EDITORIAL

Generic graduate attributes: citizens for an uncertain future

Over the past two decades the terms generic skills, graduate qualities, generic attributes and core capabilities have become a familiar part of the teaching and learning landscape of higher education. Indeed it seems that there is rarely a higher education teaching and learning conference these days that doesn’t have a theme on generic attributes (as we shall refer to them in this introduction).

At these conferences and in the literature, conversations in the higher education community around generic attributes typically centre on accounts of practice. Publications on the topic have often focussed on the evaluation of particular curriculum initiatives, reports on institutions’ initiatives in the area of generic skills and reports of the relative importance of different sets of attributes or skills. There has been less written about the theoretical and conceptual basis for such attributes, despite many reports of practice pointing to this missing conceptual base.

While there may increasingly be a shared vocabulary discernible in these publications and conversations, the extent to which this represents a shared meaning is questionable. The variety of terms commonly used to refer to generic attributes is an obvious feature of these discussions. Indeed it is a mark of the lack of critical attention that the concept has received that terms such as generic skills, graduate qualities, generic attributes and core capabilities are used relatively interchangeably, with an apparent assumption of a shared meaning. Equally striking is the range of definitions advanced for particular skills and attributes in the literature, a range that is matched only by the variety of reported approaches taken to the teaching and learning of these varied attributes.

Sitting behind such accounts of the initiatives, initiated by academics to foster such worthwhile outcomes as team work and communication skills, are policy statements claiming such qualities on behalf of graduates. These statements of generic attributes seek to describe the core outcomes of a higher education. In doing so they specify an aspect of the institution’s contribution to society and carry with them implicit and sometimes explicit assumptions as to the purpose and nature of a ‘higher’ education. Such assumptions are inextricably entwined with suppositions as to the nature of knowledge and what it means to be educated in contemporary society.
As such, generic graduate attributes sit at a crucial intersection between many of the challenges pressing upon the higher education sector. They figure prominently in contemporary debates as to the purpose of higher education in our changing world, including for example the relationship between a university education and the world of work. As statements of core outcomes of higher education they are increasingly implicated in the quality agenda facing higher education. They provide a potentially inviting benchmarking strategy as part of the growing effort by government and other participants in higher education to monitor and assure a set of common outcomes of a university education. Generic attributes are also relevant in the context of debates about disciplinarity and concerns about the fracturing of the academic community into groups unable to communicate across the epistemological gulfs between disciplines. In the context of the increasing diversity of universities as sites of learning, and the divergence and multiplication of different knowledges and disciplines within universities, generic attributes claim to articulate what is ‘generic’ or shared and in some way to bridge these differences.

What is perhaps surprising, given the role of generic attributes in such debates and in light of how commonplace generic attributes have become, is that the conceptual or theoretical basis for such attributes has, to date, received relatively little critical attention. While generic attributes might at first glance appear to be relatively innocuous and uncontroversial outcomes, to which many members of the higher education community can wholeheartedly subscribe, they have their roots in the contested territory of questions as to the nature of knowledge and the nature of a university. A consideration of the implications and nature of the assumptions underpinning such statements is the starting point for this issue.

In selecting papers for this issue the Editors aimed to include research and scholarship which, while based in particular aspects of practice, goes beyond accounts of practice and points towards directions for further research. We begin with a critique addressing the conceptualization of generic attributes then move to a consideration of teachers’ and students’ experiences of generic attributes and an investigation of some of the issues relating to curricula and the teaching of generic attributes. We close with an example of an emerging site for further discussions of the topic of generic attributes.

This special issue opens with an article from Ronald Barnett which provides a philosophical perspective from which to embark on a consideration of the topic. He challenges us to consider what it might mean to learn for an unknown future and highlights some of the limitations in traditional notions of generic skills in the face of such a challenge. In doing so he provides an alternative conceptualization of the core pedagogy of today’s universities, not as knowledge or skills but instead as human qualities and dispositions.

The next article, from Simon Barrie, approaches the challenge of illuminating the concept of generic attributes from a more empirical perspective. It takes as its starting point a description of the variation in understandings of the concept of generic attributes derived from a phenomenographic study. Interestingly, this research-based framework includes conceptualizations of generic attributes which share features with
the notions of human qualities and dispositions proposed as an alternative pedagogy in the preceding piece. The article discusses the application of research findings to practice. It describes how the framework might be helpful in clarifying discussions in the context of policy and practice in relation to generic attributes.

The next paper, from Virginia Phillips and Carol Bond, provides another piece of the missing conceptual puzzle, this time from the perspective of students. It describes the authors’ attempts to clarify the confusion around a common generic attribute—critical thinking. Unlike the preceding paper which approaches the challenge from the perspective of academics’ understandings, this paper approaches the challenge from the perspective of the students’ understanding.

Monica Leggett and her colleagues continue our exploration of the topic from the students’ perspective with a discussion of the importance of including the often-missing voice of undergraduate students in our determination of how to address generic attributes in our curricula and teaching. They report on a study comparing teachers’ and students’ contrasting perceptions of the relative importance of particular attributes. The authors point to some interesting challenges in terms of students’ changing expectations and understandings in this regard as they progress through their studies.

The paper from Debra Bath and colleagues moves the discussion of the conceptual base for such attributes to another level, approaching it from the perspective of quality assurance. The authors report on a common quality assurance response to generic attributes—that of curriculum mapping. The paper discusses the limitations of simplistic responses to this task and reports on a process of action learning which grew from such a mapping activity and led to the creation of a better understood and hence more valid and relevant curriculum for the development of graduate attributes.

The paper by Jennifer Sumsion and Joy Goodfellow also takes as its point of departure the process of curriculum mapping and, much like that of Bath et al., it points to the need for an extended dialogue about the process rather than a surface level engagement in the task of mapping the curriculum. The discussion here focuses on the need for members of the academic community to incorporate reflection and clarification in the underlying meaning of the outcomes we seek to map.

The next paper is a ‘big picture’ paper which also approaches the topic from the perspective of evaluation. Glen Rogers and Marcia Mentkowski report on an investigation of the outcomes of one of the most widely known and longest established generic attributes initiatives—that of Alverno College in the USA. The article looks at the outcomes of this revolutionary curriculum from the perspective of alumni and relates these to the program teachers’ understandings.

The final paper in the issue is from Rob Gilbert and colleagues and is based on a study currently underway into the doctoral curriculum in Australia. The paper presents research higher degrees as an emerging site for further research into the topic of generic attributes. Interestingly the paper notes the emergence of similar questions and issues that have plagued efforts to develop appropriate pedagogies around generic attributes in the undergraduate curriculum.

Seen as whole, these papers highlight the importance of considering the theoretical
and conceptual basis for generic attributes. Related to this the papers underline the importance of allowing space within familiar higher education activities (such as curriculum development and quality assurance) for discussion and inquiry into the conceptualizations underpinning and implicit in these activities. While raising these challenges, the papers in this issue also hold out the promise of new insights and knowledge. We hope these insights might prompt further questions and inquiry and contribute to informing research-led approaches to academic and curricula development in relation to the generic attributes of graduates.

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