

# ec2

## EDUCATION + CAREERS



### WORK FORCES

#### DEFENCE FORCE'S RECRUITING DRIVE

#### WHICH EXAM?

IB, CAMBRIDGE AND NCEA EXPLAINED

#### DISOBEDIENT TEACHERS

# USING YOUR EXPERIENCE

An Otago Polytech distance learning course ensures your on-the-job experience counts. By Heather Carpenter

IT COMES WHEN there is just that next step job – the one you know you can do – and is just what you have always wanted, and you don't get an interview. And there is no hiding it, despite your lengthy history of experience and skills, there are no appropriate qualifications on your CV. Your starter training of some time ago cannot compete with management degrees or other credentials, your excellent on-the-job training in business areas, public service, trades, police or social service areas did not include a current credential which takes you further; you don't even get an interview for roles you are certain you are well able to perform. You have a wealth of voluntary experience at the highest level of governance but you can't transfer it to a well-paid role. You've reached a plateau, gone as far as you can without it. That first degree – or lack of it – is the barrier. You examine the provisions of a number of different tertiary programs but none of it seems to fit either you or your life situation.

The answer for many people in this position has been to quietly and efficiently put themselves through qualifications by accreditation of prior learning distance programs and they have found the process transformational. Work based learning is still a relatively new concept in New Zealand, but many New Zealanders who are undertaking degrees and diplomas through Otago Polytechnic's Capable NZ School are involved in this innovative process. Credentialing opportunities occur at a number of levels. Some are able to prove prior experience and learning to graduate levels, many add some extra learning to their proven experience to meet the requirements of the qualifications. The learning takes place through independent learning pathways, customised to acknowledge the prior learning experience as well as fill the gaps of skills and academic knowledge of the learner.

Those people who are already graduates and want to upskill and develop expertise in their established fields through new learning can choose a Professional Practice qualification, a Gradu-



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ate Diploma or Masters in Professional Practice. These work-based qualifications ask for research based projects that develop both the learner and their workplace, and these are designed around the needs of the candidate's workplace or profession, their next step aspirations, and a contribution to their professional field.

These processes illustrate the innovative learning required now to keep up with the demands of a fast paced and changing work environment. Bill Gates predicted the 2000s would be about velocity in the workplace, bringing faster innovation, improvements and change. Programs that are flexible enough to respond to the workplace needs, offer alternative entry, recognition of professional competencies gained through work experience, the opportunity to build qualifications around current work experience, and available through distance learning assist in facili-

tating the up-to-date learning required for this fast changing environment.

Learners are asked to evidence higher level skills in critical thinking and problem solving; they build intellectual capital by demonstrating self-direction and adaptability as they chart a personal course through change; the processes encourage curiosity and creativity. These skills, wrapped in a new qualification, provide the traction to move beyond a credentials plateau, which can occur at many stages over a lifetime. It can be at thirty years of age when you find yourself bypassed by graduates, at forty when you really primed to progress but lack the evidence of your work; or at fifty plus when you would like a change but the options aren't there.

Feedback from a survey of 175 Capable NZ graduates of undergraduate degrees located NZ wide show over half applied for

a promotion or new job after graduation and of these 84% were successful in securing it. A comment from a respondent in the survey was typical; 'by validating my experiences now when I speak from experience I have the weight of a degree too. I also found many of my colleagues were in a similar position to me – learned from the coal face but now need higher education to advance career wise. I used to be 'one of the pack'. Now I'm officially educated.' Others put it more simply, 'it has opened up opportunities that I can apply for.'

Many graduates welcomed the opportunity to validate their skills and experience; they now had the proof they were 'worthy', and many noted a growth in confidence. A typical comment: 'it gave me the confidence to realise that I had the skills, expertise and knowledge to undertake various roles.'

Career confidence is an under researched but enormous asset when coping with plateaus or transitions. Career confident people know exactly what they have to offer; they are then better able to describe and present themselves accurately when they need to, with a greater awareness of how their skills transfer to other roles.

These new flexible learning opportunities demonstrate a great deal of synergy with key understandings of 21st century careers:

- That learning takes place in mixed forms – any time, any place
- That 21st century learning and careers are self-directed and self-managed
- That learning is transformational, and a stimulus for life changes

However the most important message for those facing a career plateau is that lifelong, continuous learning is an essential element for on-going career progress and personal success, and a variety of new learning opportunities are available to assist you.

Dr Heather Carpenter is a careers counsellor and consultant. She is a facilitator, academic mentor and assessor with CapableNZ.

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