

Title of Workshop

From Experience to Employment: Building Career Readiness through Experiential Learning

Conference Themes

Indigenous Knowledge – Pōhutukawa
Wellbeing – Matariki

Presentation Language

English

Abstract

As the future of work evolves, “soft skills”—increasingly reframed as “power skills” (Forbes)—are becoming critical to career readiness, adaptability, and long-term success. With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and automation, many traditional knowledge-based tasks are diminishing in importance. In response, employers are placing increasing value on distinctly human capabilities such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, resilience, and self-management. These skills are now widely recognised as essential for navigating complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing work environments.

At the same time, there is growing international concern regarding declining wellbeing among young people, including increased anxiety, reduced confidence, and reduced engagement in education and employment pathways. This presents a dual challenge for educators and career development practitioners: how to effectively prepare young people for the future of work while also supporting their wellbeing, sense of identity, and connection. Increasingly, these are not separate challenges, but deeply interconnected ones.

This workshop presents innovative practice from Whenua Iti Outdoors (Aotearoa New Zealand), demonstrating how experiential, outdoor, and place-based programmes can respond to both of these challenges in an integrated way. Through structured challenge, reflection, and group-based learning, participants are supported to develop key employability skills in authentic, applied contexts. These experiences are intentionally designed to build confidence, strengthen communication and teamwork, and foster resilience and self-management—skills that are directly transferable to employment and life beyond formal education.

The approach is grounded in practical programme delivery and supported by ongoing evaluation through a Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) framework. This framework enables the measurement of outcomes across multiple dimensions, including learner development, wellbeing, community connection, and organisational sustainability. Findings from this work demonstrate consistent improvements in confidence, engagement, and interpersonal capability across diverse learner groups, including rangatahi with additional needs.

While grounded in the unique cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, kaupapa Māori perspectives and Indigenous knowledge systems underpin the design and delivery of programmes, strengthening connection, belonging, and engagement. The integration of place-based and culturally grounded approaches contributes to deeper learning and supports holistic development, aligning closely with both wellbeing and employability outcomes.

In a context where artificial intelligence is reshaping the nature of work, and where youth wellbeing is under increasing pressure, there is a clear need for approaches that develop not only what young people know, but who they are and how they engage with others. Experiential learning offers a practical and scalable response to this need.

This workshop contributes to a growing body of practice that reframes career readiness as a holistic, developmental process—one that integrates skill development, wellbeing, identity, and Indigenous knowledge, and prepares young people not just for employment, but for meaningful participation in their communities and the wider world.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Understand how experiential learning supports the development of career readiness (“power”) skills
- Understand how experiential, place-based learning—grounded in Indigenous knowledge and kaupapa Māori perspectives—supports diverse learners, and articulate why this approach is particularly effective in improving engagement, achievement, and wellbeing outcomes for Māori learners
- Explore the relationship between wellbeing, confidence, identity, and employability
- Identify practical programme design elements that foster resilience, communication, and adaptability
- Reflect on how these approaches can be adapted and applied within their own professional contexts

Theoretical Basis

This workshop is informed by the growing global emphasis on “power skills” as critical workforce capabilities (Forbes, 2020–2023), particularly in response to technological change and automation.

It is further grounded in applied evidence from Whenua Iti Outdoors’ Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) framework, which evaluates outcomes across learner development, wellbeing, community impact, and organisational sustainability. This provides a practical and evidence-based foundation for understanding how experiential programmes contribute to both employability skill development and broader outcomes.

Methodology / Content

The session will present a series of applied case studies from Whenua Iti Outdoors programmes, including Trades Academy and the Manaaki Tāpoi Programme, to illustrate how experiential learning is intentionally structured to develop career readiness skills. These programmes are designed around progressive exposure to challenge, responsibility, and real-world expectations, enabling participants to build capability through experience rather than instruction alone.

A key feature of this approach is the integration of place-based learning and kaupapa Māori perspectives, where learning is grounded in connection to whenua (land), people, and context. Programme design intentionally incorporates values such as whanaungatanga (relationships), manaakitanga (care and respect), and kaitiakitanga (stewardship), creating environments where participants experience a strong sense of belonging and purpose. These elements are not taught as abstract concepts, but are embedded through shared experience, group responsibility, and connection to place.

Drawing on delivery practice and programme insights, the session will unpack how key employability skills—such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and self-management—are embedded within programme design, facilitation approaches, and participant experiences. Particular attention will be given to how facilitator guidance, tuakana-teina (peer learning relationships), and structured reflection contribute to skill development over time.

The session will also highlight how consistency of experience, repetition of key behaviours, and increasing levels of responsibility support the transfer of learning from programme environments into education, employment, and community contexts. Examples will demonstrate how participants move from initial engagement through to increased confidence, independence, and readiness for work-related pathways.

Insights from programme delivery will be supported by evidence drawn from Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) reporting, providing a clear link between programme design and observed outcomes in employability skills, wellbeing, and culturally grounded engagement.

Findings

Findings from post-course reporting demonstrate consistent and measurable improvements in participant confidence, communication, teamwork, and self-management. Programmes show strong engagement across diverse learner groups, including rangatahi with additional needs.

Importantly, the approach highlights not only individual skill development, but also positive impacts on wellbeing, sense of belonging, and community connection. These outcomes reinforce the interdependence between employability and holistic development.

Programme data and delivery experience also indicate strong outcomes for Māori learners, with engagement, retention, and achievement levels consistently equal to or exceeding those of non-Māori participants. In particular, Māori rangatahi demonstrate high levels of connection to the experiential and place-based nature of the programmes, which align with values of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and connection to whenua. Within NCEA-aligned programmes such as Trades Academy, this is reflected in sustained participation, completion of learning pathways, and positive transitions into employment or further training. These findings reinforce the value of culturally grounded, experiential approaches in supporting equitable and improved outcomes for Māori learners.

Conclusions

Experiential learning provides a practical, scalable, and evidence-informed approach to developing career readiness skills in a rapidly changing employment landscape. Supported by multi-year data, this model offers a meaningful complement to traditional classroom-based approaches.

As AI continues to reshape the nature of work, and as youth wellbeing challenges increase, approaches that intentionally develop human capabilities alongside resilience, identity, and connection will be increasingly critical. This includes the growing recognition that Indigenous knowledge systems and place-based approaches are not supplementary, but central to effective, inclusive, and future-focused learning design.

This workshop contributes to reframing employability as a holistic, developmental process that supports both individual success and community wellbeing.

Format & Target Audience

This workshop is interactive and experiential, combining hands-on activity, facilitated reflection, and applied discussion.

Target audience: Career practitioners, educators, youth development professionals, and policy makers.

Keywords

Career readiness; experiential learning; employability skills; wellbeing; youth development

Bibliographical References

Forbes (2020–2023). “Power Skills” and the future of work.
Whenua Iti Outdoors. Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) Reports.