding is not only logistical. It is also political. When programmes are crowded, decisions must be made about what is protected, what is compressed, and what is left optional. Disability education often appeared in this trade-off space. ABC1 described staff as "trying to do their part within their own courses, with the knowledge that they have and the resources that they have available." This suggests local effort, but also limited programme-level coordination. Disability education became something staff attempted to include where possible, in preference to something guaranteed through curriculum design.

The sequencing issue therefore involves more than simply where content appears chronologically. It concerns whether disability education is connected across the degree. If disability appears in isolated papers, examples, or placements without a planned sequence, students may encounter the topic but not develop progressive capability. In this sense, curriculum crowding contributes to episodic provision because disability education is squeezed into available spaces instead of organised as part of a coherent pathway.

4.4.2 Governance, review, and what becomes formal curriculum

Participants also described governance and review processes as important mechanisms shaping disability education. Formal curriculum change requires approval, staff allocation, learning outcomes, assessment design, and the capacity for ongoing delivery. These processes determine what becomes part of the recognised curriculum and what remains informal, optional, or dependent on individual staff.

ABC7 identified "curriculum redesign as an opportunity to embed inclusivity, but also noted that agreement did not always lead to consistent follow-through." This distinction is important. Curriculum review can open space for disability education, but it can also expose disability to competing priorities. If disability is not named, assessed, or linked to graduate capability during the review, it may remain an aspiration as an alternative to a formal programme commitment.

This finding connects to the broader issue of legitimacy. Formal curriculum structures communicate what a programme treats as real and assessable knowledge. Informal disability content may be valuable, but it is easier to remove or overlook during programme change. Where disability is embedded only through staff preference or local initiative, governance processes may not protect it. When it is attached to learning outcomes,

assessment, and programme requirements, it becomes more visible and harder to ignore (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013).

4.4.3 Viability, enrolments, and market pressure

Market and viability pressures also shaped the status of disability education. ABC2 described "universities as operating in a context where 'cash is king ', and financial considerations drive decisions." The same participant reported that disability-related provision could be difficult to support when it was perceived as unlikely to generate money. ABC4 similarly noted that "proposals had to demonstrate financial viability." These comments suggest that disability education was judged not only by its ethical or professional importance but also by its perceived market value.

ABC3 described "profitability as influencing how degrees are framed and what is likely to attract student interest." ABC9 similarly identified "market forces as affecting the viability of disability-focused papers and noted difficulty marketing disability education." These accounts show how disability education can become vulnerable when it is not presented as central to the degree's identity, employability narrative, or professional value proposition.

The data show a tension between educational values and market logics. Disability education may be recognised as socially and professionally important, but if programme viability is measured through enrolments, student demand, staff availability, and market appeal, disability content can be pushed toward the margins. This does not mean that participants dismissed disability education. More appropriately, it shows how institutional conditions can make disability education difficult to protect unless it is legitimised as core professional preparation.

4.4.4 Summary for Theme 3

Theme 3 shows that disability education was shaped by structural curriculum conditions rather than educational value alone. Across programme contexts, participants described sport and exercise programmes as crowded, resource-constrained, and influenced by competing priorities. Disability education was recognised as important, but its inclusion depended on whether space, staffing, assessment, approval processes, and programme viability permitted its integration into the formal curriculum.

The cross-case pattern was that disability education had to compete for legitimacy. Where disability-related content was linked to learning outcomes, assessment, professional capability, or programme identity, it became more visible and defensible. When it was framed as additional, specialist, low-demand, or difficult to resource, its scarcity was not simply due to a lack of interest. It was produced through routine curriculum decisions about what could fit within a degree and what was protected as core knowledge.

Curriculum crowding was one mechanism in this process. Participants described limited credit space, contact time, and staffing capacity, meaning that new or expanded disability-

related content required trade-offs with existing material. Disability education could therefore appear as a brief mention, a short module, a single example, or an optional applied opportunity rather than a sustained pathway. This is significant because crowded curricula limit not only the quantity of content but also the extent to which disability education can be sequenced, practised, assessed, and revisited across a degree.

Governance and approval processes were another mechanism. Formal curriculum change requires time, coordination, proposal development, alignment with programme goals, and staff capacity. These processes can protect disability education when it is made explicit, but they can also slow or weaken change when responsibility is unclear, or disability is not recognised as central to graduate preparation. Formal curriculum structures therefore determine whether disability education is integrated into programme architecture or remains dependent on local initiative.

Viability and market pressures also shaped priorities. Participants described universities as needing to attract students, maintain enrolments, manage staff workloads, and ensure financial sustainability. These pressures influenced whether disability education was viewed as a worthwhile investment, a marketable programme feature, or a difficult addition to already stretched degrees. Participants did not reject disability education; rather, disability content was often required to justify itself through institutional logics of enrolment, employability, workload, and programme survival.

Overall, Theme 3 shows that the scarcity of disability education is produced through curriculum governance and institutional prioritisation. It becomes more secure when formally legitimised through outcomes, assessment, resourcing, and programme identity, and more fragile when reliant on goodwill, available space, or occasional opportunities. This explains why disability education can be valued in principle yet remain weakly embedded in practice: curriculum systems may support inclusion rhetorically while making it difficult to sustain disability education as core professional knowledge.

4.5 Theme 4: Authentic learning is valued, but access is uneven and partnership-dependent

Theme 4 examines authentic learning, including placements, practicum experiences, service learning, community engagement, guest teaching, and direct contact with disability-sector organisations. Participants often described these experiences as among the most meaningful ways students could learn about disability inclusion. However, the data also show that authentic learning was unevenly available, capacity-constrained, and often dependent on individual staff members' relationships.

This theme is important because it complicates any simple claim that exposure solves the problem. Authentic learning can help students connect disability concepts with practice, communication, adaptation, and professional judgement. However, if such learning is optional, limited to a small number of placements, or dependent on partner capacity, it cannot guarantee a shared baseline of disability-informed capability across a whole cohort.

The literature on practice-based and situated learning supports the value of authentic experience but also shows that experience requires structure, guidance, and reflection to become professional learning (Billett, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

4.5.1 Placements, practicum, and community engagement: value, access, and capacity

Participants described placements, practicums, service learning, and community engagement as valuable because they allowed students to encounter disability inclusion as practice rather than as abstract content. ABC1 described students choosing “Parasport practicums”, ABC5 identified “disability placements through service learning”, and ABC8 described “a community practicum model in which students engaged with community groups and then connected these experiences to course assessment.” These accounts suggest that authentic learning can help students understand disability through communication, adaptation, relationship-building, access, safety, and situated decision-making.

However, participants did not describe these opportunities as equally available to all students. ABC1 provided a clear example of this unevenness, describing a third-year practicum in which “our students who choose, and there’s a limited space, they do Parasports.” This quote is important because it shows two constraints operating together: students must choose the opportunity, and even then, access is limited by the number of available places. In this sense, disability-related authentic learning was not necessarily absent, but it was not guaranteed for all students.

Other participants described more limited access. ABC3 noted that “there were good connections with Parasport, but that only a small number of students could undertake those placements.” ABC5 stated that students “did not have opportunities to engage with disabled people as part of their compulsory coursework or practical placements”, adding “that such engagement was not as part of their compulsory coursework or practical placements.” ABC4 was more direct, explaining that “working with disabled athletes or coaching in that space is something that we just don’t do.” Together, these accounts show that authentic learning was valued, but not consistently embedded as a core requirement.

Optionality is important because it creates uneven learning pathways within the same broad field of graduate preparation. Where placements or community experiences are optional, students who already have an interest in disability, inclusion, or adapted practice may be more likely to seek them out. Students who do not yet recognise disability as relevant to their future professional work may bypass these opportunities entirely. This finding aligns with Theme 1, in which disability education was often positioned as implicit, elective, or weakly specified. In Theme 4, the same pattern appears in applied form: authentic learning may exist, but not all students are required to access it or are able to access it.

The analytical point is therefore not simply that placements and community engagement are valuable. Rather, they are valuable when they are available, supervised, scaffolded, and connected to curriculum expectations. When they are optional, capacity-limited, or

available only to a small number of students, they can reproduce uneven exposure across cohorts. Some students may graduate with meaningful disability-related practice experience, while others may complete similar qualifications with little direct engagement. This matters because the literature on situated and practice-based learning suggests that experience becomes educationally meaningful when it is guided, supported, and connected to professional practice (Billett, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In disability education, contact alone is insufficient. Students need opportunities to prepare, practise, reflect, receive feedback, and connect experience to concepts such as access, communication, adaptation, safety, participation, and professional judgement. Research in adapted physical education similarly shows that coursework and practicum experiences can support preservice educators' confidence and self-efficacy for inclusion, but these benefits depend on students actually accessing such experiences (Taliaferro et al., 2015).

The data therefore complicate any simple claim that placements or community engagement solve the scarcity problem. Authentic learning can make disability education practical and real, but only when it forms part of a reliable curriculum pathway. If access depends mainly on student choice, limited places, timing, or chance, authentic learning remains an enrichment opportunity rather than a dependable component of graduate preparation.

4.5.2 Partnership structures and sustainability

Partnerships with disability-sector and community organisations deepened authentic learning. Participants described partnerships ranging from informal relationships to more developed practicum structures. ABC6 described "partnerships as informal and under-resourced", while ABC7 reported, "We do not have formal partnerships with disability organisations." ABC8, by contrast, described, "We have structured community practicum activity and ongoing connections with community groups." These differences mattered because partnership structure influenced what students could do, how much preparation they received, and whether learning was sustained over time.

Where partnerships were informal, learning opportunities were more vulnerable. ABC9 described "reliance on individual staff members as opposed to a systematic university approach." This suggests that partnerships were often held together through personal networks. Such networks can be valuable, but they also create fragility if staff leave, workloads change, or community partners no longer have capacity.

Partnership design is therefore a curriculum issue, not just a logistical issue. It affects who has access to authentic learning, what kind of learning occurs, how partners are supported, and whether students receive preparation and reflection. Ethical partnership literature is relevant here because disability-sector organisations and disabled people should not be treated as convenient resources for university learning. Partnerships require reciprocity, preparation, and recognition of the labour involved (Healey et al., 2016; Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013).

4.5.3 Scaffolding authentic learning

Participants also suggested that authentic learning requires scaffolding. Direct contact with disabled people or disability-sector organisations does not automatically produce capability. Students need preparation, guidance, opportunities to ask questions, structured reflection, and feedback on their practice. Without these supports, authentic learning can remain at the level of exposure instead of becoming professional education.

ABC8 provided one of the clearest examples of scaffolded practice: “We have a practicum connected to assessment in which students linked theory to practice.” This example shows how authentic learning can be strengthened when it is integrated into the curriculum instead of being left as an isolated experience. By contrast, the uneven access described above suggests that authentic learning becomes less reliable when it is optional, limited, or dependent on student choice.

This finding connects back to the distinction between exposure and capability. Students may benefit from encountering disability-related practice, but the educational value of that encounter depends on how it is prepared, supervised, interpreted, and assessed. Authentic learning therefore needs to be understood as curriculum infrastructure. It requires staff time, partner capacity, student preparation, assessment design, and ongoing relationship work.

4.5.4 Summary for Theme 4

Theme 4 shows that authentic learning was one of the most valued ways students could connect disability-related concepts with practice, but it was also one of the least reliably available. Placements, practicums, service learning, guest teaching, and community engagement enabled students to encounter issues such as communication, adaptation, access, safety, participation, and professional judgement in more applied ways than classroom discussion alone could.

However, authentic learning did not operate as a shared entitlement across participant/programme contexts. Access was shaped by student choice, limited places, partner availability, supervision capacity, staff-held relationships, and programme timing. This meant that some students could develop meaningful disability-related practice experience, while others could complete similar qualifications with little direct engagement. The issue is therefore not whether authentic learning is valuable; the data suggest that it is. The issue is whether it is sufficiently available, scaffolded, ethically supported, and connected to the curriculum to contribute to a reliable graduate pathway.

Theme 4, therefore, complicates the idea that placements or community engagement can address the scarcity of disability education. Authentic learning was valuable, but when optional, capacity-limited, or dependent on informal relationships, it reproduced unevenness across cohorts. Some students could graduate with meaningful disability-related practice experience, while others could graduate without comparable exposure.

Authentic learning becomes reliable only when scaffolded, resourced, ethically supported, and connected to the wider curriculum.

4.6 Integrated interpretation: scarcity as a produced curriculum outcome

Across the four themes, scarcity emerged as a produced curriculum outcome. It was not just the result of individual neglect or a lack of concern among staff. Instead, scarcity was produced through the interaction of ambiguous curriculum positioning, reliance on individual champions, limited staff expertise, market and governance pressures, and uneven access to authentic learning.

The first mechanism was weak visibility of the curriculum. Disability education was often implicit, folded into broader inclusion or equity language, or situated within individual papers without a clear programme-level pathway. This made disability education difficult to trace, assess, and protect. In hidden-curriculum terms, students may learn that disability inclusion is valued rhetorically but not sufficiently central to be consistently named, sequenced, or assessed (Jackson, 1968).

The second mechanism was dispersed responsibility. Disability education was often assumed to be the responsibility of particular lecturers, support services, community partners, placements, or students' own choices. This dispersal allowed disability education to exist in fragments, but it also made provision fragile. If no one owns disability education at programme level, it can become everyone's concern and nobody's responsibility.

The third mechanism was institutional constraint. Participants described crowded programmes, limited staff capacity, approval processes, market pressures, and concerns about viability. These conditions shaped whether disability education was treated as core professional knowledge or as a desirable addition. When disability education was framed as optional, specialist, or difficult to market, it became easier to sideline. When it was connected to professional capability, assessment, or programme identity, it became more visible and defensible.

The fourth mechanism was uneven access to authentic learning. Placements and community engagement were described as powerful, but they were not consistently available to all students. They depended on staff relationships, partner capacity, supervision, student choice, and programme timing. Authentic learning, therefore, strengthened disability education when it was scaffolded and supported, but reproduced scarcity when it remained optional or capacity-limited.

Together, these mechanisms show that disability education is scarce in curricular and institutional contexts. Disability education may be valued, but unless it is named, coordinated, staffed, assessed, and sustained, it remains vulnerable. The findings therefore provide an empirical basis for the discussion in Chapter 5, which considers how programmes might respond to these conditions without assuming that one model will suit every institutional context.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented four themes that explain how disability education is currently incorporated and constrained within sport- and exercise-related university programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. Theme 1 showed that disability education is often implicit, episodic, or weakly specified. Theme 2 showed that provision frequently depends on champions, staff expertise, and fragile continuity. Theme 3 showed that curriculum crowding, governance processes, and market logics shape whether disability education is treated as legitimate and central. Theme 4 showed that authentic learning is valued but unevenly accessible and dependent on partnership infrastructure.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the scarcity of disability education is more than an absence of content. It is produced through ordinary curriculum conditions: what is named, what is assessed, who is responsible, what staff can sustain, what partners can support, and what programmes treat as viable. The chapter therefore reframes scarcity as a matter of programme consistency. Students may encounter disability-related learning, but that learning is not consistently visible, compulsory, sequenced, assessed, or supported across all programme contexts.

The next chapter draws these findings together to answer the research question and consider the implications for strengthening disability education within tertiary sport and exercise programmes.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Chapter purpose and research focus

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. It answers the research question, explains how the findings confirm, extend, and complicate previous research, identifies what appears distinctive about the Aotearoa New Zealand university context, and clarifies the contribution of pathway reliability as the central concept developed through this thesis. The chapter then considers implications for programme development, defines the scope of the claims, and identifies priorities for future research.

The study examined how disability education is incorporated within sport- and exercise-related programmes at Aotearoa New Zealand universities and what curriculum and institutional conditions contribute to its scarcity or fragility. The first sub-question concerned the forms disability education takes, including dedicated papers or modules, integrated content, guest teaching, placements, practicums, community engagement, and staff-led initiatives. The second concerned the mechanisms shaping provision, including curriculum visibility, staffing expertise, programme crowding, governance, institutional priorities, partnerships, and student choice.

These were questions about curriculum positioning and perceived conditions of the curriculum. The study did not rank institutions, evaluate individual educators, audit every programme document, measure student competence, or directly represent disabled students' experiences. The findings, therefore, need to be interpreted as educators' accounts of programme-level curriculum contexts. They show how participants understood the location, visibility, continuity, and constraints of disability education, but they do not establish what every student encountered or whether graduates were competent in disability-inclusive practice.

The central argument is that scarcity cannot be understood adequately as the complete absence of disability-related content. Across the programme contexts described by participants, disability education was often present, but its position within the student pathway was uncertain. It could be implicit rather than named, optional rather than expected, episodic rather than sequenced, unassessed rather than evidenced, or dependent on particular staff members and community relationships rather than protected at programme level. Scarcity is therefore better understood as reduced pathway reliability.

Pathway reliability refers to the extent to which students can reasonably expect to encounter a visible, connected, assessable, and sustainable pathway for developing disability-informed knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgement. Reliability does not require identical curricula across universities or imply that every student should complete the same dedicated disability paper. It concerns whether access to foundational disability education depends primarily on elective choice, personal interest, a particular lecturer, a chance placement, or the temporary availability of an external partner. A reliable pathway can take different forms, but it requires sufficient visibility, reach, sequencing, assessment,

ownership, and continuity to make disability-informed capability more than an incidental possibility.

Curriculum theory and institutional theory are used together in this chapter to explain this pattern. Curriculum theory directs attention to what is selected, named, sequenced, taught, assessed, and likely to be encountered. Institutional theory helps explain why particular arrangements become legitimate, stable, or difficult to change through formal rules, professional expectations, disciplinary norms, resources, market pressures, and taken-for-granted assumptions. The discussion uses these theories selectively. The findings provide strong evidence concerning visibility, legitimacy, responsibility, governance, staffing, resources, and competing programme priorities. They provide less direct evidence for some wider institutional concepts, such as sector-wide isomorphism. This distinction is important because theory should clarify the findings rather than be applied mechanically.

5.2 Consolidated answer to the research question

The central answer to the research question is that disability education was incorporated unevenly across the sport- and exercise-related programme contexts described by participants. It appeared through explicit papers or learning blocks, content threaded through mainstream papers, informal examples, guest contributions, placements, practicums, service learning, community engagement, and staff-led initiatives. These forms demonstrate that disability education was not wholly absent. However, across the accounts, they did not consistently amount to a visible, assessable, and connected pathway with sufficient reach across the student cohort.

Participants generally recognised disability inclusion as professionally and ethically important. The problem was therefore not simply a lack of concern. Rather, recognition had not consistently been translated into programme-level arrangements that specified what students should learn, where that learning should occur, how it should develop, how it should be assessed, and who was responsible for sustaining it. Positive intent was evident, but intent and curriculum reliability were not equivalent.

Four interacting conditions shaped this unevenness. First, disability education often had weak curriculum visibility. It was implicit, located within broad inclusion or equity language, concentrated in particular papers, or available through optional experiences. This made it difficult to determine whether all students were likely to encounter a common foundation. Second, provision frequently depended on individual staff expertise, personal commitment, lived experience, and relationships with disability communities or organisations. These people enabled valuable learning, but concentration of responsibility also made provision vulnerable to staff turnover, workload, retirement, and changes in role.

Third, disability education had to compete within crowded programmes and formal governance processes. Participants described limited credit space, staffing capacity, approval requirements, enrolment pressures, and questions about financial viability. These conditions influenced whether disability education could be formalised as core professional knowledge or remained an optional, specialist, or locally maintained addition. Fourth,

authentic learning was valued but unevenly accessible. Placements, practicums, guest teaching, and community engagement could connect concepts with practice, yet access depended on student choice, staff networks, partner capacity, supervision, and programme timing.

Taken together, these conditions show that scarcity was produced through the interaction of curriculum form and institutional context. Disability education became less reliable when its visibility, reach, assessment, ownership, and continuity were uncertain. It became more dependable when disability-informed capability was explicitly connected to programme expectations, when responsibility was shared, and when applied learning was supported through a sustainable curriculum and partnership arrangements.

This answer is more qualified than a claim that New Zealand university programmes either do or do not provide disability education. The findings do not support a simple sector-wide binary. Some programme contexts contained stronger anchors, more deliberate threading, or more developed authentic learning than others. The contribution lies in explaining the conditions that made these forms more or less reliable and in showing why the presence of content alone is an insufficient indicator of graduate preparation.

5.3 Discussion: from scarcity to pathway reliability

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 had already established that disability inclusion matters, that isolated exposure is not equivalent to professional capability, and that disability-related preparation can be limited, elective, or inconsistent across related fields. The present study supports those concerns, but it also adds a more differentiated account of how scarcity is produced within university sport and exercise curricula. In particular, the findings show that disability education can be present without being reliably available, visible, coordinated, or assessable.

Pathway reliability brings the four findings together. It shifts attention from counting courses to examining the cumulative relationship among curriculum visibility, student reach, sequencing, assessment, ownership, and continuity. It also distinguishes minimum curriculum entitlement from uniformity. Programmes can retain different disciplinary identities, staffing profiles, and community relationships while still ensuring that disability-informed capability does not depend mainly on chance.

5.3.1 Visibility, optionality, and curriculum entitlement

Previous research in kinesiology, physical education teacher education, and adapted physical activity has reported that disability-related learning is often limited, concentrated in a single introductory course, or available as an elective rather than a common requirement (Case et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2022, 2025; Wilson et al., 2022). The present finding supports this literature. Participants described disability education as optional in some programmes, dependent on paper or placement selection, and sometimes difficult to locate within formal learning outcomes or assessment. Students who already regarded disability as

relevant could seek out these opportunities, while those without prior interest could complete a similar degree pathway without comparable exposure to it.

A baseline expectation for disability capability should not be confused with a fixed checklist of impairment-specific techniques. The diversity of disabled people, professional settings, sports, exercises, environments, and support needs makes exhaustive preparation impossible. A defensible foundation is more likely to include understanding disability rights and barriers, communicating respectfully, applying basic principles of adaptation and inclusive design, reasoning about risk without unnecessary restriction, working collaboratively, and recognising when further expertise is required. Specialist pathways can then extend this foundation in relation to particular occupations, sports, populations, or research interests. This distinction allows programmes to recognise disciplinary variation without treating disability education as relevant only to students who have already chosen a specialist route.

The findings extend previous studies by showing that scarcity is not confined to the number of dedicated courses. Disability education could be described as embedded or threaded through core papers while remaining weakly specified at programme level. ABC3, for example, described “disability as being woven through most core papers while also stating that it was not a formal part of the degree.” This apparent contradiction is analytically important. It shows that curriculum presence and curriculum visibility are different. Content may be enacted by individual educators without being named in programme architecture, mapped across the degree, or protected through assessment and review.

This finding complicates any simple choice between a dedicated paper and curriculum-wide infusion. The literature has long supported integrating disability-related knowledge across mainstream curricula, while also recognising the value of specialist depth (DePauw & Karp, 1994; McNamara et al., 2025). The present study suggests that neither form is inherently reliable. A dedicated elective may provide substantial depth but reach only a self-selecting group. Distributed content may reach more students but become inconsistent, repetitive, or invisible if no one can identify where it is introduced, reinforced, and assessed. The more useful question is how specialist and distributed provision connect to one another across the student pathway.

The use of broad inclusion and equity language further illustrates this distinction. Participants did not reject such language; it often created a legitimate space for discussing disability. However, several accounts suggested that disability could disappear under umbrella terms open to multiple interpretations. This finding extends the literature by identifying a specific curricular mechanism through which inclusion may be affirmed without making disability-informed capability explicit. The issue is not that inclusion language is inappropriate, but that its educational meaning depends on what students are expected to know and do.

Constructive alignment and the hidden curriculum help explain why this matters. Where disability is visible in learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment, students receive a formal signal that it is part of professional preparation (Biggs et al., 2022). Where it is mentioned but unassessed, optional, or assumed to occur elsewhere, students may infer

that it is supplementary. The hidden curriculum operates through these priorities and silences, communicating what a programme regards as ordinary, central, and worth protecting (Jackson, 1968).

Read through ableism and hidden curriculum scholarship, this pattern can be interpreted as allowing ableist norms to operate through ordinary curriculum signals rather than through overt exclusion. This interpretation does not depend on identifying ableist intent among individual educators. Instead, it highlights how disability can remain exceptional, peripheral, or weakly protected when programmes rely on optionality, broad inclusion language, unassessed exposure, or individual staff initiative, while more clearly protecting other forms of professional knowledge (Campbell, 2009; Dolmage, 2017; Peers et al., 2022).

Institutional theory deepens this interpretation. The regulative dimension includes formal programme requirements, approval processes, learning outcomes, assessment structures, and review mechanisms. Participants' accounts suggested that disability education often had limited protection within these formal arrangements. The normative dimension was stronger: participants generally regarded inclusion as important and professionally appropriate. The cultural-cognitive dimension concerned assumptions about what belongs within mainstream sport and exercise knowledge. When disability was treated as specialist, exceptional, or relevant mainly to interested students, its marginal position could appear natural rather than actively chosen (Scott, 2013).

The gap between normative support and regulative enactment resembles the distinction Meyer and Rowan (1977) draw between formal commitments and everyday organisational practice. Inclusion can be present within values, strategy, or graduate rhetoric without being tightly connected to the curriculum students are likely to encounter. The present study does not suggest that formal commitments are insincere. It shows that their educational significance depends on whether they are translated into visible and sustained curriculum arrangements.

The implication is a question of curriculum entitlement. A programme does not need to offer identical learning to every student, but it should be able to identify the minimum disability-informed preparation that all relevant graduates are intended to receive. Optional depth can sit above that minimum. Without a common foundation, student choice becomes the mechanism that determines whether disability is encountered at all, and the same qualification may represent substantially different opportunities for preparation.

5.3.2 From exposure to capability: sequencing and assessment

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 distinguished awareness, confidence, and positive attitudes from the ability to act responsibly in practice. Disability-informed capability involves knowledge, skills, dispositions, and situated judgement, rather than familiarity with disability as a topic alone (Rouse, 2006; Shulman, 2005). The present finding supports that distinction. Participants described lectures, examples, guest teaching, placements, and broader inclusion discussions, but they less often described a connected sequence through

which disability-related learning was introduced, practised, reinforced, and assessed for all students.

This finding also supports research showing that coursework and practicum experiences can influence confidence and preparedness for inclusion, while extending the discussion from individual learning experiences to programme structure (Taliaferro et al., 2015). The issue identified here was not only whether a particular learning activity was valuable. It was whether activities related to one another across a degree and whether students were expected to demonstrate what they had learned. A strong guest session or placement may contribute substantially to one student's development, but it cannot establish a programme-wide graduate outcome if other students do not encounter it.

Assessment is central to this distinction because it provides evidence of what a programme expects students to demonstrate. Constructive alignment requires a defensible relationship among intended learning, teaching activities, feedback, and assessment (Biggs et al., 2022). Authentic assessment further suggests that students should be required to make judgements similar to those they will encounter in professional practice, rather than merely reproducing information (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gulikers et al., 2004; Villarroel et al., 2018). Applied to disability education, relevant evidence could involve identifying barriers, adapting activities, communicating respectfully, evaluating accessibility, reasoning about risk, or justifying decisions in context.

The findings extend this literature by showing that assessment is not only a pedagogical matter but also a mechanism for curriculum legitimacy and continuity. Content that is attached to assessed outcomes is more visible to students, easier for programme teams to locate, and more likely to survive staff or structural change. Content that depends on individual examples or informal discussion may still be valuable, but it is harder to evidence and protect. Assessment therefore affects both student learning and the institutional status of disability education.

At the same time, the findings complicate any claim that assessment alone guarantees capability. A poorly designed task can reward appropriate vocabulary without requiring meaningful judgement. A reflective paragraph may indicate awareness while providing little evidence of applied ability. Conversely, a student may develop considerable capability through supervised work, mentoring, or community engagement that is not fully captured by formal assessment. The argument is not that every aspect of inclusion can be reduced to a rubric. It is that programmes claiming to provide disability-informed graduate preparation need defensible evidence that students have moved beyond exposure.

The study's methodological boundaries are important here. Because students were neither interviewed nor assessed, the data cannot indicate whether graduates were competent. They can show whether educators described explicit opportunities through which capability was intended to develop and be demonstrated. The more precise conclusion is therefore that pathway reliability concerns the programme's provision of opportunities and expectations, not proof of individual graduate performance.

Sequencing is equally important. Disability education may be introduced conceptually in one part of a degree, applied within disciplinary contexts later, and developed through practicum or placement. Alternatively, it may appear as a set of unrelated moments. The findings suggest that many programme contexts were closer to the second pattern, although there were examples of more deliberate development. This extends the existing literature by showing why presence, frequency, and even assessment need to be interpreted as part of a pathway rather than as isolated indicators.

A reliable pathway would therefore make the intended progression visible without assuming a universal course structure. Programmes could define foundational expectations, identify where students first encounter them, determine where they are applied in relevant disciplines, and specify how students demonstrate a defensible level of capability. This approach preserves contextual flexibility while making the claimed graduate preparation more transparent.

5.3.3 Champions, educator expertise, and institutional responsibility

Previous research has emphasised that educator knowledge, preparation, and confidence shape disability-related teaching and inclusive practice (Haegele et al., 2020; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Coaching and professional learning research also shows that disability knowledge is often developed informally through experience, mentoring, athlete relationships, and communities of practice (Culver et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2022). The present findings support both bodies of literature. Disability education was frequently enabled by individual staff members who possessed expertise, personal experience, research interests, or established relationships with disabled people and community organisations.

The findings extend previous work by showing that expertise and relationship work were not merely teaching inputs; they functioned as curriculum infrastructure. Staff members invited guest contributors, maintained placements, built trust with community partners, created examples and assessments, and kept disability visible during programme change. This labour often sat behind the formal curriculum. Where it was not recognised in workload, succession planning, or shared programme responsibility, the learning opportunities it supported remained vulnerable.

Champion-led provision therefore had a double character. It was productive because committed individuals created opportunities that may not otherwise have existed. It was fragile because the programme could become dependent on their continued presence. ABC6's observation that “the strongest disability education often came from staff with personal involvement “ and was relationship-driven captures this tension. The problem was not the existence of champions. Removing or diluting specialist leadership would weaken provision. The problem arose when champion activity substituted for institutional responsibility.

This finding complicates accounts that treat staff dependence as evidence of simple organisational neglect. Participants often described genuine effort under constrained

conditions. Staff incorporated content where they could, sought external expertise, or developed relationships despite limited time and support. The data therefore do not support blaming individual educators for scarcity. They show how positive commitment can coexist with arrangements that leave provision personalised and precarious.

The institutional framework clarifies this point. Normatively, many participants believed disability education was important. Regulative support was less consistent: responsibility was not always reflected in formal roles, workload allocation, staff development, learning outcomes, or programme review. Cultural-cognitive assumptions also mattered. Where disability knowledge was regarded as specialist expertise, other staff could reasonably view it as outside their teaching identity. Disability education could then become the responsibility of the person who already knew the area, reinforcing concentration of expertise over time.

These arrangements can also be read through the lens of ableism literature, but the interpretation requires careful calibration. The findings do not show that individual educators intended exclusion, nor that every champion-led or optional arrangement is inherently ableist. Rather, they show how fragile and personalised arrangements may allow ableist assumptions to persist when disability is not structurally recognised through shared curriculum responsibility, staff support, workload recognition, and formal expectations (Campbell, 2009; Dolmage, 2017; Peers et al., 2022).

The study also extends discussion of professional development. Participants described uneven confidence and limited systematic staff training. This suggests that programme reliability cannot depend on appointing a single disability specialist and expecting that person to handle all teaching, assessment, partnership, and advisory work. Nor is it realistic to expect every staff member to become a specialist in every impairment or context. The more sustainable distinction is between specialist leadership and distributed baseline capability. Specialist educators can provide depth, coordination, and support, while staff across the programme need enough confidence and pedagogical understanding to make disability relevant within their own disciplinary areas.

Distributed responsibility requires coordination. Without clear ownership, the language of shared responsibility can become another form of diffusion in which everyone is presumed to contribute, but no one checks whether contributions are made. Programme-level coordination, shared resources, co-teaching, professional development, workload recognition, and succession planning can preserve specialist expertise while reducing dependence on a single person. In pathway terms, the question is whether disability education remains available when staffing changes, rather than whether a committed individual can sustain it temporarily.

5.3.4 Curriculum crowding, governance, legitimacy, and competing institutional logics

The literature on inclusion and policy translation shows that formal commitments do not automatically become enacted educational practice (Ainscow, 2020; Hammond, 2022). The

present findings support this argument. Participants generally endorsed disability inclusion, but they also described crowded curricula, limited staffing, formal approval processes, workload pressure, enrolment concerns, and questions about programme viability. Disability education was therefore negotiated within the same governance and resource conditions that shape other curriculum priorities.

The regulative dimension of institutional theory is especially visible here. Programme approval, paper structures, credit limits, quality assurance, workload models, and assessment requirements determine what can be formalised and sustained (Scott, 2013). Participants described curriculum change as requiring agreement, staff capacity, design work, and continuing delivery. These processes could protect disability education when it was named and connected to programme outcomes, but they could also leave it informal when no clear owner, credit space, or delivery capacity existed.

The normative dimension concerned beliefs about what a responsible programme and a capable graduate should include. Participants' support for disability education suggests that a professional and equity-based rationale was available. However, normative support competed with established disciplinary expectations. Sport and exercise degrees also need to protect scientific, technical, pedagogical, and professional content that staff regard as central. Curriculum crowding was therefore not a neutral shortage of time. It required judgements about which knowledge was protected and which knowledge could remain optional, compressed, or implicit.

The cultural-cognitive dimension concerned taken-for-granted assumptions about the field. Disability could be treated as specialist or additional because mainstream sport and exercise practice was implicitly imagined around non-disabled bodies, conventional movement, standard performance measures, and familiar employment pathways. These assumptions did not need to be stated explicitly to influence curriculum decisions. When disability was perceived as relevant only to a niche career destination, its limited curricular position could appear reasonable despite the likelihood that graduates across many roles will work with disabled people.

Institutional logics provide a useful framework for interpreting the resulting tension. A professional logic supports disability education as part of graduate readiness, ethical judgement, and safe practice. An equity logic supports it through rights, access, participation, and social responsibility. A disciplinary logic may protect established sport science and professional knowledge, while a market logic emphasises enrolments, employability, workload, and programme viability. The findings show that these logics operated simultaneously rather than as simple opposites (Cai & Mountford, 2022; Scott, 2013).

This finding extends the existing literature by showing how disability education was required to establish legitimacy across several institutional registers simultaneously. Ethical importance alone was not always enough to secure curriculum space. Provision appeared more defensible when it could also be connected to graduate capability, programme identity, employability, community engagement, or sector need. Conversely, disability-focused provision became vulnerable when it was framed as an additional interest, as

difficult to market, as dependent on low enrolments, or as requiring resources beyond those already allocated.

The findings also complicate explanations based solely on prejudice or lack of commitment. Ableist assumptions may influence what is regarded as mainstream knowledge, but scarcity was also produced through ordinary governance, workload, and resource decisions. These mechanisms should not be treated as politically neutral: repeated decisions about what is core have distributive consequences. However, explaining those decisions requires attention to the interplay among values, rules, resources, and disciplinary identities rather than attributing them to a single motive.

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) account of legitimacy helps explain why inclusion can be visible in strategy or policy while weakly connected to curriculum practice. Formal endorsement may support organisational legitimacy without determining what is taught, assessed, or experienced. The present study supports this interpretation, but it also shows that the relationship is not simply a complete separation between policy and practice. Participants used inclusion language, developed local initiatives, and pursued curriculum change. The gap was one of uneven translation rather than total inaction.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism is less strongly demonstrated by the data. Participants referred to professional expectations, market pressures, programme identity, and perceptions of what degrees needed to offer, but the study did not systematically investigate whether programmes copied competitors or converged through accreditation and sector pressure. The findings provide clearer evidence of common pressures combined with substantial local variation. Institutional logics, legitimacy, and the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions therefore offer more direct explanatory value than a strong claim of sector-wide isomorphism.

The practical significance of this interpretation is that disability education may be strengthened when it is framed in ways that connect rather than isolate institutional priorities. Positioning disability-informed capability as professional readiness, ethical practice, community relevance, and inclusive employability can align professional and equity logics with programme viability. This does not remove the need for resources or difficult curriculum choices, but it gives disability education a stronger claim to legitimacy than a framing based only on optional specialist interest.

5.3.5 Authentic learning, partnership capacity, and equity of student access

Practice-based and situated learning literature establishes that professional knowledge develops through participation, guidance, feedback, reflection, and engagement in authentic contexts (Billett, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Research in adapted physical education similarly suggests that coursework and practicum experiences can support confidence and preparedness for inclusion (Taliaferro et al., 2015). The present findings support this literature. Participants frequently described placements, practicums, guest teaching, and community engagement as among the most valuable ways for students to

connect disability concepts with communication, adaptation, access, safety, and professional judgement.

The findings extend previous research by showing that authentic learning depends on an infrastructure of relationships. Opportunities were shaped by staff networks, partner availability, trust, supervision capacity, timing, and the willingness of disabled people and organisations to contribute. Relationship work was therefore not external to curriculum design. It was one of the conditions that determined whether students could access applied learning at all.

This extension is particularly important because universities can describe a placement or guest contribution as a curriculum opportunity without accounting for the labour required to sustain it. Staff need time to identify partners, negotiate expectations, prepare students, resolve access and safety issues, support participants, and maintain relationships. Community partners contribute expertise, facilities, coordination, trust, and emotional labour. When this work is informal or under-resourced, authentic learning becomes difficult to scale and vulnerable to disruption.

The findings also complicate the assumption that placements or contact with disabled people automatically solve the scarcity problem. Authentic learning was valuable, but access was often optional, capacity-limited, or dependent on student choice. As a result, some students could complete rich disability-related experiences while others in the same or similar qualification had little direct engagement. A learning method intended to strengthen inclusion could therefore reproduce uneven preparation when it was not available as a common entitlement.

Contact is also not equivalent to learning. Without preparation, supervision, critical framing, and reflection, students may confirm existing assumptions or reduce disability to a personal story. The literature cautions against treating disabled people as objects of study, sources of inspiration, or convenient resources for non-disabled learners (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). The present findings reinforce the need to consider reciprocity, recognition, resourcing, and the purpose of engagement. Disabled people and community organisations should be treated as knowledgeable partners, not as a substitute for programme responsibility.

This has implications for both ethics and curriculum design. Students need conceptual preparation before engagement, support during it, and structured opportunities afterwards to connect experience with barriers, communication, ableism, adaptation, risk, and professional responsibility. Partners need clear expectations, meaningful involvement, and appropriate recognition of their contribution. Where in-person capacity is limited, case-based, digital, or simulated learning may supplement preparation, but it should not be presented as an automatic replacement for relational practice.

The concept of pathway reliability adds an equity dimension to authentic learning. The question is not only whether valuable opportunities exist, but which students can access them and how those opportunities connect to the rest of the degree. Authentic learning becomes part of a reliable pathway when it is sufficiently available, scaffolded, ethically

supported, and linked to intended learning. When it depends mainly on luck, prior interest, or a staff member's personal network, it remains an enrichment opportunity rather than a dependable component of graduate preparation.

5.3.6 What the Aotearoa New Zealand context adds

Much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 was produced in North American kinesiology and physical education teacher education, international coaching, or broader inclusive education contexts (Case et al., 2025; McNamara et al., 2022, 2025; Townsend et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Unlike that earlier work, the present study provides an educator-informed cross-programme account from the Aotearoa New Zealand university sport and exercise sector. It does not establish that the mechanisms identified are unique to New Zealand, but it shows how they operate within a small national system with distinctive programme histories, staffing patterns, and community relationships.

The scale of the sector is important. Participants represented seven of the eight universities offering relevant programmes, and several accounts indicated that specialist expertise and community capacity were concentrated in a relatively small number of people and relationships. In a small system, the departure of one staff member or the loss of a relationship can have a visible effect on service provision. The same scale can also create opportunities for closer collaboration and national learning, although the present study did not assess whether such coordination currently occurs.

The findings also sit within a national environment in which disability inclusion and workforce capability are recognised sector priorities (Sport NZ, 2024; Sport NZ et al., 2018). These sources establish a strong normative expectation that graduates entering roles in sport, exercise, coaching, recreation, and physical activity should be able to work inclusively. The study extends the policy-practice literature by showing that these expectations do not automatically specify what universities should teach, assess, or protect within degree pathways. The translation problem is therefore visible in the relationship between national aspiration and local curriculum arrangements.

A further feature of the Aotearoa New Zealand context is the importance of local relationships. Participants' accounts suggest that community partnerships, guest teaching, and authentic learning were often shaped by regional networks and individual staff connections. This supports a fit-for-context approach rather than a single national course design. Programmes may need different examples, partners, and teaching structures. However, local flexibility does not remove the need for a defensible minimum expectation. The distinction is between common capability and identical delivery.

The wider context of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, cultural safety, and the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge also matters. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 emphasises that inclusion is shaped by relationships, power, institutional histories, and the knowledge recognised (Curtis et al., 2019; Gerdin, 2022; Linnér et al., 2022; Morton et al., 2023). The present study did not investigate these intersections in sufficient depth to claim a specifically Te Tiriti-based model of disability education. It would therefore be inappropriate

to make that claim here. The contribution is more limited: disability education in Aotearoa New Zealand cannot be treated as a culturally neutral technical addition, and future curriculum work should engage disabled people, Māori, whānau, and relevant communities rather than assume that a generic imported model is sufficient.

What appears distinctive is therefore not a wholly different scarcity problem, but rather the way common curriculum mechanisms are intensified or made visible within a small, relational national sector. Expertise, partnerships, programme identity, and local history matter considerably. The study adds context-specific evidence while also showing that the broader concerns identified internationally optionality, weak specification, staff dependence, policy translation, and uneven practicum remain relevant.

5.4 Implications for programme development: building more reliable pathways

The implications that follow are not a prescription for a universal curriculum. The study did not evaluate interventions or establish that one model will suit every university, discipline, or degree structure. The findings instead support a staged design logic through which programmes can examine their existing provision and strengthen pathway reliability in ways appropriate to local context. The aim is not to replace specialist expertise, remove institutional flexibility, or require identical assessment. It is to reduce dependence on chance.

5.4.1 Establish a visible baseline of disability-informed capability

A first step is to articulate the minimum disability-informed capability relevant to all graduates in a programme. This baseline need not require mastery of every impairment, sport, or access scenario. It may include understanding disability as a social, relational, and professional issue; communicating respectfully; identifying environmental and organisational barriers; adapting activities and exercise progressions; reasoning about risk without defaulting to exclusion; collaborating with disabled people, whānau, support people, and other professionals; and recognising when specialist advice is required. Making this baseline visible would help distinguish programme responsibility from elective specialisation. It could be reflected in graduate attributes, programme outcomes, paper-level outcomes, assessment criteria, or curriculum maps. Visibility would not guarantee learning, but it would give staff and students a shared reference point and make the intended pathway easier to review.

5.4.2 Combine an assessed anchor with coordinated infusion

The findings do not support a simple choice between one compulsory paper and complete infusion. A more defensible approach is a hybrid in which students encounter a visible foundational anchor and then apply or extend that learning within relevant disciplinary contexts. The anchor could be a dedicated paper, a required module, an assessed learning

block, or a coordinated sequence within existing papers. Its purpose would be to establish a common foundation, not to contain all disability education in one location.

Coordinated infusion could then connect disability to areas such as coaching, exercise prescription, biomechanics, physiology, pedagogy, strength and conditioning, sport development, professional ethics, and practicum. This reflects the long-standing argument for integrating disability-related knowledge across mainstream preparation while retaining specialist depth (DePauw & Karp, 1994). The critical word is coordinated. Distributed content should be visible enough for programme teams to know where learning is introduced, reinforced, applied, and assessed.

Assessment should match the capability claimed. Conceptual understanding may be assessed through analysis of rights, barriers, disability models, or ableism. Applied reasoning may be assessed through case design, accessibility analysis, exercise modification, coaching plans, or risk decisions. Communication and facilitation may be assessed through practical or simulated tasks. Placement-based assessment may provide more authentic evidence where ethical and logistical conditions allow. No single task is sufficient for every programme, but the assessment strategy should make the expected progression defensible (Biggs et al., 2022; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gulikers et al., 2004).

5.4.3 Develop staff capability, coordination, and continuity

Programme reliability requires a distinction between specialist leadership and distributed capability. Specialist staff can provide advanced knowledge, curriculum coordination, mentoring, and community relationships. Other staff do not need to become disability specialists, but they need enough support to incorporate disability appropriately within their disciplinary teaching and to avoid assuming that another person or paper will address it.

This may involve shared resources, co-teaching, peer development, access to disability-sector expertise, curriculum conversations, and professional learning focused on pedagogy and terminology. Workload recognition is essential where staff maintain placements, guest contributors, and community partnerships. Succession planning is also important. If a paper, placement, or relationship would disappear when one staff member leaves, the programme has identified a continuity risk.

Clear coordination should accompany shared responsibility. A named programme role, working group, or review responsibility may help ensure that distributed provision is actually connected. The purpose is not to centralise all teaching under one person, but to ensure that someone can see the pathway as a whole and support its continuity.

5.4.4 Treat authentic learning and partnership work as curriculum infrastructure

Authentic learning should be planned as curriculum infrastructure rather than added as occasional enrichment. Programmes need to consider partner capacity, student

preparation, supervision, access, assessment, reflection, and the ongoing labour required to sustain relationships. Community organisations and disabled contributors should be involved in shaping the purpose and form of engagement where possible, and their expertise should be recognised appropriately.

A reliable approach would prepare students before contact, support them during engagement, and require structured reflection or application afterwards. It would also avoid making one community organisation responsible for educating an entire cohort without sufficient capacity or resourcing. Where placements are limited, programmes may combine several forms of authentic learning rather than assume that every student must complete the same experience. The key requirement is that all students have a defensible opportunity to apply disability-related learning, not that every programme use an identical partnership model.

Partnership ethics should remain central. Disabled people should not be invited only to provide inspirational stories or to serve as objects for students to practise on. Their contribution can include expertise in programme design, teaching, feedback, assessment development, and evaluation. Reciprocity, continuity, and respect are therefore part of educational quality, not additional courtesies.

5.4.5 Use staged governance, mapping, and review

Because participants described crowded curricula and resource constraints, a whole-programme redesign may not be immediately feasible. A staged process offers a more feasible route. Programmes could begin by mapping current provision: where disability is named, where it is taught, which students encounter it, how it is assessed, who is responsible, and which partnerships support it. Curriculum mapping can reveal gaps, overlaps, optionality, and unsupported transitions without assuming that more content is always the answer (Dyjur et al., 2019; Harden, 2001).

The next stage would be to agree on a minimum graduate expectation and identify the strongest existing foundation. Programmes could then strengthen one or two points of greatest fragility, such as an unassessed foundation, an optional practicum, sole reliance on one staff member, or the absence of reinforcement in applied papers. Later review could examine whether the pathway has become more visible and sustainable.

Governance mechanisms should be proportionate. The findings do not imply that disability education requires a large new administrative system. They suggest that informal provision requires sufficient documentation and ownership to withstand routine change. Paper reviews, programme reviews, assessment moderation, workload planning, and staff induction are existing processes through which disability-informed capability can be made more visible and protected.

A staged approach also accommodates institutional difference. Programmes vary in size, disciplinary emphasis, staffing, and community relationships. Reliability should therefore be judged by the coherence and reach of the pathway rather than by whether every institution

adopts the same paper title or credit structure. Common expectations and local design can coexist.

5.5 Contribution of the thesis

This thesis makes an empirical, conceptual, theoretical, and practical contribution.

Empirically, it provides an educator-informed account of disability education across sport- and exercise-related programme contexts at seven Aotearoa New Zealand universities. Existing research had identified limited or inconsistent disability preparation within adjacent fields, particularly kinesiology, physical education teacher education, adapted physical activity, and coaching. The present study confirms that similar concerns are relevant in New Zealand while adding national context concerning curriculum visibility, staff dependence, governance, market pressure, partnership capacity, and local variation. It does not provide a complete sector audit, but it offers a cross-programme account not previously available in the literature reviewed for this thesis.

Conceptually, the thesis reframes scarcity as reduced pathway reliability. This concept adds to present-or-absent accounts by showing that disability education can be available in some form while remaining unreliable across the student journey. Pathway reliability highlights six interconnected dimensions: visibility, reach, sequencing, assessment, ownership, and continuity. It therefore provides language for distinguishing isolated provision from a dependable opportunity to develop disability-informed capability.

The concept also resolves part of the tension between specialist and infused provision. A specialist course may provide depth but limited reach; infused content may provide breadth but weak visibility. Pathway reliability asks how these forms connect and whether students have a common foundation, reinforcement, applied learning, and evidence of progression. It is therefore a way to examine curriculum coherence rather than prescribing a single format.

Theoretically, the thesis brings curriculum and institutional analysis together to explain scarcity as a produced outcome. Curriculum theory shows where disability education is located, how it is signalled, and whether it is connected to assessment and student progression. Institutional theory explains how formal rules, professional expectations, disciplinary assumptions, resources, and competing logics shape those arrangements. The findings provide particularly strong support for the relevance of legitimacy, the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions, and competing professional, equity, disciplinary, and market logics. They provide weaker evidence for a strong claim of sector-wide isomorphism, demonstrating the value of selective rather than exhaustive theoretical application.

This theoretical contribution also avoids reducing scarcity to either individual prejudice or resource shortage. Participants commonly valued disability inclusion, yet provision remained fragile because supportive norms were not always translated into formal ownership, assessment, staffing, and continuity. The study therefore shows how goodwill

can coexist with curriculum arrangements that continue to position disability as optional or specialist.

Practically, the thesis offers a context-sensitive programme-development logic. It proposes that programmes define a visible baseline of disability-informed capability, establish an assessed foundation, coordinate reinforcement across relevant papers, support specialist and distributed staff capability, and treat authentic learning and community relationships as curriculum infrastructure. These are not presented as a validated intervention or fixed national model. They are implications that programmes can use to review where their current pathway is dependable and where it remains exposed to chance.

The overall contribution is therefore not a claim that all programmes should look the same. It is a framework for asking more precise questions. Instead of asking only whether disability appears somewhere in a degree, programme teams can ask which students encounter it, what they are expected to learn, where that learning develops, how it is evidenced, who sustains it, and whether it survives ordinary organisational change.

5.6 Scope of the contribution and future research

The contribution of this study should be read within its methodological scope. The data were generated through interviews with nine educators and programme leaders from seven universities. Participants were well placed to describe teaching, curriculum decision-making, staffing, partnerships, and programme constraints. Their accounts provide insight into both formal and informal curriculum processes that may not be visible in programme documents. However, those accounts are not a substitute for a complete document audit, classroom observation, student assessment, or the perspectives of disabled students and communities.

The findings therefore do not establish what every paper taught, what every student experienced, or whether graduates were competent. References to student pathways concern the opportunities and structures educators described, not direct evidence from students. Similarly, the study cannot determine the effectiveness of a dedicated paper, an infused model, a placement, or a particular assessment. It identifies the conditions under which participants believed provision became more or less visible and sustainable.

The study also did not rank institutions. Heavy anonymisation was necessary because the national sector is small and participants discussed potentially identifiable staffing arrangements, programme histories, curriculum gaps, and community relationships. This protected participants and partners but limited institution-specific comparison. The analysis, therefore, focuses on cross-case mechanisms and variation rather than on naming examples of stronger or weaker practice.

The sample was purposive rather than statistically representative. Its strength lies in information-rich accounts from people involved in teaching, coordination, and leadership across most of the university sector. The findings may be analytically transferable to similar applied professional programmes, but they should not be treated as a numerical estimate of

national provision. The study also used institutional theory interpretively; it did not test causal relationships among particular institutional pressures.

Future research could extend the study in several directions. First, disabled students, disabled graduates, current students, whānau, employers, and disability-sector partners should be brought into the analysis. Their perspectives could show how curriculum provision is experienced, what forms of learning are useful or harmful, and whether graduates appear prepared in practice. This is especially important because the present thesis deliberately does not speak for disabled people.

Second, future studies could combine interviews with programme documents and observation. Graduate profiles, paper outlines, learning outcomes, assessment briefs, marking rubrics, programme review records, placement handbooks, and teaching materials could provide a more detailed account of intended and enacted curriculum. Student interviews or longitudinal pathway mapping could then examine the experienced curriculum more directly.

Third, research could investigate disability-informed capability itself. Studies could examine how students identify barriers, communicate, adapt activities, reason about risk, work with uncertainty, and collaborate with disabled people. Such work would help distinguish awareness, confidence, and assessed capability and could test whether particular curriculum designs produce meaningful learning.

Fourth, programme-development research could implement and evaluate staged changes. Examples include an assessed foundational component, coordinated infusion across core papers, staff development, curriculum mapping, or redesigned authentic learning. Longitudinal evaluation would be particularly valuable because curriculum reliability concerns continuity across a degree and through staffing or programme changes, not only the immediate response to a single learning activity.

Fifth, partnership ethics and infrastructure require further study. Research could examine how universities and disability-sector organisations negotiate issues such as purpose, workload, compensation, preparation, feedback, and shared decision-making. It could also explore alternatives where community capacity is limited and identify models that provide meaningful student learning without placing disproportionate responsibility on disabled people and organisations.

Sixth, the Aotearoa New Zealand context requires deeper attention to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori disability perspectives, cultural safety, and the relationship among disability, whānau, education, and sport. The present study acknowledges these issues but does not provide sufficient evidence to resolve them. Future work should be designed with relevant communities rather than adding cultural considerations after the curriculum model has already been determined.

Finally, comparative research across professional fields could clarify which mechanisms are distinctive to sport and exercise and which reflect wider patterns in higher education. Teacher education, health sciences, recreation, nursing, social work, and other applied

programmes also negotiate inclusion, professional judgement, curriculum crowding, and community partnership. Such comparison could strengthen understanding of pathway reliability as a broader curriculum issue.

5.7 Closing statement

This thesis began with a practical concern: graduates entering sport and exercise settings may be expected to work with disabled people without having experienced a dependable pathway of disability education within their degree. The findings support that concern, but they also make it more precise. Disability education was not simply absent. It appeared in multiple forms across the programme contexts described by participants, yet its visibility, reach, sequencing, assessment, ownership, and continuity were uneven.

The central conclusion is that scarcity is best understood as reduced pathway reliability. A lecture, elective, placement, guest contribution, or committed staff member can provide valuable learning, but no single element ensures that all students develop a defensible foundation. Reliability arises through the relationship among curriculum signals, staff capability, institutional support, assessment, and authentic learning. It is weakened when provision depends primarily on personal interest, local goodwill, or chance access.

Disability education should therefore be understood as part of ordinary professional preparation rather than as a specialist concern relevant only to selected students or career pathways. This does not mean that every graduate must become a disability specialist. It means that graduates can reasonably be expected to develop a baseline of disability-informed knowledge, skills, dispositions, and judgement: the ability to communicate respectfully, recognise barriers, adapt practice, reason about risk, collaborate with disabled people and their communities, and seek additional expertise when required.

The study also shows that responsibility cannot rest solely with individual champions or community partners. Champions and specialists remain essential, but their work becomes more sustainable when it is recognised, coordinated, and supported through programme structures. Similarly, authentic learning is most defensible when it is scaffolded, reciprocal, and sufficiently available rather than treated as optional enrichment.

Ultimately, disability education raises a question about what sport and exercise programmes consider normal professional preparation. Curricula can continue to prepare graduates mainly for the participants most readily imagined within traditional teaching, or they can recognise human variation as an ordinary feature of professional practice. Moving from coverage to capability does not require one uniform national model. It requires programmes to make deliberate decisions about what graduates should learn, how that learning develops, and how its continuity is protected.

Where programmes claim to prepare inclusive professionals, disability education warrants a visible, assessable, and sustainable place within the graduate pathway. The contribution of this thesis is to show that the key issue is not simply whether disability education exists, but whether students can reliably reach it and develop through it.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Gate 1, Knighton Road
Hamilton, New Zealand

Human Research Ethics Committee
Roger Moltzen
Telephone: +64021658119
Email:humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

26 February 2025

Michael Hynard
Health, Sport and Human Performance
By email: Mh1449@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dear Michael

HREC(Health)2024#68: Exploring the scarcity of disability education in New Zealand tertiary institutions within exercise science and sport coaching programs

Thank you for your responses to the Committee feedback.

We are now pleased to provide formal approval for your project.

Please contact the Committee by email (humanethics@waikato.ac.nz) if you wish to make changes to your project as it unfolds, quoting your application number with your future correspondence. Any minor changes or additions to the approved research activities can be handled outside the monthly application cycle.

We wish you all the best with your research.

Regards,

Emeritus Professor Roger Moltzen MNZM
Chairperson
University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Participation Information Sheet

Human Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: The Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee

Private Bag 3105

Hamilton 3240

E-mail: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Exploring the learning disability education in New Zealand tertiary institutions within exercise science and sport faculties of eight tertiary education providers of New Zealand

Contact Details:

Michael Hynard, Masters Student - (mh1449@students.waikato.ac.nz)

Dr Robert Townsend, Academic Supervisor - (robert.townsend@waikato.ac.nz)

1. Inviting Paragraph

You have been invited to participate in this study to help us explore the availability of disability education in exercise science and sports programmes in tertiary education institutions in New Zealand. The study aims to explore the process by which new exercise science and sports coaches choose to become disability exercise science and sports coaches or are trained to become disability exercise science and sports coaches. We hope this research will lead to a better understanding that can help educate, recruit, train, and retain disability exercise science and sports coaches to benefit all New Zealanders with a disability.

2. What is the purpose of the study?

The research addresses the gaps in the availability of tertiary educators offering exercise science, sport and recreation courses in New Zealand. Hopefully, this study will provide valuable insights into the identification, training, and retention of new disability exercise science and sports coaches interested in working within the disability sector in New Zealand.

3. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to participate in the study because your faculty offers an undergraduate course in exercise science, sport, and recreation education in New Zealand.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Human Research Ethics Committee
Postal Address: The Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
E-mail: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Exploring the learning disability education in New Zealand tertiary institutions within exercise science and sport faculties of eight tertiary education providers of New Zealand

Project Supervisor: Dr Robert Townsend, Senior Lecturer in Disability and Para sport Te Huataki Waiora - School of Health, University of Waikato
Masters Student: Michael Hynard (Student ID 1645428, Email mh1449@students.waikato.ac.nz)

The purpose of the study and interview has been explained to me, and I agree with the following:

- All my questions have been addressed and answered. I had ample time to consider my participation.
- I understand that I will be interviewed, the interview will be recorded, and notes may be taken during the interview.
- I understand that I can choose the time and location of the interview. The interviews can be conducted via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or in person.
- I may have a support person or interpreter with me during the interview.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- I can withdraw the data seven days after receiving a copy of the transcribed interview.
- Any notes will be destroyed at the end of 2025.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information will be destroyed.
- I know the interview may be used to support student learning and develop enhanced training methods, but no information will be provided to others who identify me in person.

The main questions that will asked are:

1. Can you outline the key focus area of the undergrad paper your university or polytechnic offers?
2. Does your course offer any disability-specific modules for this degree?
3. If yes, can you elaborate, e.g., on duration and theory versus practicum?
4. If no, are you aiming to include it in the future?
5. Why do you think more tertiary education providers don't offer disability papers, or what are the barriers, in your opinion, to offering disability papers at tertiary education providers?

I agree to take part in this interview.

Participant Signature:
Participant Name (capital letters):
Date:
Pseudonym:

Principal Investigator Signature:
Principal Investigator Name (Capital letters):
Date:

Note: The participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

"Or I could go the following way"

This interview guide was used flexibly to support semi-structured interviews with educators and curriculum leaders involved in sport and exercise-related university programmes. Questions were adapted where appropriate to reflect participants' roles, programme contexts, and areas of expertise. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify examples, explore programme-level conditions, and understand how disability education was incorporated, constrained, or sustained.

Opening

Before beginning the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, their right to decline to answer any question, and their right to withdraw in line with the conditions outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form. Permission to record the interview was confirmed before recording began.

Section	Item	Interview guide wording
Interview guide		This interview guide was used flexibly to support semi-structured interviews with educators and curriculum leaders involved in sport and exercise-related university programmes. Questions were adapted where appropriate to reflect participants' roles, programme contexts, and areas of expertise. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify examples, explore programme-level conditions, and understand how disability education was incorporated, constrained, or sustained.
Opening		Before beginning the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, their right to decline to answer any question, and their right to withdraw in line with the conditions outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form. Permission to record the interview was confirmed before recording began.
General context	1.	Can you briefly describe your role and involvement in sport and exercise-related teaching, curriculum design, programme leadership, or student learning?
	2.	From your perspective, how is disability education currently incorporated within your programme or teaching area?
	3.	How important do you think disability education is for students preparing for careers in sport, exercise, physical activity, coaching, recreation, or related fields?
	Possible prompts:	• What kinds of graduate roles are students being prepared for? • In what ways might graduates encounter disabled people in future practice? • Is disability education viewed as central, specialist, optional, or peripheral?
Curriculum positioning and visibility	4.	Are there specific papers, modules, topics, or learning activities that address disability, inclusion, accessibility, adapted physical activity, adapted sport, or working with disabled people?
	5.	Where does this content sit within the programme?
	Possible prompts:	• Is it located in compulsory papers, electives, placements, workshops, guest sessions, or informal examples? • Is disability education concentrated in one area or distributed across several papers? • Is it introduced once, revisited across the degree, or mostly dependent on staff or contexts?
	6.	Is disability education visible in formal curriculum documents such as learning outcomes, graduate attributes, paper outlines, assessment tasks, or programme descriptions?
	Possible prompts:	• Is disability named explicitly? • Is it included under broader terms such as inclusion, equity, diversity, accessibility, or professional practice? • Is there any curriculum mapping or programme-level coordination of disability-related learning?
Teaching, learning, and assessment	7.	How is disability-related content taught in your programme or teaching area?
	Possible prompts:	• Lectures • Tutorials • Practical sessions • Case studies • Guest speakers • Online resources • Workshops

Section	Item	Interview guide wording
		• Simulations • Reflective tasks • Applied projects
	8.	How are students encouraged to engage with disability-related concepts such as access, ableism, inclusion, communication, adaptation, risk, rights, or social models of disability?
	9.	Is disability-related learning assessed?
	Possible prompts:	• If yes, how is it assessed? • If not, why not? • Are students required to demonstrate disability-informed knowledge, practical adaptation, communication, reflection, or professional judgement? • Is assessment linked to learning outcomes or mostly informal?
	10.	How do students learn to apply disability-related knowledge in sport and exercise contexts?
	Possible prompts:	• Adapting activities • Modifying equipment or environments • Communicating with disabled participants • Planning inclusive sessions • Managing safety and risk • Working with whānau, families, support people, coaches, or organisations
Authentic learning, placements, and partnerships	11.	Do students have opportunities to engage with disabled people, disability-sector organisations, inclusive sport programmes, adapted physical activity settings, or community partners as part of their learning?
	12.	Where these opportunities exist, how are they organised and supported?
	Possible prompts:	• Are they compulsory or optional? • Are places limited? • Who coordinates them? • How are students prepared before engagement? • Is there supervision, reflection, or assessment afterwards?
	13.	Are there formal or informal partnerships that support disability-related learning?
	Possible prompts:	• Community organisations • Disability-sector organisations • Sport organisations • Schools • Health or recreation providers • Disabled athletes, coaches, advocates, or guest contributors
	14.	What makes these partnerships sustainable or difficult to sustain?
	Possible prompts:	• Staff relationships • Workload • Funding • Partner capacity • Reciprocity • Student numbers • Institutional support
Staffing, expertise, and resources	15.	Who usually teaches or supports disability-related content in the programme?
	16.	How confident or prepared do staff feel to teach disability-related content?
	Possible prompts:	• Is expertise widely distributed or held by a small number of people? • Is provision dependent on staff members? • What happens if those staff members leave, change roles, or become unavailable?
	17.	What resources or forms of support are available for disability education?
	Possible prompts:	• Professional development • Teaching materials • Guest speakers • Case studies • Funding • Workload recognition • Support from programme leaders • Disability services • External partnerships

Section	Item	Interview guide wording
	18.	Are there professional development opportunities for staff in relation to disability, inclusion, accessibility, or adapted sport and exercise?
Curriculum constraints and enabling conditions	19.	What challenges affect the inclusion of disability education within the curriculum?
	Possible prompts:	• Curriculum crowding • Limited contact hours • Staffing capacity • Lack of expertise • Funding • Programme approval processes • Student demand • Competing priorities • Placement availability • Partnership capacity
	20.	What helps disability education become more visible, sustainable, or effective within a programme?
	Possible prompts:	• Programme leadership • Staff champions • Curriculum review • Accreditation or professional expectations • Student interest • Community partnerships • Research activity • Institutional inclusion strategies
	21.	Are there any gaps in the current programme in relation to preparing students to work with disabled people in sport and exercise contexts?
Future development	22.	How do you think disability education could or should develop in sport and exercise-related programmes?
	23.	What would make disability education more reliable across the student pathway?
	Possible prompts:	• Compulsory content • Dedicated papers or modules • Infusion across several papers • Assessment • Placements or practicum • Staff development • Stronger partnerships • Curriculum mapping • Programme-level responsibility
	24.	Are there any changes currently planned or being discussed that might affect disability education within the programme?
	25.	Is there anything else you think is important for understanding how disability education is incorporated, constrained, or sustained in sport and exercise-related programmes?