

Introducing Bradley

Bradley works in academic development at a leading university in New Zealand. He has more than 18 years' experience with a scholarly interest in the educational psychology of teaching and learning in university settings, academic development, as well as science education. As his current role is to help teaching staff implement employability in their programs, Bradley provided some interesting and in-depth thoughts around embedding employability into university course curriculums.

Employability Capabilities

We start by talking about the capabilities Bradley believes students need to have on leaving university and, straight away, he says having communication skills is key. As it becomes clear this is not the first time Bradley has thought about this question, he notes that when looking at what employers want from graduates, communication skills top that list. He also thinks that the embedding of communication skills in university teaching varies; that, while some programs have elements such as, say, a presentation as part of the assessment, he often doesn't teach students the specifics of how to do a presentation effectively.

Bradley also emphasises the importance of students having independent problem-solving skills; the ability to solve ill-defined problems. Summing up this point, he notes that students need to be able to find the solution to something that can't be found in a textbook, and that being able to communicate this with a variety of stakeholders is very important in the workplace. But Bradley also doesn't think that New Zealand teaches that skill at an undergraduate level, mainly because undergraduate students don't do independent research.

Uncertainty over the possibility of embedding employability in courses

Bradley also notes that one of the major challenges to embedding employability in university courses comes down to the teaching staff themselves, rather than the content or subject area. This is because, Bradley notes, academic teaching staff are not necessarily trained to embed employability into their courses or, going further, trained as teachers overall in the first place. Bradley highlights how teaching staff who have taken a traditional academic route from post grad to post-doc to academic staff member often have very little experience with issues around employability in the current non-academic job market. As a result, Bradley suggests, approaches to employability teaching in universities tend to be strongly focused on academic career paths, which are quite different to, and not necessarily appropriate for, most of the students that they are teaching.

In terms of how to address this, Bradley suggests explicitly addressing employability in graduate outcomes, starting with program graduate profiles,

and teaming up with experts in employability, experts in teaching, and have these people embedded into the program to make teaching for employability relevant for that particular discipline.

He also notes that some universities have their own academic developers whose job it is to support teaching staff in their development as a teacher. Basically, Bradley notes, the best way to address this variable is to set up a shared projects between teaching staff in a programme and people who are experts in employability or know what the job market wants, like people either in a business school or the career centre, and combine that with experts in teaching or academic development to set that up in an authentic way for a department.

Perceptions of Barriers

Bradley does tell me that courses, departments and schools often do actually want to embed employability into their courses. However, he notes that they often lack the resources that are needed, and no expertise is brought in, so the teaching staff are making it up as they go along. Bradley notes it is important for senior leadership at universities to emphasise that they want to see employability embedded in the courses and, just as importantly, provide the resources to set up these types of partnerships.

Bradley highlights the importance of "authenticity". This grabs my attention, as I am not 100 percent sure what he means. He notes that it is important to have employability embedded into a course to fit the purpose of the discipline, saying "Employability in engineering can be vastly different from teaching for employability in history, for example." Bradley suggests that teaching employability tends to be easier in areas that are more vocational in nature, such as engineering, law and medicine. He notes that in "generic degrees", like a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, embedding employability can be much harder.

This interests me, so I ask Bradley to explain this in a bit more detail. Bradley notes that it is not effective to prescribe *how* things should be taught; saying that this leads to a "one-size-fits-nobody approach" that is not particularly well aligned to any particular discipline. In essence, Bradley notes, when this is done you end up with compliance rather than engagement from the teaching staff, where the teaching of skills becomes a box-ticking exercises involving teaching staff just going through the motions without having "skin in the game". It is better, Bradley notes, to have a broad set of skills that should be developed, and then allow the experts in the particular discipline to figure out how to develop them most effectively for their particular discipline.

Researcher notes: This informant unpacks the difficulties staff have in teaching employability capabilities. His perception of employability capabilities is restricted to communication and problems solving. He regards these as nuanced and to some extent discipline specific.
