

DEPLOYING CAPABILITIES: LOCAL, NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL LENSES

David McMaster and Oonagh McGirr

As outlined in a recent report by the World Bank, graduate employability has become a key concern of governments and education providers across the globe – and of particular concern to New Zealand, Australia and the UK.

With employability as the key driver of curriculum development, institutions are increasingly working to align or co-construct curricular and educational outcomes to fit industry needs and preferences more closely. Of central concern in these shifts is the development of learner capabilities – and cognate concepts (soft skills, employability skills, twenty-first-century skills) – which are also intended to empower students to achieve their career goals, as well as make meaningful contributions to local and global communities.

While these skills have been central to certain subject areas, where curricula have been closely aligned to requirements for accreditation from professional bodies (for example, in nursing and engineering), the development of personal effectiveness in communication and cross-cultural skills, team-working skills, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, along with digital literacies, is now being sought, in addition to the sound disciplinary knowledges which once held a privileged place. The embedding of these capability skills in curricula, along with a range of extra-curricular activities – internships, work-based learning opportunities, career self-management, entrepreneurship, social and cultural networking opportunities – serves to enhance graduate employment prospects.

However, as the contributions in this issue of *Scope* demonstrate, capability development is not a one-way street – it is equally relevant to the readiness displayed by educational institutions and to academic and professional staff. Nor, though often presented in instrumental terms, should these shifts be endorsed uncritically, as the papers in this *Scope* (*Learning and Teaching*), 5, set out to demonstrate.

In her contribution, Claire Goode focuses on the issue of organisational capabilities and readiness as they relate to the delivery of academic programmes offshore. Her extensive survey of the literature on transnational higher education suggests that institutions need to understand the importance of being “capability-ready” in a broad range of educational practices before embarking on such ventures.

This imperative of being a capability-ready institution is addressed in Oonagh McGirr’s paper, which sets out Otago Polytechnic’s strategy for academic staff capability development, highlighting the necessity for continuous professional development for learner success to be premised on responsive and agile formal policies and processes which support multiple development opportunities for all teaching and professional staff.

This link between academic and learner capability enhancement and learner experience is illustrated in Rachel Cash’s article, which takes the reader through the process of designing a blended course template, key to any technology-enhanced learning practice, and the capability building that ensued across the polytechnic in step with the progressive introduction of the template.

This dual capability building that (often) occurs in technology-enhanced learning is further exemplified in Bronwyn Hegarty's extended interview with Matt Thompson, a carpentry teacher at Otago Polytechnic, which explores the introduction of e-portfolios in the certificate programme.

Returning to the international and transnational realm, Behnam Soltani and Jean-Philippe Loret show, through their interviews with international students studying in New Zealand, that capability building for learners is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. As their research clearly shows, as these learners tackle the challenges of a new living and learning environment in a novel cultural context, they need to develop a raft of additional cultural capabilities if they are to be successful in their studies and in the transition to the workplace.

Staying in the transnational arena, and also focussed on the question of learner capability, David McMaster offers a persuasive critique of the representation of the learner capabilities of Arab students studying in transnational programmes throughout the Persian Gulf. In his contribution, McMaster clearly shows that – as in Philippa Kearney's critical reflection on the discourses of employability, "What Lies Beneath?" – affirming the value of employability integrates the various narratives that conjoin to produce the idealised figure of what Kearney calls the "neo-liberal employable subject:"

Taken together, the papers in this second cluster show that, as with any learning and teaching practice, who is capable of what and who decides is inflected with power and knowledge practices, be they local, national, global or neo-colonial.