

HOW DO WE CREATE NEW ZEALAND'S MOST EMPLOYABLE GRADUATES?

Amber Paterson

Learner capabilities are traditionally what people call 'soft skills' or 'transferable skills'. They are the skills or capabilities that people use regardless of the competencies that they use in their job. A competency may be being able to cut and colour hair; but learner capabilities are the ability to interact with people, communicate effectively verbally, and think creatively. 'Employability' is defined by Yorke (2006) as: "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (p. 8).

The 'i am capable' web-based tool is an innovation that addresses a need and want from employers. It has been designed so that it can be customised by schools, businesses, and other tertiary institutions. The 'i am capable' tool is a way that people can showcase their learner capabilities to potential employers in an online format. The user uploads evidence of their learner capabilities and this is verified by 'i am capable'. Potential employers are able to view the profiles of potential employees in regards to their capabilities.

There is a recognition that many employers are increasingly going global in both recruitment processes as well as their business activities, therefore transferable skills especially ones such as cultural competency and effective interpersonal behaviour are vitally important (Archer & Davidson, 2008).

Archer and Davidson (2008) concluded that online recruitment is the most widely used method to find graduates. This is an encouraging piece of research as it supports our decision to give our students access to the 'i am capable' online tool which assists them in finding employment. We can summarise that we are giving our students the best opportunity to have an online presence in the online employment recruitment process. Archer and Davidson (2008) also found that there were three capabilities that topped the most important skills and capabilities table above intellectual ability. These included firstly communication skills, secondly teamwork, and finally integrity.

At Otago Polytechnic we have 25 'Learner Capabilities' that have been garnered from global and New Zealand-based research, which form



Figure 1. Scott Mason,
Managing Partner,
Findex, Employer feedback.
Source: Kelk photography.

the Learner Capability Framework. In 2018, 163 local employers were interviewed by 51 Otago Polytechnic staff in 15 disciplines, to gain feedback about the order of importance of the 25 capabilities in their fields. The research team collated the results into an employer priority index (Otago Polytechnic, 2019) to show the top ten learner capabilities for that discipline. This research has played a major part in staff choosing capabilities for their programmes. Our research project is assisted through funding and/or support from Ako Aotearoa, and the Otago Southland Employers Association. Ako Aotearoa is currently undertaking complementary employer research, while we continue with our employer and alumni research. We are also conducting a smaller research project with a Bachelor programme, and a certificate programme. This has a primary focus on historical and current implementation from the tutors' and students' points of view, as well as looking at future implementation.

Currently the Learner Capability Framework is being rolled out across Otago Polytechnic programmes. Undergraduate degree programmes have had the flexibility to choose to roll out the 'i am capable' online tool to year one, two or three students depending on programme needs; with the exception of the Bachelor of Leadership for Change, who have opted for all students to use the 'i am capable' online tool. Some certificate and diploma programmes began in Semester Two. We aim to roll out 'i am capable' to all students by the start of 2020.

An initial mapping process is undertaken for each programme which is then shared with each programme teaching team for adaptations. Curriculum mapping is used as a tool for each programme to look more closely at what is taught, how it is being taught, and what assessment points are used that are aligned with the curriculum. The intention of the Learner Capability mapping process is for programme staff to look the alignment between graduate profile outcomes, learning outcomes, and assessment.

For all new programmes, and reviews of programmes, staff will undertake this process through the normal Learning and Teaching Development process, with support from the Learner Capability office. Each programme looks at their mapping documents, employers' priorities, and knowledge of their programmes to choose the core capabilities for their programme. A one-year programme will complete four core capabilities, a two-year programme will complete eight, and a three-year Bachelor degree will complete twelve to fifteen. All students can access all 25 Learner Capabilities on their 'i am capable' tool, and the responsibility for verifying is split between the programme staff, and the Learner Capability office.

Our vision is to make Otago Polytechnic graduates the most employable and, to assist us in this vision, all programmes that are taught at Otago Polytechnic campuses will have the Learner Capability Framework integrated into their programmes at the start of 2020. All students will not only have capabilities embedded into their learning, but also have full access to the 'i am capable' tool to create their personalised profiles ready for employment.

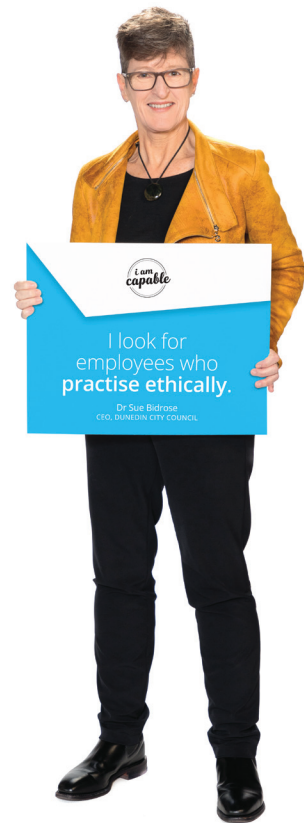


Figure 2. Dr Sue Bidrose, CEO, Dunedin City Council, Employer feedback. Source: Kelk photography.

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