

Introducing Paul

Paul is a senior academic in the sciences at a prominent university in New Zealand with over 20 years teaching experience. Paul is a committed teacher who aims to inspire students to learn and to take an interest in the possibilities of current and future trends in the subject. I sat down with Paul to talk about embedding employability into university courses.

Employability Capabilities

The first thing we discuss is what capabilities students need to have after university and what they taught and, not surprisingly, Paul tells us is how important it is to emphasise “generic skills”. To Paul, this includes skills like turning up on time, critical thinking as well as being able to read and analyse documents. The latter in particular is something Paul notes is something even academic staff need to remember to do themselves at times. He says he sometimes gives out documents for students to read and then point out all the things that are wrong with the document; emphasising the importance of critical analysis. He also highlights the importance of skills such as data analysis and modelling.

Paul also separates out these “generic skills” with what he see as more job/industry specific employment capabilities. He indicates that the local polytechnic has a good reputation for having students who leave their institution knowing how to do particular jobs, such as using advanced technical electronics and software. He says his university is less focused on such skills. Instead, Paul sees their role as to educate rather than train.

Uncertainty over the possibility of embedding employability in courses

This separate interpretation of “generic skills” and employability capabilities also comes through as we talk about embedding employability into university courses. Paul notes that the courses they teach are not “vocational training” and that, if they were to embed employability as they saw it into their course, it would move away from their area of science into another already established area of science.

Furthermore, due to workload, Paul believes it has become more difficult to change the makeup of a course, even to update the generic skills for the changing employment market. He continues that teachers may have good ideas about innovating their courses in order to give students the skills needed in today’s world. However, because they are just trying to stay afloat, teachers don’t have time to figure out how to embed them into their courses, and how to assess them, effectively.

Paul explains that further exacerbating this are ongoing changes in the workplace; thanks in part to factors such as automation. He suggests that, while a lot of attention has been paid to automation in manufacturing, this can also be seen around jobs that university graduates may also be looking into. Using the example of law graduates, Paul notes that not that long ago they would get an entry-level job consisting of sitting in libraries and looking up case law. However, this can now be done by artificial intelligence. So Paul thinks it is hard for academics to determine the specific skills that should be embedded into a course curriculum when we do not know what specific industry related jobs that will be available in the upcoming years.

Perceptions of Barriers

Paul points out other practical barriers which hinder teachers from incorporating their idea of employability skills into courses. He thinks that a major reason why teaching staff are “just trying to stay afloat” is because of the larger class sizes. He notes that they are teaching more students at a time; going from 18 to 80-90 for a 300-level class over his time teaching. Paul notes this means that, while they are more productive now in real terms, they are less productive per student and feel they lose touch with the individual students.

Again emphasising their interpretation of employability compatibilities being around job/industry specific skills, Paul is concerned that over time, real-world experiments, that may be done in the workplace, have been replaced by computer simulation exercises, literature review exercises, as well as writing essays, proposals and writing a design for an experiment. He notes that it is logistically impractical to do lab experiments in a class of 80 to 90.

At a more macro level, this change has also had an impact. Paul notes that, while they have a list of graduate attributes that they expect ordinary graduates to have, they have doubts about whether they actually deliver that. Rather, Paul believes students try to figure out how to meet the formal requirements in the easiest way possible, as they too have time pressures. In other words, Paul believes the students are trying to get a degree rather than an education, and the teaching staff accept that. This means that the relationship between the staff and student becomes more transactional, and the ability to provide students with a deeper level of understanding about the skills being taught, and how they may be used outside of the class room or the lab, are not possible. He quips, “As the old joke goes, we pretend to teach, and they pretend to learn.”

Researcher notes: This informant explains how little time lecturers have for redesigning courses and how classes are larger now. He regards employability capabilities as generic skills but comments that it is difficult to know what to teach in a rapidly changing technological environment. Paul also makes reference to student push-back.
