Rethinking Generic Graduate Attributes

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The issue of Generic Skills has received considerable attention over recent years as universities seek to renew and articulate their purposes and demonstrate the efficient achievement of these, particularly in response to calls for accountability. As an articulation of the core outcomes of higher education as a process (HEC 1992) generic skills (or generic attributes as they are also known) are an obvious focus for such quality assurance activities. However, despite the high level of interest from government, employers, society and students, as well as the recent flurry of curriculum development activities (see B/HERT 2003), earlier concerns (Clanchy & Ballard 1995) as to the flimsy theoretical or conceptual basis for generic skills have persisted.

In a time where ‘research-led and evidence-based’ approaches to teaching and curriculum development are expected (Prosser & Barrie 2003), this lack of a sound theoretical basis from which to plan and monitor improvements is a significant concern. Instead of being research-led, much of the current activity around generic attributes is grounded in the assumptions and presumptions which characterised the re-emergence of the generic skills agenda in the early nineties.

The University of Sydney has attempted, in a small way, to address this missing conceptual basis as part of its five-year institutional project on generic graduate attributes. The project does not pretend to have all the answers in terms of the theoretical basis for generic skills, however it does provide one perspective from which we might move forwards. This article outlines the background to the university's Generic Graduate Attributes Project and invites other members of the higher education community to participate in the next stages of this work.

Universities’ claims of certain generic qualities on behalf of their graduates are not new. Indeed the University of Sydney’s first statement of generic attributes of graduates dates back to 1862, and there are similar statements to be found in the archives of American universities (Yale has an interesting 1828 statement) and in many British universities. While today’s statements of generic attributes undoubtedly have their roots in these early statements, in Australia these days ‘Generic Graduate Attributes’ are considered to be;

The qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future. (Bowden et al., 2000)

Statements of such graduate attributes have become commonplace in Australian universities over the last decade. In fact, since it was made a condition of government funding a few years ago, every university in Australia now has a statement of the generic attributes of its graduates. However, one wonders if every graduate of each of these universities lives up to the rhetoric of these statements.

Certainly the recent round of AUQA audits of universities have focussed renewed attention on the question of what universities actually do to achieve such generic learning outcomes in their graduates. In most cases the AUQA audits have revealed the need for more systematic addressing of generic attributes in curricula. However, even in cases where initiatives were noted to be in place, the evidence typically advanced in support of institutional claims is restricted to policy statements and relatively surface mapping strategies (see Sumsion & Goodfellow 2004 for a discussion of the pitfalls of mapping). At the very least it seems reasonable to expect that universities might provide evidence that they have appropriate teaching and learning strategies in place (see Bath et al 2004) to realise claims that their graduates are likely to have achieved such outcomes. Possibly even to provide evidence through assessment practices that their graduates have actually achieved such outcomes. The only outcome measure advanced by most Australian universities relates to data from the national Course Experience...
Questionnaire, which probes graduates' perceptions of the development of some very simplistic formulations of generic skills, (formulations which are often unrelated to the universities' specific claims of generic attributes). In addition to the AUQA results, recent surveys of Australian employers (DETYA 2000) and two recent national reports (Hager et al 2002, Bowden et al 2000) have also pointed to the need for significant curriculum reform to fulfil universities' current claims of generic graduate attributes. Indeed many universities have taken up this challenge in recent years and several major whole-institution curriculum development initiatives are now underway in Australia (B/HERT 2003).

The interest in generic attributes is of course not restricted to Australia. In the UK generic or key/core skills have been part of the HEFCE agenda for many years, albeit with a more 'employable skills' focus in recent years. Unlike Australia, UK universities' efforts to foster the development of such skills have sometimes received extensive government funding. However, in a review of practice in the UK, Drummond et al (1998) came to the conclusion that despite the existence of some excellent isolated initiatives the overall picture in regard to graduate attributes and the higher education curriculum is one of patchy uptake and implementation.

The overall picture of personal and transferable skills in the UK higher education sector is not very encouraging. Certainly there is little evidence of effective practice on any large scale. There is however considerable evidence to suggest that, sometimes major, development programs have had only limited success. (Drummond et al 1998 p.23)

In light of the recent flurry of curriculum development initiatives in Australian universities and this not very optimistic picture of the outcomes of major initiatives in the UK, it is perhaps worth considering why these initiatives in the UK have met with such limited success. This seems particularly prudent as the current round of major Australian innovation and development initiatives seem unlikely to receive the additional government funding that supported such undertakings in the UK.

For many years authors have been critical of the lack of a coherent theoretical model underpinning the generic skills agenda (Bennet et al 1999). The absence of a conceptual base is perhaps best exemplified in the variety of terms that are used - apparently interchangeably - to describe these generic outcomes. Are skills the same as qualities? Certainly competencies are not the same as capabilities to many authors. And what is the basis for assuming these outcomes are generic or transferable? These are but a few of the challenges pointing to the need for clarification about what we mean by generic skills. A further pointer to the confusion that permeates the area can be found in the lists of generic skills / attributes / competencies (pick a term!) themselves. In many cases the lists position what might be termed broad motherhood statements (along the lines of 'graduates will be ethical') alongside low-level technical skills, (for instance 'graduates will be able to use a computer'). Beyond the variation in the policy statements there is variation in the way policy is interpreted, (or not), by the academics responsible for implementing curricula to foster the development of such generic attributes (see for example the wealth of initiatives in publications such as Fallows and Steven, 2000). As various authors have noted:

The complexity associated with the development of these skills coupled to their permeation throughout courses ….leads to a level of confusion which is unacceptable. (Kemp & Seagraves 1995 p 327)

In light of this apparent complexity and confusion, the absence of a theoretical or conceptual basis from which to address graduate attributes is of concern, particularly if we are to take a research-led and evidence-based approach to our teaching. Moreover, if as academics, we are unclear as to what exactly we are aiming at, then it seems reasonable to expect that students will be even less clear as to what they should be learning and employers and society at large will be unsure of what they are getting in the way of graduates.

In seeking to avoid the 'patchy' implementation that has characterised generic attributes initiatives in the UK and with the aim of fostering approaches to teaching and curriculum development that are based in research evidence, the University of Sydney initiated a graduate attributes initiative that is somewhat different to many of the other initiatives currently underway in Australian universities. Rather than simply updating and mapping its existing list of graduate attributes as it had in the past, the university embarked on a five year project which sought to first establish a conceptual basis for its work in this area. The initial research used a phenomenographic approach to identify the key aspects of (the considerable!) variation
in how academics understood the concept of generic attributes in the context of the courses they taught. The differences found did not simply reflect discipline backgrounds, they represented quite different ways of thinking about the nature and place of generic attributes amongst the more familiar 'content' outcomes of university learning. The variation identified went a long way towards explaining the variability in uptake in generic attributes curricula at the university. The understandings ranged from a belief that such attributes were not even part of a university course to more complex understandings that encompassed differing relationships between generic attributes and discipline knowledge (Barrie 2004). Accompanying these different understandings of 'outcomes', were different approaches to teaching these attributes. These ranged from variations of teacher-focussed approaches to learner-focussed approaches and learning community engagement approaches, with the resultant differences in the quality of the learning outcomes achieved (Barrie, 2003).

Building on these findings the university formulated a two-tiered policy statement of graduate attributes based on the two most complex conceptualisations identified in the research. The policy's top-level attributes recognise that some generic outcomes are complex interwoven aspects of human ability, which are difficult to explicitly teach or assess in traditional university experiences. In the context of the University of Sydney these have been described as Scholarship, Global Citizenship and Lifelong Learning. Attributes that might be described as attitudes or stances that allow a graduate to prosper in a postmodern world (Barnett 2004). The second tier abilities are a different way of understanding these overarching abilities, a more explicit way, and one that is realised differently in different discipline contexts. At this level generic attributes are realised as clusters of personal skills and abilities. These clusters of attributes were identified as (1) Research and Inquiry, (2) Information Literacy, (3) Personal and Intellectual Autonomy, (4) Ethical Social and Professional Understanding and (5) Communication.

There are other, less complex understandings in the hierarchy of conceptions of generic attributes which are also important as they support these more complex ways of viewing generic attributes. While not articulated in the statement of generic attributes, the revised policy recognises the role of these foundation skills initiatives (as we have called them) in providing the basis for the development, in the context of the usual courses taught at the university, of the university's graduate attributes. It even recognises the role of initiatives that might be broadly classed as university preparation courses. Such preparatory conceptualisations are not of themselves sufficient for developing graduate attributes, but they can provide a necessary basis from which students can work to develop graduate attributes (for a full discussion of this see Barrie, in press).

This different approach to developing a statement of generic attributes brings to light the underlying assumptions academics hold regarding the place of a graduate attributes in university curricula. Rather than seeking to impose a single 'correct' definition, the approach recognises the reality of such disparate understandings and incorporates these in a university's statement of graduate attributes. A key aspect of the Project's approach was the formation of university wide working group. Rather than just establishing yet another committee, the project sought to foster the development of a learning community within the working group. The aim was to establish a space in which different voices could be heard and the disparate understandings of generic attributes recognised and learnt from (see Bowden and Marton 1998 for a discussion of learning in this sort of community). Using this perspective, it was possible for the University's existing conglomerate list of different types of generic graduate attributes to be reorganised, rather than redeveloped from scratch, and the role of the different types of initiatives already in place to be recognised. More importantly from the point of view of the project's success, the approach provides a vocabulary that allows debate and discussion about graduate attributes that goes beyond the assumption of a shared meaning implied by a shared vocabulary.

I mean, we all think communication skills are important don’t we?……….. But what do you mean by communication skills?

Because the second tier of the policy recognises the embedded and contextual nature of graduate attributes each faculty has taken responsibility for developing its own statement of graduate attributes under the structure identified. The approach taken was a highly consultative one, with the different faculties of the university validating the new policy framework through consultations with their respective staff, employer and student groups. This means that the staff and students of the university now have a clear articulation of what the attributes of (for example) Research and Inquiry are like at the Sydney Conservatorium and in the Faculty of Science, and what the Communication attributes are of graduates of
the Sydney College of the Arts as well as of the Faculty of Economics and Business. These statements are available on the project web site at [http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/interpretations.cfm](http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/interpretations.cfm).

As well as supporting work within the university, these faculty statements are being used by researchers at other universities to investigate areas such as research-led teaching (Hoddinot and Wuetherick in preparation - come to the HERDSA 2005 conference for an update!).

More interestingly still, the different faculties in the University are embarking on a range of research and development initiatives to investigate the teaching and learning of graduate attributes in their contexts. The development and assessment of critical thinking skills in Agriculture and a PhD Scholarship in Engineering investigating the relationship between the faculty’s attributes, curriculum and professional standards are just two examples. Because of the common framework of five second-tier attributes, there appears to have been great acceptance of applying ideas from one discipline context to another and of collaborating across disciplines. Hopefully this is something that will get over the ‘you can’t do that on my discipline’ and the ‘not invented here’ syndromes that plague dissemination and uptake of teaching ideas.

To further facilitate the exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas we are starting to build a database of teaching and learning initiatives that address each of the attribute clusters. These are collected under the common framework of the five second-tier attributes: (1) Research and Inquiry, (2) Information Literacy, (3) Personal and Intellectual Autonomy, (4) Ethical Social and Professional Understanding and (5) Communication. We have opened up the database to contributions from colleagues in other institutions in Australia and overseas. You are welcome to read the statement of attributes developed by colleagues in your discipline here at the University of Sydney and, if you feel you have a teaching and learning idea that you would like to share, submit a case study under the relevant attribute. You can submit a one-page case study through the easy to use web site at [http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/casestudyInput.cfm](http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/GraduateAttributes/casestudyInput.cfm).

The project is still in its early stages and with three more years to run we are certain we still have major hurdles to face in implementation. In particular, the specification of graduate attributes in the way we have means a need to foster student-focused approaches to teaching. This is because the research found that such approaches were consistently associated with these conceptions of graduate attributes. Currently we are grappling with the best way to integrate generic attributes in statements of learning outcomes at a unit of study level. Related to this is the vital challenge of developing assessment criteria and standards that relate to these new outcomes. It is these criteria that will make graduate attributes a reality in how students approach learning at the university. An even greater assessment challenge we are still to face is how to incorporate the rich diversity of out-of-class student learning experiences associated with engaging in a learning community like a university. The development of assessment portfolios that are integrated with course and subject assessment is something we are investigating in this regard.

While the project is only just moving into the implementation phase, we are already finding that there is a high level of ownership and buy-in across the institution. Staff in faculties are now engaging in institutionally supported and recognised research and development projects, collaborating across the usual faculty divides and contributing and supporting to the vibrant learning community that is forming around the project working group. Recent feedback from one of the faculty members of the project suggests that in part this because of the different way the project has used the research findings to frame its work:

*This is one of the most useful and vibrant working groups I’ve been involved in here……. It has been so helpful to have a common language to talk about what we do and to learn about what other faculties do………… Being able to go back and talk to my colleagues and understand where their barriers and resistance are coming from and also knowing that what we are doing lines up with what is happening across the university makes it so much easier to get change happening. (Working Group Member 2005).*

The project’s achievements to date are very much the result of the contributions and commitment shown by all members of the working group. Clearly its achievements in the next implementation stage will be even more dependent on their efforts and without then the project would not be viable. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank my colleagues in the Graduate Attributes Working group for their
contribution to the project. On behalf of the group I would also like to invite other HERDSA colleagues to get in touch with us if they would like to participate in the project, particularly through sharing case studies of their teaching and curriculum initiatives or through benchmarking our faculty statements and curricula with colleagues in other universities.

References


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