The National Graduate Attributes Project (GAP): Key issues relevant to the successful integration and assessment of graduate attributes

Phase One of the National Graduate Attributes Project identified seven aspects of institutional policy and strategy which seem to be key to the successful embedding and achievement of graduate attributes. Within each of these areas, literature reviews and discussion with experts in the field highlighted a variety of ways these might impact – positively or negatively - on universities’ efforts to achieve graduate attributes. A range of ‘indicative’ responses is included under each issue to give a flavour for the ways these might impact.

Key Issues

1. **Conceptualisation:** The different understandings the individuals involved have, about the very notion of graduate attributes, have been shown to influence how they write policy, design curriculum and approach the problem of integration.

   Indicative responses include:
   
   1. “People (teachers as well as policy writers) have very different ideas about what graduate attributes are and how we should go about developing them, and we haven’t spent enough time getting everybody on the same page before we started trying to change things.”
   2. “Until people really start to grapple with the concept of generic attributes they think they can be dealt with simply by making sure the important outcomes are included on the university’s list.”
   3. “People think it is simply about showing teachers “how” to ‘integrate’ generic attributes, its not. The people trying to implement this change haven’t recognised that it brings up fundamental questions about the purpose of a university – not to mention the problems of positioning students as consumers. Most implementation strategies just ignore these bigger issues.”
   4. “The university has delegated responsibility for the generic attributes initiative to the Careers Centre who understandably approach it from a different perspective than the assessment working party used to.”

2. **Implementation:** The way a university coordinates its approach to the integration and achievement of GGAs (from university policy to quality measurement and assurance) is one of the most influential drivers of how well they are embedded.

   Indicative responses include:
   
   5. “There are no meaningful consequences for staff for not following the policy on embedding and assessing GGA development – and no real rewards if they do!”
   6. “We have attempted to create a fully aligned approach – starting first with research to inform our policies on GGAs, then support staff and curriculum development, and finally developed an approach to student assessment and QA that sealed the deal.”
   7. “We have a policy but no coherent implementation strategy to alter the student experience so what tends to happen is that individuals interested in embedding and assessing GGAs have just gone their own way; this just results in a lot of chaos!”
8. “We find that the importance of the GGA agenda keeps changing with changes in leadership (VCs, DVC(A)s, Heads of Faculty/School etc). That lack of continuity has made sustaining long-term Generic Graduate Attributes initiatives difficult.”

3. Stakeholders: Diverse groups have quite different perspectives on the development, articulation and application of GGAs – policy makers, students, curriculum developers, marketers, professional associations, industry groups.

Indicative responses include:

9. “The creation of our institutional Graduate Attributes was the result of engagement by the academic community in widespread discussion and debate.”

10. “The different stakeholder groups have developed a shared understanding of our institutional graduate attributes.”

11. “Assessment and feedback has encouraged student awareness of the Graduate Attributes they are developing.”

12. “Professional accreditation has helped bring all stakeholder groups into alignment around graduate attributes.”

13. “Our graduate attributes are primarily a marketing response to employer feedback.”

4. Type of curriculum approach: The approach to curriculum planning (eg. is it decided by individual teachers or is it a whole degree approach) and the models used (e.g. PBL) are intimately connected to how the university goes about achieving graduate attributes.

Indicative responses include:

14. “It’s left entirely up to individual teachers to decide if, and how, to integrate Generic Graduate Attributes into their subject.”

15. “We have gone through the motions of changing our curriculum - but really nothing has changed except that we use some graduate attributes words in our course outlines.”

16. “The university management’s decision to restructure the undergraduate degrees means the whole university’s curriculum model determines and constrains the implementation of Generic Graduate Attributes.”

17. “We had a project to embed Graduate Attributes but after a while we realised it meant we had to change all aspects of teaching and learning.”

18. “In this university, a faculty/course/program adopts a curriculum model like ‘work integrated learning’ or includes a practicum component or introduces PDP, to achieve Graduate Attributes.”

19. “The faculty’s new degree planning & review team process helps us to take collective responsibility for any particular degree and ensures students achieve Graduate Attributes.”

5. Assessment: The explicit embedding of GGAs in assessment provides convincing evidence of GGA policy implementation.

Indicative responses include:

20. “It’s difficult to assess things like ethical understanding, intellectual curiosity or lifelong learning so we don’t try to embed them”

21. “How does our assessment capture the development of attributes like problem-solving or oral communication as a student progresses through a program of study?”

22. “We’re relying on a supplementary portfolio assessment in some of our courses.”
6. **Staff development:** The way a university supports staff in the integration and achievement of GGAs is an important aspect.

Indicative responses include:

23. “Showing staff relevant teaching and assessment strategies is an effective way of ensuring the development and assessment of Graduate Attributes.”

24. “Staff development is crucial to getting GGAs embedded and assessed across curricula – without it, staff are left to do their own thing which just results in a mish-mash of poor practice.”

25. “Staff development is the wrong approach to this problem – because it treats all academics and disciplines the same, which just results in a one-size-fits-none outcome!”

26. “Staff have found developing and assessing Graduate Attributes very difficult and would appreciate and make use of any help they can get.”

7. **Quality Assurance strategies:** The way a university monitors and assures the integration and achievement of GGAs is one of the most influential drivers of how well they are embedded.

Indicative responses include:

27. “We use subject outline templates to monitor and report how we are embedding Generic Graduate Attributes.”

28. “There are effective Quality Assurance strategies in place for monitoring the development and assessment of Graduate Attributes.”

29. “We have mapped the teaching (but maybe not the learning) of graduate attributes in the curriculum.”

30. “Accreditation of the professional degrees has been the main driver for assuring that graduate attributes are visible in the curriculum for staff and students.”