Graduate Attributes and Career Development Learning

Some Ideas about Graduate Attributes, Career Development Learning and WIL
A preliminary discussion paper to the NAGCAS symposium, June 2008

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As a precursor to the NAGCAS forum I have been asked to briefly introduce some ideas about graduate attributes that might be pertinent to the discussion at the symposium. In doing so I will draw not only on some of the published research on graduate attributes, but on another ALTC (Carrićk) funded national scoping study which is currently underway. The study is the National Graduate Attributes Project (The National GAP) and it is exploring the barriers and affordances to Australian universities efforts to achieve graduate attributes through university education. This study is bringing to light some of the challenges encountered during a decade of efforts to reshape university curricula to achieve graduate attributes.

What this study has revealed is an interacting complex of factors that impact on an institutional undertaking such as the Graduate Attributes project. These include the following:

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 challenge of achieving GA.

2. **Systems**: The way a university coordinates its approach to the achievement of GAs (from university policy to quality measurement and assurance) is one of the most influential determinants of the success of the project.

3. **Stakeholders**: Diverse groups have different agendas in the development, articulation and application of GAs – policy makers, students, curriculum developers, marketers, professional associations, industry groups – and all must be engaged.

4. **Curriculum**: The approach to curriculum planning (e.g. 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.

5. **Assessment**: The explicit articulation of GAs in assessment provides convincing impetus (and evidence of) GA policy implementation.

6. **Staff Development**: The way a university supports staff in fostering the achievement of GGAs is an important aspect.

7. **Quality Assurance**: The way a university monitors and assures the development and achievement of GAs is one of the most influential drivers.

There are some aspects of each of these seven factors which are affordances and some, which are barriers. The second phase of the study, which is due to be completed in December 2008, examines the specific nature of these affordances and barriers however I will draw on some of the preliminary findings to date in the following pages.

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In providing this introduction I believe it is important to recognize that efforts to reshape higher education using graduate attributes (GA), career development learning (CDL) and work integrated learning (WIL) are not unrelated. While I will focus on GAs, I will attempt to make clear the relevance to the related CDL and WIL initiatives. I offer these observations in the hope that they will prompt a consideration of some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin these initiatives - as I believe it is on the rigour of these assumptions that they will ultimately succeed or fail.

All three projects are, in essence, efforts to align better educational ‘outcomes’ with better educational ‘processes’. In the case of the GA project; some would argue it is about defining new educational outcomes which are consistent with contemporary conceptions of knowledge, in the hope that the change to the education processes will follow – and in doing so move away from a narrow focus on transmission of content knowledge towards a focus on capability. With WIL the focus on process is perhaps more explicit and up-front with outcomes – authentic learning of employment relevant skills. For CDL – a slightly different set of abilities is in focus and related to these, another set of educational processes come into play. However these have much in common with aspects of the GA project – an observation I will return to later.

We all agree what we mean by Graduate Attributes….don’t we?
At the outset let me note that there is considerable variability as to how GA, WIL and CDL are understood – both by their supporters and opponents. This variation reflects more than the choice between different definitions. Beneath the appearance of a shared vocabulary there are fundamental differences in the way we conceive of these things. It is these fundamental understandings (or conceptualizations) and the assumptions that follow from them, more than any of the other seven issues we have identified thus far in the National GAP initiative, that trip universities up in their efforts to effect change.

Perhaps the importance of some of the underlying conceptions is not surprising given that all three ‘projects’ cannot escape the difficult fact that they are fundamentally engaged with questions as to the role of a university education in today’s society. As such, their endeavors touch on unresolved questions about the university’s role in moral development and in promulgating social values, which are important on a global scale. A discussion about graduate attributes is never far from questions such as: What is the role of a university education in equipping members of society to shape a better future for our planet? What is the role of a university in providing a skilled workforce to ensure the economic success of the nation state? What is the role of an education in providing citizens who can live personally fulfilled and satisfying lives in a world beset by religious and economic confrontation? To a varying degree such questions impinge on all three projects and the work of all three projects is sometimes hampered by the assumption that all those involved share similar understandings as to the relevance of questions – let alone the answers.

The way we think about graduate outcomes and the strategies we choose to achieve these outcomes already carry with them the seeds of our success or failure
Most people are familiar with the idea that the goal posts determine the way we play the game. The same is true of the goal posts of a university education. More over, the nature of the outcomes, and the nature of the educational processes used to achieve these outcomes, are intimately related. If we change the sorts of outcomes we are aiming for, then the sorts of educational experiences likely to develop those outcomes should also change. If we change the sorts of educational experiences we offer then we should not be surprised if the outcomes change. Sitting behind the ‘lists’ of desirable outcomes are multiple assumptions about the nature of these – and related to these- some inescapable assumptions about how they might be developed. This variation is summarized in a model I call the Conceptions of Graduate Attributes (COGA) model (Barrie 2006 & 2007). Some of the ways this variation plays out are illustrated in the sections that follow:

Are universities just about preparing graduates for work?
Graduate Attributes proponents would argue that universities should be about educating graduates who have the sorts of flexible ways of thinking and being, which will allow them to thrive in today’s unpredictable, changing and pluralistic world. An important part of a graduate’s world is the world of work, and work is also likely to be the main way in which graduates can shape society. However, work is not all there is to life and universities should equip graduates for life. So while work might be seen as possibly the most important context for the graduate to thrive in, it is not the only one. This means that the needs and demands of work should not be the only voice determining graduate qualities. Also, a bit like modern life - work is not the stable and familiar place it once was. Which
begs the question of which of a graduates future work environments should determine the required attributes? More importantly, all jobs need to be re-learnt regularly – not just once – so they are constantly changing. Indeed the successful graduates are likely to be the ones who will be creating these new jobs and re-inventing themselves and their work to keep pace with the changing world they live in. We should ask ourselves how we might capture that quality in our statements of attributes. Unfortunately however, the way ‘work’ appears to be conceived of in some formulations of graduate attributes, is somewhat less exciting – and more problematic. In some cases it is focused on work entry skills, and typically on discussions about what is needed now rather than what might be needed in the future. The stakeholder conversations that have contributed to the development of many statements of graduate attributes have often not reflected the complexity of the issue, for instance being reduced to a survey of HR staff about the top five things asked for in a job advert. In a similar fashion, such conversations are often limited by the language used in surveys. The issue remains however that for many of those working and researching in this field there is little relation between the lists of ‘employable skills’ and the sorts of underlying abilities and aptitudes required to thrive today’s world of work once you enter (and re-enter) it.

**Is university about skills training or transformational learning?**

Unfortunately what you need to thrive in today’s world – be it at work or play - are not the sorts of skills we often talk about as generic or employable skills. In fact what is needed are not ‘skills’ at all. What are needed are new sorts of knowledge and knowing that replace the old ways. Most statements of graduate attributes are based in ideas of ‘knowing what’ (Mode 1 knowledge - to borrow from Gibbons & Nowotny et.al, 1994) or sometimes ‘knowing how’ (Mode 2 knowledge). Unfortunately neither of these is sufficient to cope with today’s world. Indeed, most formulations of graduate attributes only focus on old fashioned ways of thinking about knowledge. What is needed is not a list of additional ‘employable/generic/soft’ skills – what is needed is a new way of talking about knowledge. This is where many attempts to use graduate attributes to reshape university education get off on the wrong foot.

The way we conceive of GA’s as knowledge, shapes the way we define them, measure them and develop them. And unfortunately talking about ‘ways of being in the world’ is still largely the province of philosophers – and some educational researchers. It certainly hasn’t made it into the way most university managers think about and talk about GA and is not yet part of the language used in discussions with employer groups or part of the usual list of skills generated from industry surveys. However, it is part of the literature on this topic and increasingly it is part of the language of professional accreditation bodies as they seek to articulate what it is about a university education that will keep their profession evolving.

**Conceptions of outcomes: Some of the dead ends inherent in the different ways universities have understood graduate attributes as “skills”**

GA are thought of by some people as a set of skills that can be defined independently of other sorts of knowledge – such as discipline knowledge. Thought about in this way, they are typically the sorts of ‘behavioural’ skills that people can be taught – usually by others who already possess them. For universities this often means they can be taught by somebody apart from the academic – so we see skills modules offered as an addition to the students’ usual curricula. This conveniently means there is no need to change the usual curricula. Because these skills are often about concrete behaviours they are easy to measure – so they lend themselves to mass-testing and inclusion in surveys. Interestingly they often don’t transfer well to new contexts – remaining instead tied to the context in which they are taught. Incidentally, all these things make them very good for maintaining the cultural status quo of an organisation or industry. Because they are easy to measure – they are frequent contenders in ‘entry level’ employable skills lists and have a tendency to come up in response to questions like ‘what are the top five skills you want from our graduates?’ or ‘what are the five things you see as weaknesses in today’s graduates?’. This conception of GA is as the sorts of things that everybody easily recognises as ‘generic skills’ and which are - on the surface - hard to disagree with – but they don’t actually hold up to much analysis. It is easy to say somebody doesn’t have team skills – it is much harder to articulate the complex interplay of attitudes, values and abilities that manifest in team skills. Interestingly – universities only ever seem to ask these sorts of questions of employers and employees – which is interesting. Perhaps it is because this is a conception of graduate attributes which has little room for the sorts of abilities that might be relevant to a graduate’s life in settings other than work. Indeed it is a rare university that asks its graduates about how their time at university equipped them to lead complex and satisfying personal lives – though perhaps we should. In this conception, the GA are generic skills. It is possible to talk about ‘problem solving skills’ without acknowledging that
the way you solve a problem is different in an architecture studio than it is in a youth crisis centre. Because they are generic, this sort of understanding is very helpful if you are developing national frameworks or skills lists. But is all that society (or indeed employers if we want to focus mainly on the world of work) and graduates need - another set of 'bolt-on' skills? If that was all that was missing from a university education then there would be a simple skills course that we could give to students - and that would be it. However that is not it. It would be hard to find an employer or a graduate who would see the solution to the challenges of tomorrow's society or tomorrow's graduate workplace, as being met by a set of content lectures with an accompanying set of skills classes on "teamwork". Yet that is the logical response if what we are aiming at is a set of low level generic skills of the sort often implied in employable or generic skills lists. From this conception of GA it is certainly not a big leap to 'generic skills training' and de-contextual 'generic skills' assessment. It is quite logical that they can be best taught by skills experts. Indeed, students don't really need to go to university to learn them. In this conception it is not surprising that academics don't see it as being their role to teach such skills and they certainly won't change their curriculum to address such outcomes. Most importantly of all - students don't see these skills as being an important part of with their university education – and as a consequence they don't learn or retain these skills taught in skills courses.

The conception of GA described above is called the 'Complementary' conception in the COGA model. There are other formulations of GA outcomes that lead to other responses on the part of universities and employers and these are summarized in the article 'A conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of graduate attributes' (Barrie 2007) if you are interested in reading more.

Curriculum Processes: Graduate Attributes and WIL

I noted earlier that these three projects were about linking outcomes and processes. Let us turn briefly to include a focus on processes as well as outcomes. WIL is a popular process that many universities have seen as the way to achieve the GA aspirations of university policy statements. I would argue it can deliver on GA aspirations very effectively - however it can be somewhat of a double edged sword. Firstly as a strategy WIL is only going to be as good as the outcomes it is aiming to achieve and if it is focused on developing low level skills then it will not necessarily deliver its full potential. As a strategy WIL tends to go beyond the limited perspective described above – however it can easily be reduced to the service of simple lists of behavioural skills if that is what is articulated as the outcomes. More usually though WIL curricula are based on an understanding of the outcomes of higher education as being about knowledge 'applied' or made real in the world. This is a conception of graduate attributes which appears to be particularly prevalent in the professional disciplines. This conception of graduate attributes is based in the idea of the theory-practice dichotomy, and the distinction between ‘knowing-what’ and ‘knowing-how’. A logical consequence of adopting this understanding of graduate attributes is that you need to teach students ‘knowing how’. It is hard to imagine teaching the students “how” without the use of elements of WIL such as; real life examples, case studies, the introduction of industry examples in lectures, the inclusion of practical experiences, placements and the introduction of work as curriculum. Authentic and relevant learning is good pedagogical practice and can bring a sense of coherence the whole curriculum. However, there is a risk that some stand-alone WIL curricula (for example placements or professional practice subjects), can be seen as sufficient to achieving the GA, thus obviating the need for more traditional parts of the curriculum to address these outcomes. This is made more likely if the conception of graduate attributes is in terms of those skills of application which are necessary to translate knowledge to real world practice. While such a conception renders graduate attributes as different in different knowledge and practice contexts, (they are shaped by the discipline and in turn they shape the discipline knowledge) they are still somewhat separate to content knowledge. From such a perspective on graduate attributes it is easy to divide up the university curriculum into theory (traditional) and applied (WIL) components and to relegate GA to the WIL component alone.

Combining a different type of GA outcome and the WIL process

Such a consequence of a WIL strategy is less likely if the conception of GA does not suggest this. The final understanding of GA that I will introduce is not of skills of application – rather it is one of GA as dispositions and ways of knowing. These are the sorts of GA outcomes I have previously suggested as being important for the demands of the modern life and work. In this conception GA no longer sit alongside knowledge – they are knowledge – just a different sort of knowledge to the sorts of knowledge that have traditionally been talked about in university statements of generic attributes. In this formulation of GA, it is not possible to split the teaching and learning of GA off from the ‘usual business’ of higher education, indeed they are a statement of the core business of educating future
citizens – not in terms of the content they will know – nor in terms of how they will be able to solve problems using that content – but instead in terms of how they will be able to create multiple ways of solving – or not – as yet unimagined problems – something that has many echoes with notions of capability (Stephenson) and supercomplexity (Barnett) and I would argue – those formulations of CDL which are predicated on work and careers being similarly complex and non-linear. Of relevance to the discussion of WIL and CDL – is the finding that these sorts of outcomes are not developed only by formal curriculum – be it a WIL curriculum or lectures, rather they are developed through the broad experiences of gaining an education. Every interaction is potentially a learning experience – and because variation and plurality sit at the heart of these sorts of GA students need to experience diversity in their learning. They need to learn across disciplines and contexts from a range of people with a range of perspectives. This fundamentally challenges the way universities are currently organized – not to mention who teaches and what is taught. However it does foreground a role for learning that draw on the rich diversity of experiences of work and life in general.

A glimpse of tomorrow in today’s universities

While such conceptions of GA do constitute a significant challenge to the way universities have operated in the past, there are already many examples of how universities are – potentially- moving towards creating these sorts of experiences. I say potentially because in the same way as a WIL curriculum can be restricted to the service of achieving low level outcomes, the sorts of learning potentially available from some recent university changes might easily be subverted by a focus on developing and assessing low level outcomes. However, the following do suggest to me new GA learning potential:

- Cross disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning is increasingly present as a key feature of UG curricula. This provides scope for students to experience a variety of forms of knowledge and work.
- Universities are diversifying the sort of people they employ to teach – conjoint appointments etc.
- Universities are diversifying the sorts of opportunities for students learn – learning from other aspects of the academic role – research and service as well as teaching
- Universities are expanding the range of contexts for students to learn in – especially through new WIL offerings; community outreach, virtual worlds, internship programs - though some of these remain limited by the conception of GA that underpins them.
- Universities are loosening the shackles of assessment – (eg, student owned portfolios) and this is key. However the different conceptions of GA play out particularly strongly in traditional course assessment (traditionally we assess what is measurable rather than what is important). Currently student portfolios are often supplementary and secondary – and like WIL – seen as the answer to the GA problem. However this use of portfolios as a separate assessment stream secondary to academic assessment embodies a somewhat limited conception of GA.

There are no doubt other examples, however, for the potential of these to be realised then everybody involved – especially the students – needs to understand the sorts of things that are being aimed at as outcomes. The messages sent in how we articulate the outcomes of a university education, the sorts of experiences we offer to students and the ways we measure and reward this learning are important. They can cultivate the sorts of initiative and creativity which allows us to thrive in a world of risk and change – or they can encourage us to stay safe and learn the behaviours that will be right in one context only. The challenge for university communities inherent in the GA project, is to find a way to make universities more like the pluralistic, changeable and exciting societies they are part of and it seems likely that both WIL and CDL have much to offer in that regard.

Some questions to re-focus you on WIL and CDL:

I promised I would end with some questions to prompt discussion about WIL and CDL:

1. How might CDL help universities avoid WIL inadvertently creating a second class curriculum whose role is perceived to be about appeasing calls for employable graduates in professional courses.
2. Is ‘career’ a limiting concept in CDL? …….isn’t it really about life development learning?

3. What would it take to get all the relevant members of the university community engaged in CDL in a way that would realize its potential?

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For further development following discussion at the NAGCAS symposium