Overview of the key elements of the University of Sydney Graduate Attributes implementation strategy

The staff development requirements to enable the implementation of the University’s Graduate Attributes (GA) policy need to be considered in relationship to the various elements that constitute the University’s efforts to achieve and assure the intended graduate attributes. As such it is first necessary to outline the elements of these efforts. The university has identified two tiers of graduate attributes as the core outcomes of a university education in its GA policy.

1. The first tier identifies three overarching outcomes which relate to dispositional stances or ways of thinking and being that characterise our graduates: These are described as Scholarship, Global Citizenship and Lifelong Learning. The development of these attributes draws on the broader student experience of belonging to a university community to integrate attributes developed in their courses. This will require the university to make the most of the many opportunities that already exist for student engagement in university life and identify additional opportunities where possible for:

   - disciplinary and transdisciplinary student engagement in the collegial life and governance of the university,
   - engagement with academics across the university community through participation in the opportunities afforded by academics’ teaching, research and service work,
   - student engagement with extracurricular activities such as study abroad programs,
   - student engagement with clubs and societies and
   - engagement with other students.

Such attributes are complex, rarely explicit and do not readily lend themselves to short term assessment, developing as they do throughout and beyond a student’s program of study. In addition to work to make it possible and beneficial for students to more productively engage as a members of a vital university community, a strategy, such as student portfolio, by which they can record the benefits of this engagement is required.

2. The second level of attributes is defined in terms of clusters of more explicit and assessable outcomes identified under the five headings of: Research and inquiry, information literacy communication, personal and intellectual autonomy and ethical social professional understandings. The attributes under each of these headings have been variously defined by different faculties and disciplines in consultation with staff, students, employers and external bodies. All the different faculties have used the same five headings to ensure a degree of coherence across the institution.

The development of these attributes should be integral to student learning in their units of study and courses. As such this requires the university make explicit for students the focus on learning and development of these attributes in their studies through:

   - The integration of relevant graduate attributes in stated unit of study learning outcomes and the effective communication of these to students,
   - The integration of relevant graduate attributes with the taught content of units of study
   - The use of curricula (eg work integrated learning), teaching techniques and strategies (eg those that encourage active student learning) to effectively provide learning opportunities that promote the development of graduate attributes
   - The explicit assessment of graduate attributes in assessment tasks and their inclusion in assessment criteria.

These strategies are essentially those strategies which promote good teaching and learning. The university already has many effective graduate attributes development and support strategies in place which can be built upon and disseminated.
3. These graduate attributes strategies (1. engagement in university life and 2. the development of graduate attributes as an integral element of existing units and courses) are supported by essential co-curricular skills development initiatives. These co-curricular activities provide useful additional learning opportunities for particular sub-elements of graduate attributes development or provide important foundation skill development opportunities for students new to university. These include:

- Foundation level generic skills modules, either as stand-alone units of study or as additional modules especially for first year students or as specific learning activities integrated into core first year units of study.
- Provision of additional learning support for students in relation to foundation level generic skills either through peer assisted study or by specialist learning support providers
- Co-curricular learning opportunities such as employment or internship experiences targeting the development of particular skills throughout a degree.

The university already has many excellent co-curricular strategies in place eg Sydney Talent's student employment service, information literacy modules provided by the library, writing support provided by the Learning Centre, online self study modules on plagiarism developed by faculties etc. however there is little coordination of these resources for staff or students.

All three elements are needed for an effective strategy:

- The provision of co-curricular skills development initiatives as a foundation for GA development
- The integration of GA into student learning in their units of study and courses
- The development of GA which draws on the broader student experience of belonging to a university community.

The three components should be coordinated to provide a coherent student experience at the university. While co-curricular strategies provide valuable support for graduate attributes development throughout a degree, they do not, on their own, constitute an effective strategy for the development of the university’s graduate attributes. In a similar fashion, the expectation that students will develop graduate attributes in the course of their learning in their disciplinary subjects is predicated on them possessing the foundations skills developed by such co-curricular strategies. To use the experience of participating in a university community to develop the higher level integrated attributes requires that students have developed the necessary component attributes through their disciplinary studies.

Having sketched out some of the key elements of the University of Sydney’s implementation strategies for developing graduate attributes, it is now possible to consider the staff development strategies relevant to these.

The general issues related to staff development strategies for graduate attributes were identified in a national study of all Australian universities graduate attributes activities funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council in 2008. One of the discussion papers developed for that project provides a succinct overview of the staff development issues which is helpful before considering the specific recommendations which follow in regard to the University of Sydney.

**Proposed University of Sydney GA staff development strategies**

The following strategies were proposed, for discussion, through the 2009 Provost’s Working Group, to support the University of Sydney’s development of graduate attributes.

Different staff development strategies are required in relation to each of the three strands of the University’s strategy to achieve and assure GA:

**Strand A: The provision of co-curricular skills development initiatives as a foundation for GA development**
Strand B: The integration of GA into student learning in their units of study and courses
Strand C: The development of GA which draws on the broader student experience of belonging to a university community

The following staff development initiatives are recommended as priorities in light of the current University of Sydney situation in relation to ongoing efforts to achieve graduate attributes.

Strand A: Co-curricular skills development initiatives as a foundation to GA development:

1. Strategy: Provide central support and resources for development of additional co-curricular resources and promotion and uptake of existing resources:

1 (a) Provide curriculum development support and leadership through the coordinated input of various experts around the university to enable the development of additional co-curricular units of study, modules and learning opportunities to supplement the excellent resources and opportunities already provided. This process is already underway through the three curriculum development groups established by the current Provost’s Graduate Attributes Working Group and the development of the new BLAS.

1 (b) Identify collate and promote the existing University co-curricular resources to promote and improve access by staff and students to these resources, and to identify gaps in current provision to inform future development work. A cataloguing of the University’s available foundations skills development resources and co-curricular skills development initiatives was last undertaken in 2003 and significant new resources have been developed since. This cataloguing process could be initially be facilitated by staff from the ITL, Careers Unit and the Learning Centre and promoted by the DVC (Education).

1 (c) Identify additional staff development needs to enable ongoing co-curricular resource development.

Strand B: The integration of GA into student learning in their units of study and courses

This is the area still requiring additional significant staff development input in the short term. In light of available resources for staff development for teaching and learning a range of strategies are required. This aspect is particularly relevant given recent Australian and international quality assurance developments relating to assurance of program level learning outcomes.

2. Strategy: Establish and extend networks of staff who have a good understanding of the university’s GA policy and expertise in teaching, curriculum design and program level leadership for GA:

2. (a) Build on and link; existing faculty-based, program level networks, faculty based industry and professional association networks, and the ITL GA network of faculty based and institutional leaders for GA initiatives – to address a new focus on program level assurance of learning standards: In response to national (AUQA/TEQSA) and international (AHELO) quality assurance developments, there is a need to develop new institutional strategies to assure standards of program level learning outcomes. In essence this requires the implementation and assurance of the faculty based statements of graduate attributes. A considerable amount of progress towards establishing a leadership group was made during the consultation involved in the development of the university’s GA policy statement and more particularly in faculties in the development of the faculty specific statements of graduate attributes. This was facilitated by the first GA working group which included representation for all faculties and key central units (Careers Unit, Library, Learning Centre etc). This group had well established connections with the professional accreditation and industry liaison groups within faculties. This group needs to be re-established and
linked with other faculty based networks/groups with expertise in relation to program level curriculum design. This would create a network of key individuals within faculties who could be brought together to lead conceptual change and practical teaching development and standards-based assurance of program learning outcomes activities within the faculties. It would be helpful to re-establish this network with appropriate institutional leadership and endorsement.

2 (b) Link graduates of existing teaching development programs to this network as potential collaborative peer staff and teaching development agents and collaborators on faculty based (TIES) projects. The development of an understanding of GA policy and GA teaching strategies are built into all the university’s core teaching and learning development programs including the Principles and Practice orientation program for all staff and the year-long Graduate Certificate in university teaching and learning which is mandatory for new staff in some faculties and voluntarily used by staff in many more. This course currently graduates between 40 – 50 staff a year, mostly academic teaching staff in faculties but also staff from central units such as the library, who, along with over 200 alumni of the course provide a ready-made network of informed staff in the area of graduate attributes. They provide a potential network of individuals across every faculty, and many key central units of the university who could support collegial staff development and curriculum development work in the faculties if this sort of work could be recognised and rewarded appropriately.

3. Use GA network to provide local, practical mentoring and peer teaching development support for teachers seeking to better integrate the teaching of GA in their units of study and courses

3 (a) Provide central support from ITL, Learning Centre and other sources of expertise for faculty leaders and the network to disseminate effective teaching and learning practice in relation to GA through activities incorporating conceptual change in relation to an understanding of GA as core outcomes of a university education rather than a set of additional generic skills. These activities might include collaborations drawing on existing resources such as ‘databases of best practice GA curricula’ and ‘GA toolkits’ etc to develop and run faculty projects on the theme of assurance of program level learning outcomes supported by:

- staff development workshops and forums on understanding the faculty GA statements
- Discussion sessions using examples of faculty practice to develop an understanding of standards of program level learning outcomes
- Faculty mapping and course curriculum planning projects and discussions, either in the context of support for accreditation or general course curriculum review processes.
- Faculty workshops on writing learning outcomes which communicate GA to students
- Faculty workshops on practical teaching strategies to foster GA such as group work and facilitating active student engagement in large classes.
- Faculty workshops on assessing learning outcomes in ways which make tangible to development of program level GA for students
- Mentorship programs for new teachers seeking to improve their teaching in relation to graduate attributes

4. Establish systems and structures which support and reward staff and faculty engagement in integrating graduate attributes in their own curricula and in supporting new colleagues to do the same.

In addition to developing staff skills in integrating GA the issue of staff motivation must be addressed. As noted in the proceeding discussion paper drawn from the ALTC study, there is little meaningful motivation for staff to engage in activities to implement graduate attributes. In part this is because they don’t necessarily understand GA as something that they would want to be involved in implementing (hence the need for the conceptual change strategies outlined above) but even when they do agree this is an important activity there is not sufficient inducement to spend time on this in the face of more pressing demands. This requires a multipronged approach:
4 (a) **Provide teaching systems that promote and support effective teaching in relation to the University’s GAs.** This might include provision of unit of study data repositories which facilitate mapping of GAs, provision of assessment tools which facilitate the recording of assessment data in relation to GAs, A student portfolio system with an architecture which mirrors the University’s GAs etc. These resources already exist or are under development.

4 (b) **Develop GA quality assurance systems and ensure appropriate regular reporting of these.** The University’s current teaching quality assurance tools and strategies all address GA integration however there is no regular reporting of the data gathered by these processes at either faculty or university level. There is scope to further enhance the existing tools to assure GA outcomes (see ALTC discussion paper on QA) once the current reporting processes are enacted.

4 (c) **Develop recognition and reward systems that provide meaningful motivation for academic staff to engage in teaching and curriculum development work to enhance graduate attributes outcomes for students in their units of study or courses.** Integrate recognition of GA teaching and curriculum development work in PMD processes and workload allocations, develop systems to encourage GA teaching and curriculum development work through teaching grants, awards and promotions processes.

4 (d) **Develop recognition and reward systems to motivate expert faculty staff to provide GA mentoring and peer support for teaching and curriculum development work (see point 2 & 3 above) to colleagues seeking to enhance their GA teaching skills or undertake GA curriculum review and development.**

5. **Leadership development:** Unless institutional and faculty leadership is provided then individual efforts to develop GA can become fragmented and, in some cases, counterproductive. Support and engagement by Faculty and departmental leaders needs to be achieved through institutional and faculty level endorsement for initiatives and the participation of Heads of Department, Schools and Faculty leaders. This engagement requires targeted input for other faculty and central unit leaders on GA through the SEG, the ITL A/Deans group, liaison with the Sydney Learning leadership program and the provision of invited seminars for these groups.

**Strand C: The development of GA which draws on the broader experience of belonging to a university community.**

While the development of the discipline based graduate attributes (described in Strand B above) goes a long way towards the achievement of the university’s graduate attributes, there are additional attributes which are developed on the basis of these disciplinary attributes, through the students participation in a university community of learners and researchers.

This requires longer term development strategies which draw on the University of Sydney’s strengths and mission in relation to its research excellence its commitment to supporting the lifelong learning of members of Australian society and its participatory global citizenship aspirations.

Optimising the potential of these strengths for the learning and development of graduates requires

6. **Creating a Sydney community:** Fostering those institutional qualities as the hallmarks of the experience of working (and studying) at Sydney.

7. **Making these links explicit to students** through better articulation of the benefits of learning in a research intensive university and through new Service Learning initiatives

8. **Fostering student engagement in extracurricular learning opportunities** – study abroad, student exchange programs, participation in clubs and societies.
9. **e-Portfolios** - Supporting student recording of development of graduate attributes through supporting students in developing self awareness of their development of these attributes and expertise in articulating these in the form of a record of assessment such as an e-portfolio.

*Simon Barrie*

*Draft for discussion March 2009*