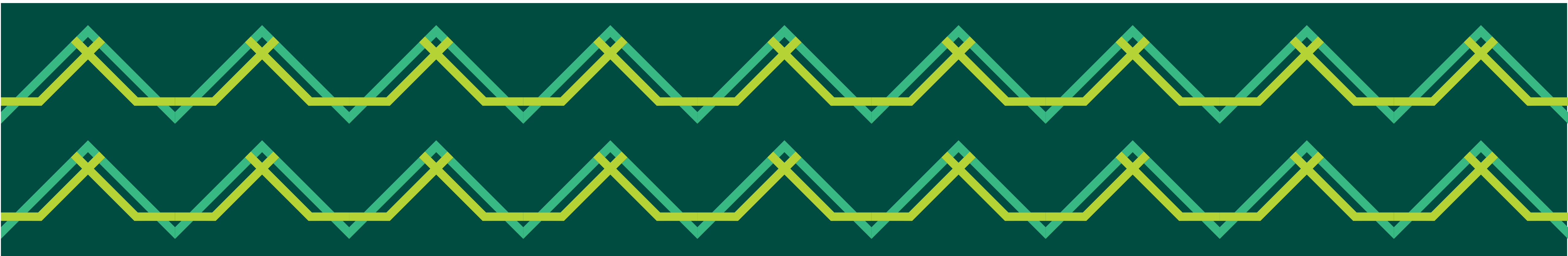




Restoring mana through digital inclusion

June 2025



Story in a nutshell

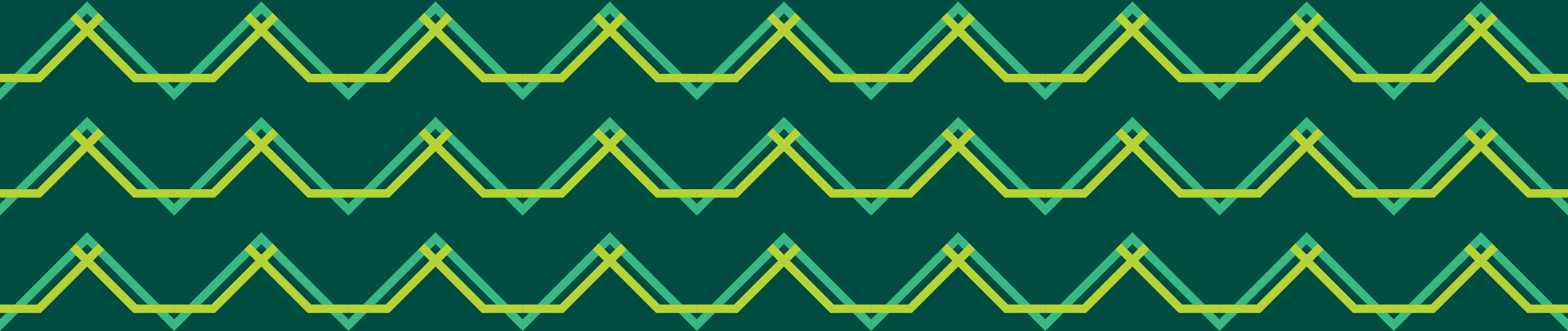
Digital equity is not just about closing a skills gap – **it’s about restoring mana and connection.**

When people are excluded from a digital world that others navigate with ease, it creates a cycle of whakamā - a deep sense of shame or inadequacy. That shame leads to withdrawal, which further erodes confidence, comfort, and access. The result is not just digital exclusion, but disconnection from whānau, opportunities, and identity.

Katoa Connect succeeds not simply because it teaches digital skills, but because it is grounded in whakawhanaungatanga and rangatiratanga: Building relationships that restore dignity, and fostering the self-determination of every learner. As a kaupapa Māori initiative, Katoa Connect’s facilitators meet whakamā with mana-enhancing support. In doing so, the programme unlocks holistic impact, from confidence and belonging to new competencies – enabling more New Zealanders to thrive in a digital world, on their own terms.

1

The world we're in



Digital access and skills are now essential infrastructure

Since the pandemic, digital has become the default.

Practically every aspect of life in Aotearoa - from accessing healthcare and banking, to education, employment, and social connection – now relies on digital tools or platforms to some degree.

1 in 5

800,000 New Zealand adults – 1 in 5 – still lack the essential digital skills needed to navigate this new reality confidently and safely.

These skills include basic tasks like connecting to Wi-Fi, managing online accounts, or recognising scams – skills that are increasingly necessary for day-to-day functioning.

Imagine you lost your digital literacy overnight...

We pieced the following story together from the real stories of Katoa Connect's participants:

The morning starts like any other. Sarah, 44, a solo mum in Hamilton, wakes with a plan. Her daughter has a cough, there's a job application due by 5pm, her teenage son needs help with schoolwork, and she's finally going to explore that cleaning business she's been dreaming about. It's a full day, but she's ready.

But something's different. Overnight, Sarah has lost her ability to use the internet.

She calls to book the GP—but a long message urges her to use the online portal. She doesn't know how. Embarrassed, she drives 20 minutes to the clinic. The doctor casually mentions an app to access lab results. Sarah nods, pretending to understand, too ashamed to ask.

Back home, the job application looms. The file? Locked in an email she can't open. The form? Only available online. She stares at her screen, frozen.

Her son asks for help uploading his assignment. She can't. He mutters, "Every other parent can do this," and shuts his door. Shame creeps in.

At lunch, she remembers a bill. She calls the bank. A chirpy voice says the branch is now in central Auckland—most services are online. She hangs up, defeated, and drives her kids across town. At reception, the woman looks confused, as if Sarah is being difficult for not using the QR code.

She ends her day working hard to navigate the IRD website to learn how to register as self-employed, but finds the described – mostly digital – process so daunting that she gives up on her dream while her digital skills are what they are.

By 9pm, she's used half a tank of petrol, achieved nothing, and felt the kind of defeated only someone trying their best can feel.

Digital inequity isolates.

Digital exclusion means not being able to engage with far-away family, access online banking, apply for jobs, or access medical records. Participants shared their fear of scams, their struggles with CV creation, the difficulty of using government platforms and accessing benefits, and again and again the feeling of inadequacy and shame in interaction with those, who navigate the digital world with ease.

Digital exclusion compounds other forms of disadvantage

Digital exclusion doesn't occur in isolation. It most acutely affects those already facing systemic barriers – Māori and Pacific Peoples, disabled New Zealanders, seniors, low-income households, and those living in social housing or rural communities.

52%

Of disabled New Zealanders struggle with essential digital skills, more than double the national average

3x

Pacific peoples are three times more likely than New Zealand Europeans to live in homes without internet access, and are significantly overrepresented among youth without connectivity

2x

Confidence and trust online are low: many adults with limited digital skills are also more likely to fall victim to digital harms and are twice as likely to struggle to verify online information, limiting access to reliable services and support

And this has structural consequences...

While no one has broken down the exact costs yet, both private and public sector have acknowledged the cost of digital inequity:

- When government services remove face-to-face or paper-based options, community organisations like CABs must step in, absorbing costs and creating new services.
- InternetNZ noted that closing the digital divide would bring national economic gains worth around NZ\$280 million per year, indicating significant latent value from reducing the need for expensive traditional alternatives.

“We recognize that there’s huge economic benefit for the majority of our nation being online. We’re a small country, we’re disconnected from a lot of the world. So, you know, online opportunity is vast. We also know that there are benefits from a connection, reducing isolation, telehealth, you know, e-learning... There are endless opportunities, not just for people’s kind of health and well-being but also for our economy.” Funder

Implications:

Digital exclusion is a barrier we can no longer afford to ignore

Digital exclusion has real human and economic consequences.

For individuals, it creates shame, isolation, and lost opportunities. For society, it drives up costs elsewhere—forcing community services to bridge the gap and limiting national productivity.

Without action, the divide will widen.

The shift to digital-by-default continues, but those with limited access or confidence are struggling to keep pace. The result: deeper inequities for disabled New Zealanders, Māori and Pacific communities, low-income households, seniors, and rural whānau.

This is not just a tech problem, it's an infrastructure gap.

Digital inclusion must be seen as critical infrastructure for a thriving, connected, and equitable Aotearoa.

2

The core problem to solve



MAST continues to be a useful tool to describe the multi-faceted problem of digital exclusion.

MAST (Motivation, Access, Skills, and Trust) is a widely referenced framework in Aotearoa New Zealand for understanding and measuring digital inclusion. It is used by the New Zealand government and organisations like the Digital Equity Coalition Aotearoa (DECA) to structure impact measurement and guide digital inclusion initiatives.

We applied it as a lens to understand the specific stories we were told by the stakeholders and participants of Katoa Connect.

Digital exclusion is never the result of a single issue, but rather the intersection of many – though different demographics face barriers with different emphasis.

For example, older people might have the means to get a device, but lack motivation, capability and tailored opportunities; Low-income households, on the other hand, often have capability gaps and cost barriers, and require digital services to feel relevant and empowering, not just “nice extras.”

Motivation	Access	Skill	Trust
Whakamā (shame)			
			People feel ashamed to admit they don’t know how to use digital tools; they fear judgement and avoid asking for help—even from family. This is the most foundational barrier to address
Low perceived benefit			
			Some older adults and migrant learners don’t see how digital skills relate to their daily life or identity—e.g. not connecting it to mokopuna, creative expression, or career opportunities
Learned helplessness			
			Learners have experienced past digital failure and give up quickly, believing digital tools “just aren’t for them” due to repeated negative experiences

Digital exclusion is never the result of a single issue, but rather the intersection of many – though different demographics face barriers with different emphasis.

For example, older people might have the means to get a device, but lack motivation, capability and tailored opportunities; Low-income households, on the other hand, often have capability gaps and cost barriers, and require digital services to feel relevant and empowering, not just “nice extras.”

Motivation	Access	Skill	Trust
Inadequate internet/Wi-Fi		Low income households have slow or unreliable Wi-Fi, which makes ‘learning’ the internet at best a frustrating experience, at worst impossible	
Lack of devices/tools		Many learners, particularly disabled or low-income individuals, don’t have their own device or access to assistive technology	
Language barriers		Learners from migrant backgrounds struggle with English-only materials and instruction	

Digital exclusion is never the result of a single issue, but rather the intersection of many – though different demographics face barriers with different emphasis.

For example, older people might have the means to get a device, but lack motivation, capability and tailored opportunities; Low-income households, on the other hand, often have capability gaps and cost barriers, and require digital services to feel relevant and empowering, not just “nice extras.”

Motivation	Access	Skill	Trust
Low functional literacy		Some learners don’t know how to turn on a device, upload files, or complete online forms	
Limited applied understanding		Rangatahi may use devices for entertainment but don’t know how to leverage digital tools for education, employment or entrepreneurship	

Digital exclusion is never the result of a single issue, but rather the intersection of many – though different demographics face barriers with different emphasis.

For example, older people might have the means to get a device, but lack motivation, capability and tailored opportunities; Low-income households, on the other hand, often have capability gaps and cost barriers, and require digital services to feel relevant and empowering, not just “nice extras.”

 Motivation  Access  Skill  **Trust**

Fear of scams/fraud

Many learners fear being scammed online or misled by digital tools, making them hesitant to engage, even when tools are useful

Low trust in systems

Government and banking portals are seen as intimidating or impersonal. Learners fear they’ll make a mistake or be penalised

Low self-trust

Learners have lost confidence in their ability to improve. They are caught in a cycle of learned helplessness, where repeated negative experiences gradually erode their sense of agency and belief in change



But if we don't address whakamā, we don't get to address other barriers at all.

"If you are uncomfortable and don't have the confidence or fearful of making mistakes, then you're not going to participate... There'll be people who are pulling back because the environment feels unsafe for them." Coordinator

Overcoming the isolating effect of shame is a limiting factor to fixing all other barriers to digital inclusion.

It colours the entire experience of interacting with technology and interacts with every element of the MAST framework:

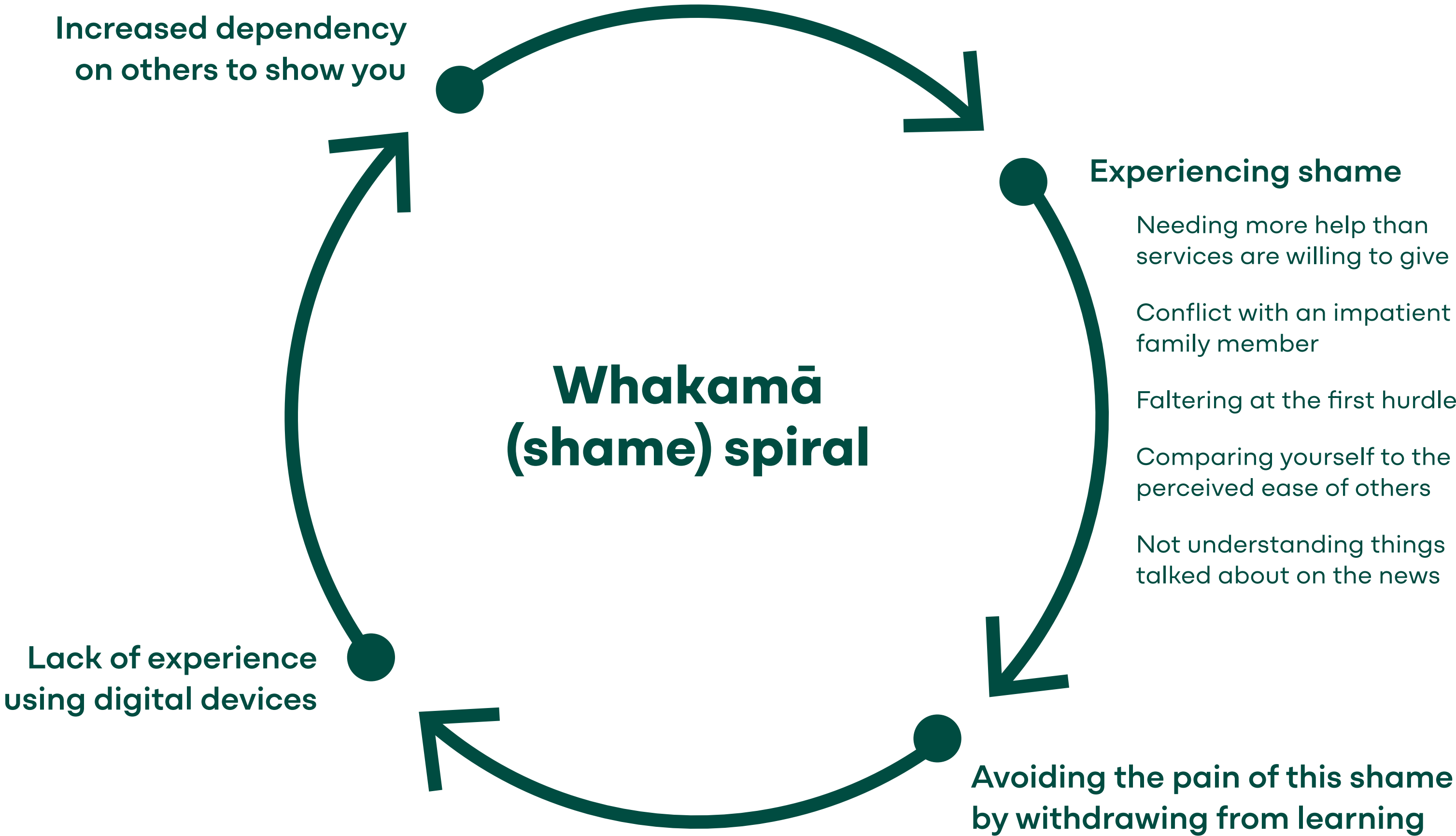
Ways in which shame interferes with other barriers

Lack of devices/tools	People won't access services or share that they don't have access to technology out of shame
Low functional literacy	They won't reveal their real level of skill, because they understand how low it is compared to the average
Learned helplessness	They have learned to not even try as failure has been painful in the past
Low perceived benefit	And they can't see the huge potential benefits of digitally connecting because the digital world has so far only severed connection from them

And the shame spiral is self-perpetuating – even across generations

Without appropriate intervention, digital exclusion quickly becomes a vicious cycle, driven by shame.

“Their children don’t have the patience to teach them, they go “But dad, I’ve shown you 10 times already!” and it only creates more shame and frustration, so they think this just isn’t for them.”
Facilitator

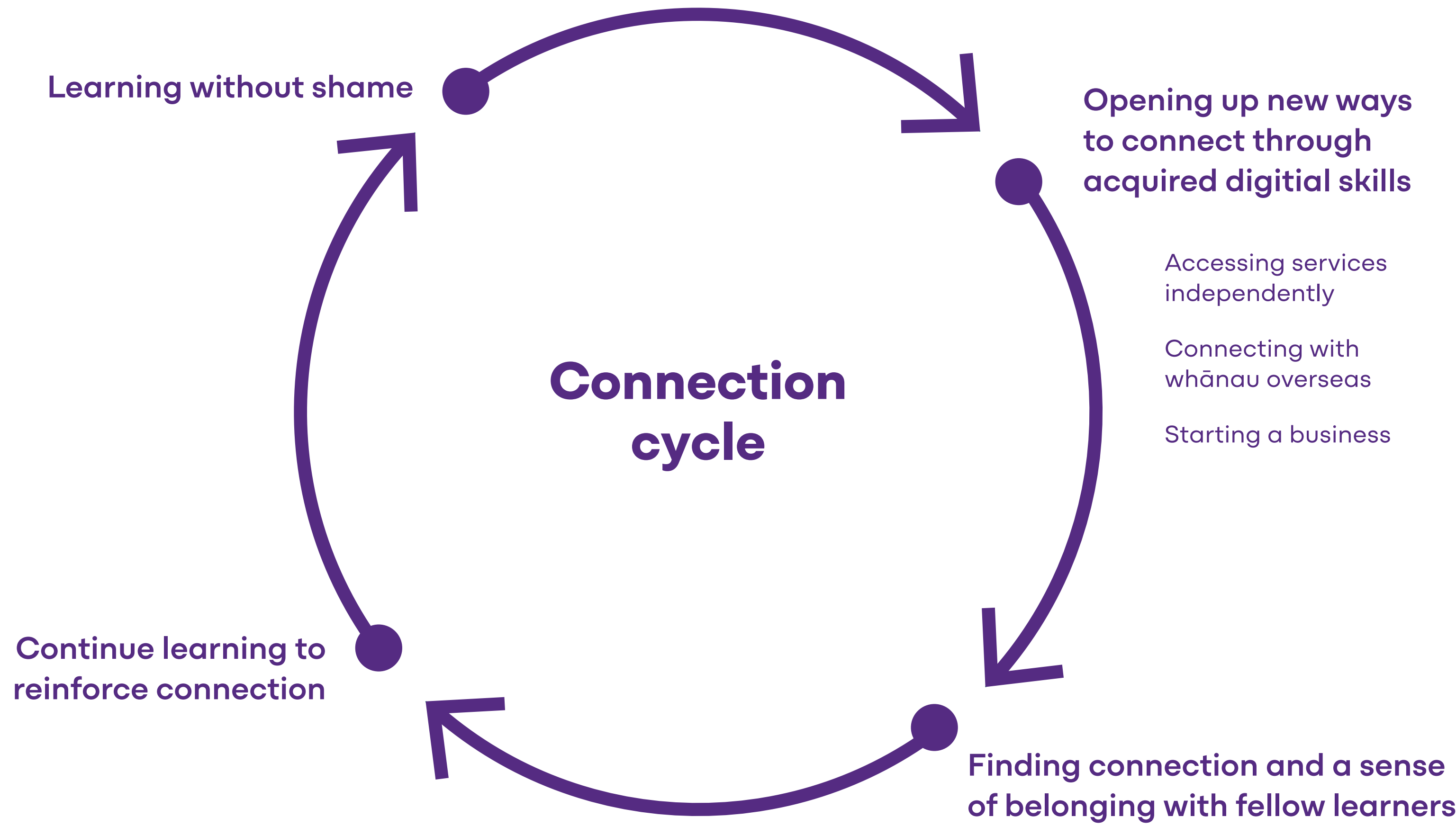


If shame is removed, digital inclusion can become a powerful catalyst for wellbeing and self-determination - creating a new, virtuous cycle of confidence, connection, and opportunity.

Breaking the shame spiral, digital inclusion can unlock agency - the ability to make independent choices and pursue meaningful goals (Goulding et al., 2024).

As people gain digital skills, they become more confident and connected, better able to engage with essential services, find employment, participate in their communities, and pursue personal aspirations.

This empowerment builds a virtuous cycle: greater digital engagement leads to increased self-determination, which in turn enhances overall well-being.



Implications:

Addressing digital exclusion starts with dismantling whakamā

Digital exclusion is complex and layered.

Motivation, Access, Skills, and Trust (MAST) interact in different ways across demographics—no single barrier explains the problem.

But whakamā (shame) is the gatekeeper.

Shame blocks learners from admitting gaps, asking for help, or even trying. Until it's addressed, other barriers remain untouched.

The opportunity? A circuit-breaker.

When shame is removed, digital inclusion builds confidence, capability, and connection—unlocking agency, restoring dignity, and enabling participation in modern life.

3

How we solve the problem



Connection is the antidote to shame – and it can't be faked.

Neuroscience research by Naomi Eisenberger shows that shame activates the same brain regions as physical pain. It's a deeply felt, embodied emotion that drives withdrawal, a protective instinct to avoid the pain of judgment or rejection.

But as social beings, isolation cuts against our core needs.

That's why Katoa Connect's approach grounded in whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building) and rangatiratanga (self-determination), is so powerful.

By restoring mana through trusted relationships and culturally anchored support, Katoa Connect doesn't just teach digital skills – they create the conditions for people to make genuine connections. In doing so, they break the shame barrier and open the door to confidence, agency, and ultimately competence.

“Having those local connections, that local face that you recognize is absolutely crucial because we know that especially for vulnerable groups that are more likely to be digitally excluded, they need to have someone in the community that they trust before they will even consider getting online.” – Commercial Partner

How Katoa Connect creates genuine connection:

Whakawhanaungatanga

The process of building and nurturing relationships through shared experiences and mutual respect. In te ao Māori, relationships are foundational to wellbeing, belonging, and collective strength.

Rangatiratanga

The exercise of self-determination, leadership, and authority, often grounded in whakapapa, values, and responsibility to others.

Katoa Connect starts where people are, not where systems want them to be

Katoa Connect links into **trusted spaces, familiar faces, and existing networks** to reach learners in ways that feel natural and meaningful. This approach ensures that learning doesn't feel like an interruption, but an extension of existing connections and what already matters to the community.

Whakawhanaungatanga

Rangatiratanga

●

Trusted spaces

●

Familiar faces

●

Existing networks

Learning happens at familiar locations such as churches, marae, community centres and libraries, where participants feel safe, welcome, and seen—leading to stronger engagement and retention.

“Just like they’re in their own living room, you know...”
Facilitator

Katoa Connect starts where people are, not where systems want them to be

Katoa Connect links into **trusted spaces, familiar faces, and existing networks** to reach learners in ways that feel natural and meaningful. This approach ensures that learning doesn't feel like an interruption, but an extension of existing connections and what already matters to the community.

Whakawhanaungatanga

Rangatiratanga

● Trusted spaces

● **Familiar faces**

● Existing networks

Community-embedded facilitators who go beyond teaching, building genuine relationships. They arrive early, stay late, check in on students' wellbeing, and stay connected even after the program ends.

"People usually stay in touch to ask me for help or just tell me how they are using their skills." Facilitator

Katoa Connect starts where people are, not where systems want them to be

Katoa Connect links into **trusted spaces, familiar faces, and existing networks** to reach learners in ways that feel natural and meaningful. This approach ensures that learning doesn't feel like an interruption, but an extension of existing connections and what already matters to the community.

Whakawhanaungatanga

Rangatiratanga

Trusted spaces

Familiar faces

Existing networks

Peer-supported learning models that grow from psychologically safe environments where learners feel comfortable to connect, collaborate, and learn together. Shared experiences build trust, reduce isolation, and turn classrooms into supportive communities. Everyone gets the same tools (Chromebook), no one is left behind.

“So her and I were socially engaged, talking about our tablets because we were both at a similar level, so we were doing things together, and then we’d stop and she’d help the lady next door to her and I’d help the lady next to it on the other side.” Learner

Katoa Connect uplifts people's mana by focusing on their inherent dignity, worth, and capabilities rather than on their challenges

Facilitators don't teach from above—they walk alongside. They treat learners as experts in their own lives, encouraging questions, knowledge-sharing, and mutual support. Leadership is shared, not held.

"For me as a facilitator, I just sit down with them and really try to understand what they're saying. In our culture, we give respect to our elders, and I think they feel that. They feel calm—like they're not intimidated by me, even though I'm younger." Facilitator

Facilitators frame the learning as a reminder, not a revelation, honouring what's already known. This restores confidence, uplifts mana, and makes learning feel like reclaiming, not catching up.

"I call it a 'refresher', I tell them they already know most of this stuff, we're just bringing it back to mind. It just feels better that way."

Facilitator

Rangatiratanga

Facilitators are the bridge – culturally, personally, and practically

Katoa Connect finds the right people by building on existing community connections. They are trusted, known, and deeply embedded in the communities they serve. They are not just instructors, they are the bridge between where people are to where they want to go.

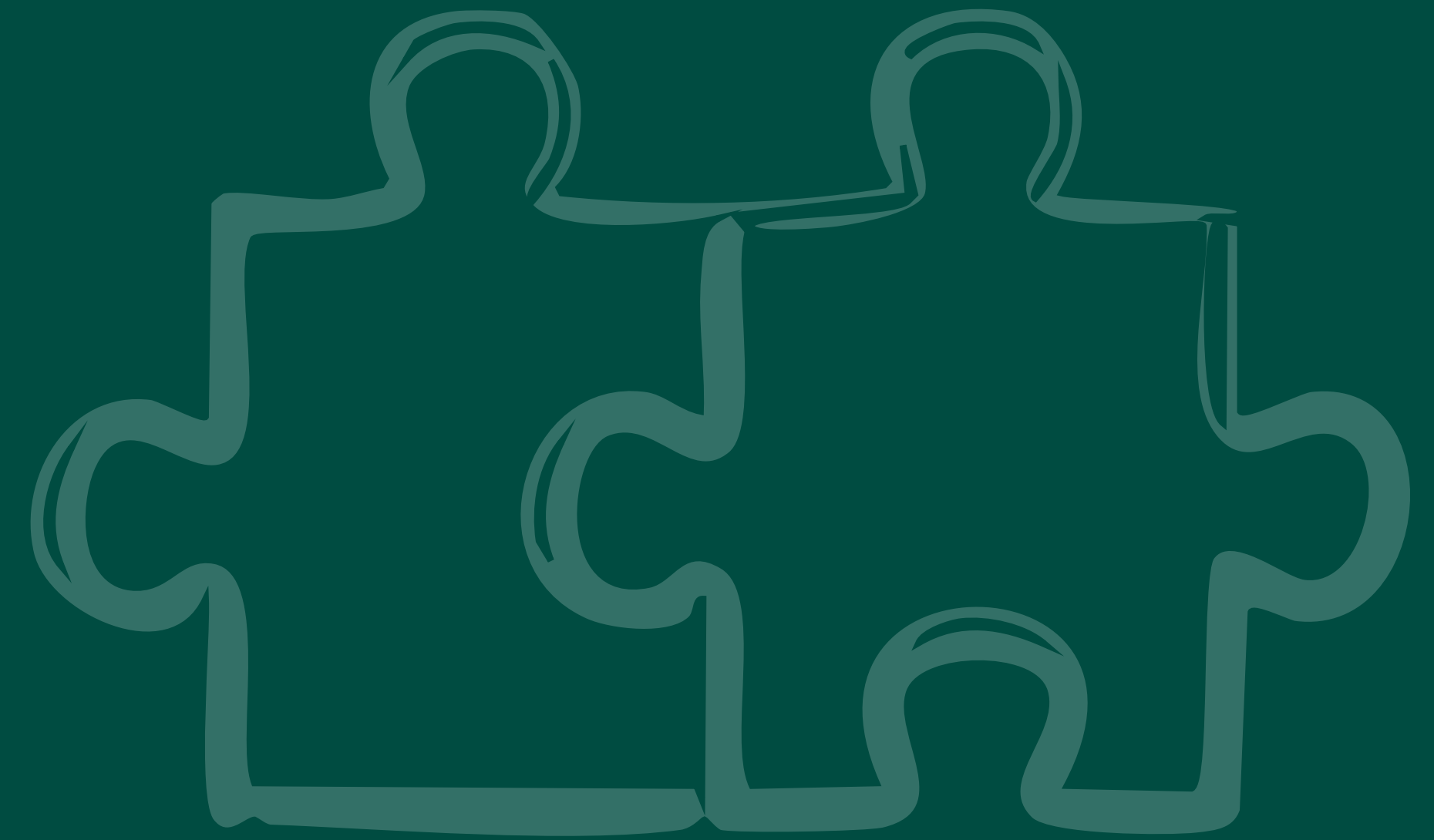
“When we did the graduation ceremony, there was a guy there who kept trying to shake people’s hands. All the women just folded their hands and bowed politely, not taking his hand. I kept exchanging smiles and glances with them, because [as someone from the former refugee community] we just know that Muslim women don’t accept touch. He got it after maybe five times [laughs]. But if that had happened early in the course, some of these women wouldn’t have come back.” Coordinator

Whakawhanaungatanga

Rangatiratanga

“You can’t train facilitators to have that connection to the community, you have to find them in the community, already connected.”

Coordinator

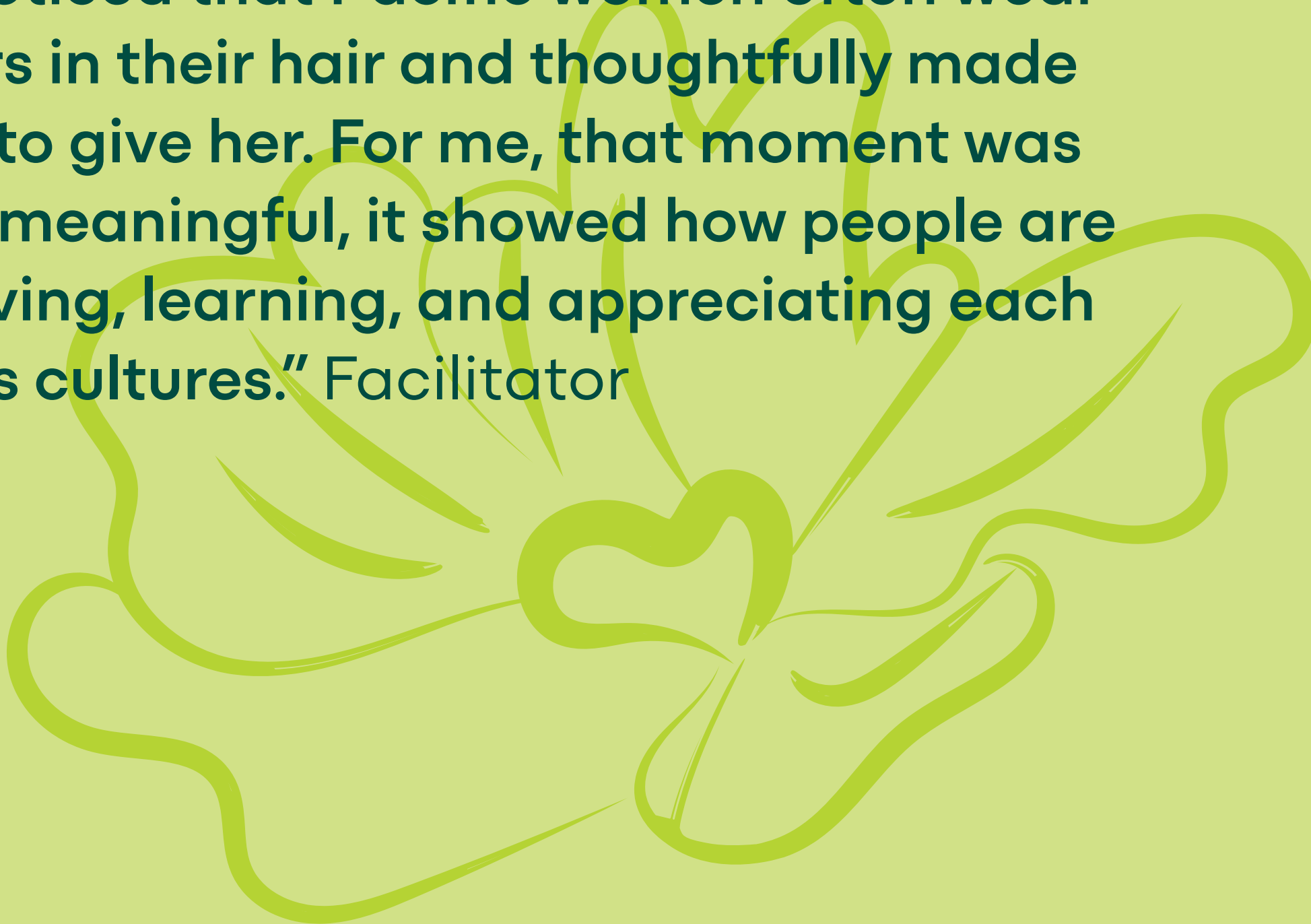


Katoa Connect is so much more than a digital literacy programme

Our impact extends to:

- Legacy and intergenerational exchange
- Cultural exchange and integration
- Further education
- Employability and entrepreneurship
- Community cohesion

“At one of our graduation ceremonies, our coordinator, who is Samoan, was given handmade silk flowers by a participant who makes traditional Chinese floral crafts. She had noticed that Pacific women often wear flowers in their hair and thoughtfully made some to give her. For me, that moment was really meaningful, it showed how people are observing, learning, and appreciating each other’s cultures.” Facilitator



Katoa Connect is so much more than a digital literacy programme

Our impact extends to:

- Legacy and intergenerational exchange
- Cultural exchange and integration
- Further education
- Employability and entrepreneurship
- Community cohesion

Further education

“Last year, a young woman completed the course alongside her mum. She told me she would never have joined on her own - she was too nervous - but doing it together gave her the confidence to finish. They both got certified, and a year later, she got into university. We stayed in touch—she still messages me for help with job applications and interviews. It was more than just a course; it was the connection we built.” Coordinator



Implications:

Connection-first design unlocks holistic impact

Only real human connection can overcome whakamā.

Trust, respect, and belonging are prerequisites for learning. Without them, people won't come back.

Katoa Connect meets people where they are, and facilitators are the bridge to where they want to be.

Learning happens in trusted spaces, with familiar faces, through shared experiences that restore mana and confidence.

The result is holistic impact far beyond digital skills.

From restoring intergenerational connection to enabling further education, the programme strengthens communities and uplifts mana at every level.

4

Future direction



1 Scale what works

Katoa Connect is not yet covering the full demand facilitators and coordinators encounter in the community.

One way to think about our future direction is to simply grow the current programme, leaning on our strength in Māori and Pacific communities and with 1st generation migrants and refugees – adult learners, skewing towards older generations who are most likely to be digitally excluded.

We also need to alleviate some pressures on the existing classrooms.

What's needed:

- Portable WiFi that can cover the whole class
- Learning resources in multiple languages
- An optional mouse for participants who struggle with integrated cursor

2 Nothing works without the facilitators, so let's invest where it matters most

Katoa Connect's success doesn't come from tech or curriculum. It comes from people. Facilitators are at the heart of the programme - but this core capability is under strain. Facilitators and coordinators are often balancing the flexibility that the role requires across multiple commitments. They also work very independently and could benefit from meeting the Katoa Connect team more often.

What's needed:

- Meeting needs for office space, home office support, flexibility but also getting enough paid hours, all to make coordination and facilitation a viable, long-term role.
- Peer-to-peer support and cultural supervision.
- National wānanga for learning exchange, celebration and renewal.



3 Upskilling our people keeps the kaupapa future-ready

As the digital world evolves, so must Katoa Connect. AI, cybersecurity, and government platforms are changing fast and our people need the tools to stay ahead of these shifts.

“How amazing would it be if I could get one of those guys [internal AI experts] to run a day’s training on AI—what it means, what it will do. It could be really powerful.” Funder

This is a win-win-win:

Facilitators have expressed a desire for more training on emerging digital trends, not just to keep up, but to pass that knowledge on.

Participants hear about new technologies and are keen to understand in order to connect with their whānau and make sense of the news. There is also the leap-frogging effect, where an improved technology can sometimes be easier to learn than its previous versions.

Funders expressed their capability and desire to support Katoa Connect with training, thereby strengthening the relationship between organisations.

4 Learners want to go further – they just need a pathway

Katoa Connect participants often describe their course as “Level One.” Many are eager to continue learning but hit a structural ceiling due to the programme’s charitable status:

“They call this Level One - and then they ask, ‘When can we have the next part?’” Facilitator

Participants want next steps. Suggested topics include scam prevention, AI awareness, small business literacy, and more confident online navigation for life and work.

This is not about turning Katoa Connect into a tertiary institution – it’s about acknowledging the appetite for deeper engagement and providing mana-enhancing, flexible options to match.

Possible solutions:

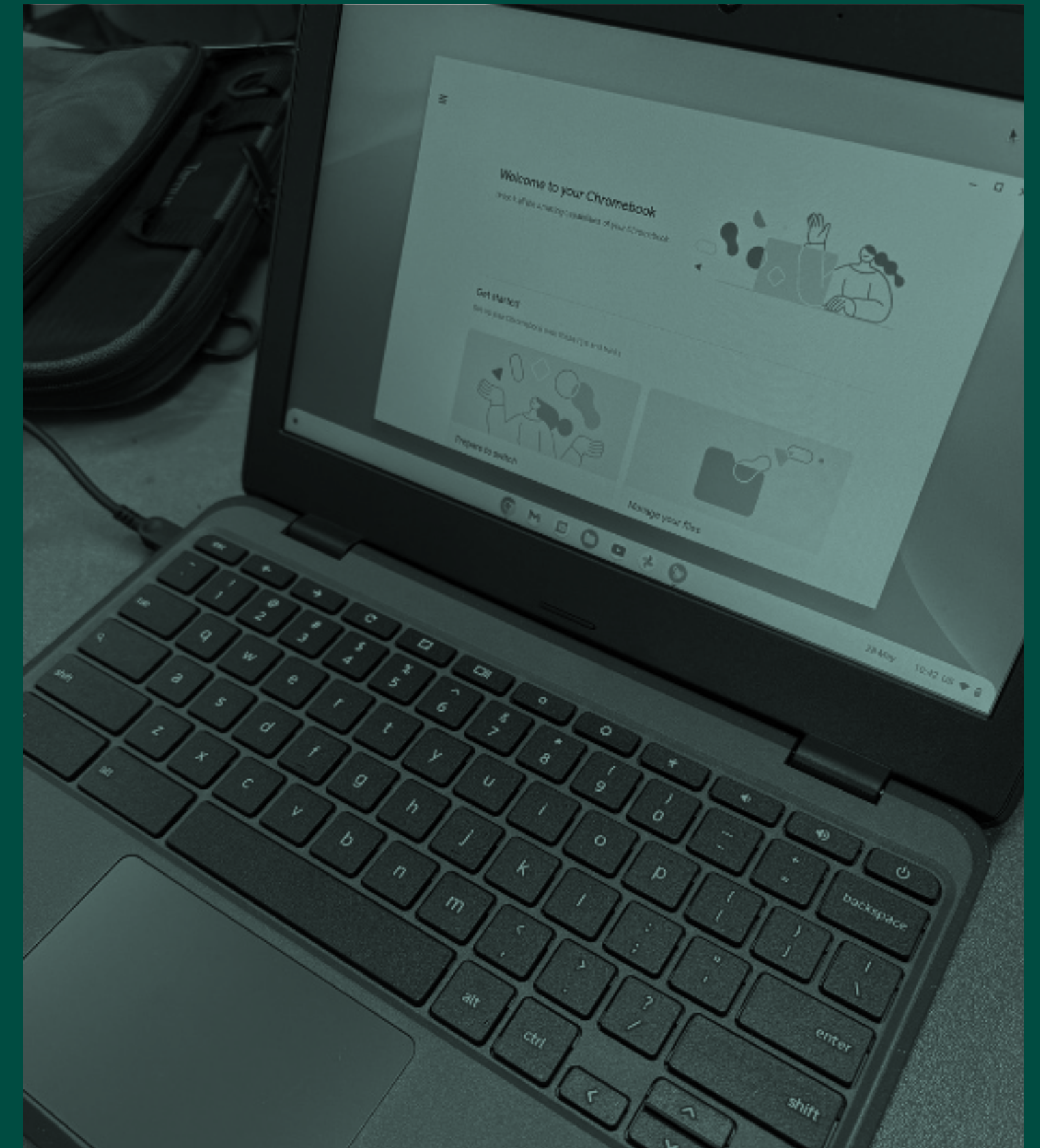
- A “Level Two” stream focused on applied learning.
- Partnerships with wānanga or accredited providers.
- Pathways for micro-credentials that don’t compromise relational integrity.

5 From digital skills to digital agency

Digital exclusion isn't just about hard skills, it's about what those skills unlock. Many participants don't know what's possible beyond entertainment and essential tasks:

“Younger and older participants use digital tools mainly for YouTube or messaging. They don't realise the digital world includes CV formatting, budgeting apps, and business tools.” Coordinator

This lack of exposure creates a hidden divide - between those who can leverage AI to write a cover letter, and those who don't even know it's an option. The long-term risk is a widening gulf in opportunity, education and wellbeing.



6 Katoa Connect’s Kaupapa is well-placed to make a meaningful difference for disabled people

Disabled people experience some of the most significant barriers to digital inclusion in Aotearoa. Over half (52%) of disabled New Zealanders lack essential digital skills, compared to just 20% of the general population. This group is also twice as likely to experience severe digital harm, such as scams or online abuse, and are more likely to report low confidence in navigating digital environments.

Katoa Connect has already begun exploring specialised programmes for disabled participants. Given the importance of whakawhanaungatanga and rangatiratanga within this community, there is strong reason to believe that scaling this work could deliver significant impact by reaching those with the highest need and helping to reduce some of the deepest digital inequities in the country.



Implications:

To close the digital divide, we must scale what already works—while evolving for what comes next.

1. Grow to meet demand

The current model is effective but oversubscribed. Scaling our reach in Māori, Pacific, refugee and migrant communities is essential. This means not only more classes, but better-equipped environments with multi-lingual resources, stronger WiFi, and learner-friendly tools.

2. Invest in our people

Facilitators are the programme. Long-term viability means offering sustainable hours, cultural supervision, national wānanga, and peer networks. The relational core that drives success must be resourced to thrive.

3. Future-proof our capability

With digital tools changing rapidly, facilitators need ongoing access to training on topics like AI, cybersecurity and government tech. Partnering with funders and experts to deliver this builds capacity and strengthens strategic ties.

4. Design for progression

Participants are asking for “Level Two.” They want to apply skills for work, business, and self-determination. Mana-enhancing learning pathways—whether through KC or trusted partners—must be part of the next chapter.

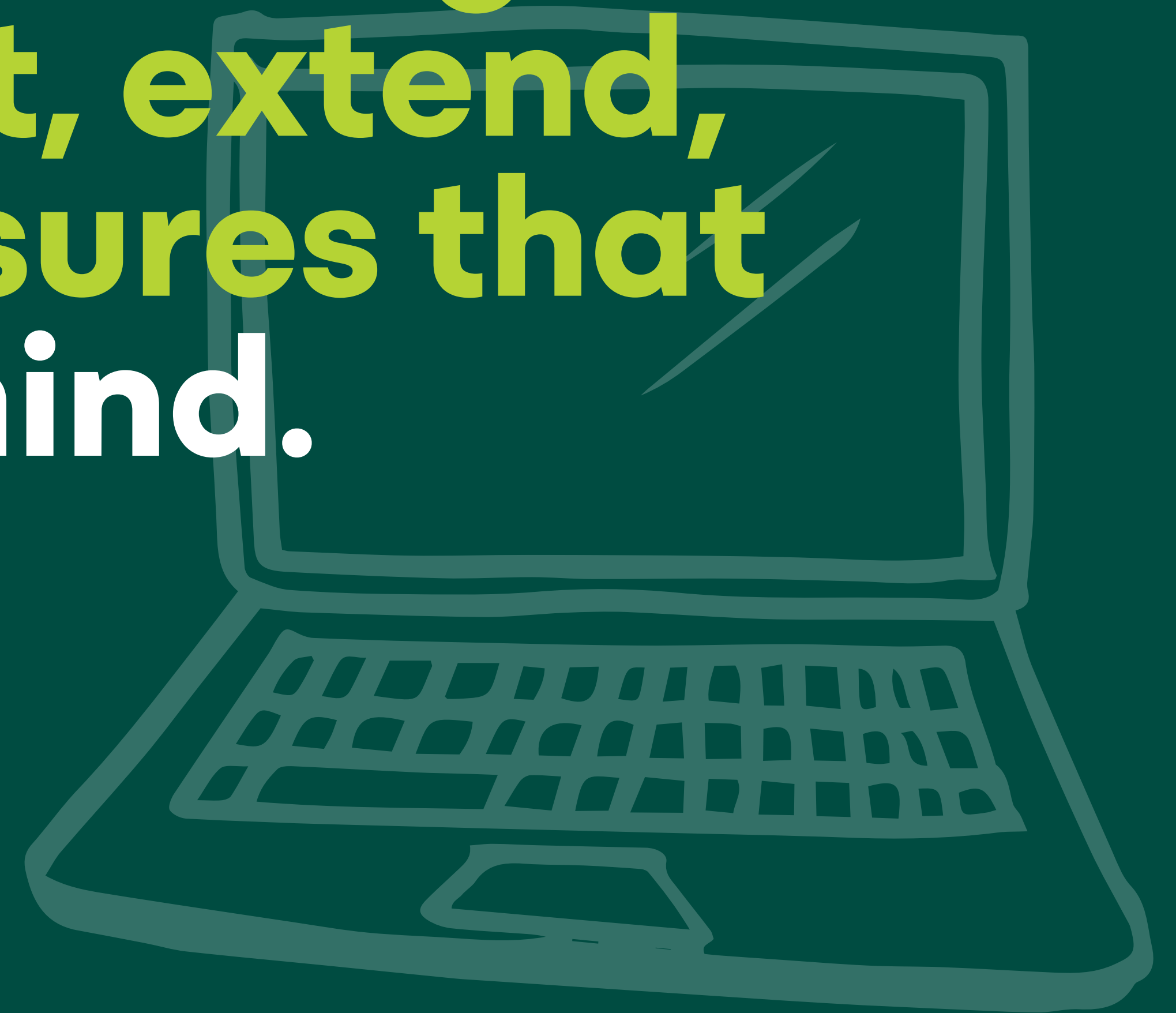
5. Focus on digital agency, not just digital access

People don’t know what they don’t know. Broadening awareness of what tech can do for them, from budgeting tools to building a whānau legacy, is just as important as teaching how to use a device.

6. Extend reach into disabled community

Taking this kaupapa to the disabled community would grow impact by addressing the deepest and most persistent digital inequities in Aotearoa.

**Katoa Connect is working.
Now we must invest, extend,
and evolve. This ensures that
no one gets left behind.**



Aotearoa is uniquely positioned to lead on digital inclusion – so let's lead

We are a small island nation in the southwest Pacific. Being digitally connected means more to us than most other nations - linking whānau across vast distances, bridging rural and urban divides, and enabling equitable access to services, knowledge, and opportunity.

It's no coincidence that true thought leadership has emerged here. Katoa Connect's foundation is built on kaupapa Māori – a worldview grounded in collective wellbeing, resilience, and a deep and personal understanding of how to navigate systems change. This perspective offers a powerful model for inclusive, values-led digital transformation, one that the world can learn from.

This isn't just about equity – it's about future readiness. If we want people to access, we must resource relational models

How many business worldwide feel the pressure to optimise their digital channels to be future-ready, struggling to keep traditional channels open? Surely part of the solution for truly great UX lies with the U, not the X.

Katoa Connect proves what's possible when we lead with people, not platforms.

Its success lies in the mana it restores, the relationships it fosters and the confidence it builds – before a device is even turned on.

The path forward is clear:

Invest in connection-first models that meet people where they are.

Back the facilitators who make learning safe, empowering, and real.

Design for digital agency, not just access.

**Aotearoa has the values, the vision,
and the model to lead the world in
inclusive digital transformation.**

Let's choose to lead.





TRA

