Issues Paper 1: Conceptualisation

The different understandings people have, about the very notion of graduate attributes, have been shown to influence how they write policy, design curriculum and approach the development of graduate attributes.

There is considerable variation in how graduate attributes (GA) are thought about in universities and the wider community.

In some cases the variation reflects a focus on a particular context. An example of this might be a concentration on employability in a university with a vocational orientation and strong links to workplace learning. Other perspectives can be associated with the role the person plays in a university – a placement coordinator or an academic researcher or an industry recruiter. However, more fundamental variations are those concerning the sorts of learning outcomes GA are understood to be. For instance, they can be thought of as skills of varying levels of complexity, as abilities that sit in various differing relationships to discipline knowledge, and even as a reformulation of what has previously been thought of as discipline knowledge. These different ‘conceptions’ carry with them assumptions about how generic or discipline specific GA might be, how important they are in a university education, the mechanisms by which they might be taught and learned and assessed, and how efforts to achieve such outcomes might be facilitated and assured. These conceptions underpin the sorts of beliefs and values different people have about the teaching and learning of graduate attributes.

These variations play out in each of the other key institutional framework elements identified in this set of papers; namely the choice of institutional implementation strategies, the role of different stakeholders, the effectiveness of different curriculum and assessment strategies, as well as decisions about what constitutes valid quality assurance and how to approach staff development. More significantly, the various understandings about the nature of these supposedly ‘core outcomes of higher education’ (HEC, 1992) are communicated to, and made ‘real’ for, students through their experience of these same elements of university practices. What follows is an overview of some of the ways these different conceptions can play out in practice. Subsequent papers in this series consider the particular challenges for achieving GA posed by each of the elements of the institutional framework.

Context or Focus

Context is important as this goes to the heart of much of the dissent voiced by academic communities (‘GA are somebody else’s idea of what a university education should be about’), and a narrow focus on a particular context might also reflect some possible misperceptions about what GA actually are. Various recent papers in Australia have tried to articulate the relationship between GA and employability skills; though these attempts have not usually effectively addressed the variation in how either GA or employability skills are conceptualised. Lee Harvey (2001) provides a useful overview of the variation in how employability skills might range from what can be called ‘work-ready’ skills to ‘career success’ skills. It is often suggested that employability skills are a subset of GA. However, it is perhaps more useful to think of employability skills as being about how GA might be manifested in a particular context – that of work – rather than thinking of employability skills as a separate (sub) set of GA. It follows that the same GA might present differently in other non-employment contexts such as a purely research context or a social justice context. A key point in relation to the employability context is that GA are not about the skills required to get a job. Rather, they are the skills needed to thrive in a job. Interestingly, the abilities required to thrive and succeed are often the things employers also desire in their employees. However, they are harder to articulate – in lists or conversations or surveys or reports. This matter is explored further in the paper on Career Development Learning, Work-Integrated Learning and GA – (Barrie, 2008) but several of the key issues relevant for institutional attempts to articulate and achieve GA are introduced below.

The focus on GA primarily as employability skills of the sort needed for recruitment means that in some cases they are articulated in university policies and quality assurance strategies in ways similar to the lists of generic employability skills published by non-university organisations. The term ‘generic’ also suggests the attributes are not discipline specific, eg ‘problem solving skills’. Because of their simplicity and generality, such perspectives are often those explicit in institutional and sector-wide quality assurance
strategies – eg student surveys. (This focus often embodies the research finding described below as a ‘Complementary level’ conception of graduate attributes).

Other perspectives on GA privilege a professional association or accreditation focus. For many within universities, GA are approached in terms of attributes that are aligned with professional accreditation. This focus suggests disciplinary variation and means that advances in how professional bodies are thinking about accreditation are shaping how universities think about the knowledge they should develop in students. Professional bodies have far more sophisticated articulations of what it means to belong to their profession than the sorts of generic employability skills often articulated as general ‘work-ready’ skills. This is a considerable advance, however it limits the relevance of graduate attributes to professional contexts and degrees. (This parallels the research finding of a Translation level conception of GA discussed below and the disciplinary variation in graduate attributes argued for by many researchers eg Jones, 2006).

Other perspectives on GA take a broader view of graduates’ future activities and needs; one which goes beyond their future work activities. The majority of institutional approaches to GA in Australia see GA in the context of preparing graduates for life – of which work is an important part. This focus provides for a richer understanding of GA and incorporates both the previous contexts (recruitment and professional membership) though it is not limited to either of these. This focus often encompasses the Enabling conception described below. From this perspective the ‘context’ for application of GA is more diverse – hence the descriptions of GA are closer to ideas of human ‘capability’ than they are to ‘competence’ (Stephenson & Weil 1992). It also means that the contexts for learning these sorts of outcomes are broader than the workplace. Such a perspective on GA suggests that student learning does not only need to be extended to work integrated learning, but needs to draw on notions of ‘life-integrated’ learning – similar to service-learning (Bowdon, Billig & Holland, 2009) - and the broader college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Conceptions of outcomes and processes
While the focus on different contexts described above would suggest different institutional strategies in terms of GA, there is also a more far-reaching variation described in the research on academics’ conceptions of GA, which exists regardless of the focus on employment/profession/life. The variation in individuals’ conceptions of GA reported in the research literature (Barrie, 2006) plays out on a larger scale in institutional strategies and approaches to teaching and assessing GA. There are four quite different understandings of GA outcomes, and associated with these are logically related but distinctive understandings of teaching and learning processes, curriculum design, assessment tools and strategies and quality assurance frameworks. Some of these understandings are quite limiting – they will only ever achieve low level generic skills of the sort that could be more easily and cheaply achieved in short training courses, and are not the sorts of outcomes described by most Australian university policies as being relevant to a university education. However, many of these conceptions are apparent in Australian universities’ current practices around graduate attributes.

Precursor conceptions of attributes
There is a group of university strategies that reflects the perception that graduate attributes are only undifferentiated foundation skills (like English language proficiency or basic numeracy). These skills are separate from discipline knowledge and learning, but vital precursors to such learning. From the perspective offered by this understanding of graduate attributes, most students are expected to have these skills on entry. For those that do not, the development of such skills is best addressed by the provision of an additional remedial curriculum. This additional curriculum might take the form of a supplementary course on these skills or a series of remedial workshops or similar support provided by non-disciplinary teachers. In this conception, graduate attributes are not really about ‘graduates’ – and they are truly ‘generic’ – they are the same regardless of which academic discipline the student is entering.

Complementary conceptions of attributes
There is a second group of strategies that address graduate attributes as higher (university) level, additional generic skills outcomes that usefully complement or round out discipline knowledge. In these strategies, graduate attributes are understood to be functional, atomistic, personal skills that, while an important addition to disciplinary learning, are quite distinct from other university learning outcomes. They might be addressed by the inclusion of an additional unit (or units) of study in a course, an additional series of lectures or workshops within an existing unit, or through the inclusion of a particular learning task to address the development of these attributes. This additional graduate attributes curriculum is part of the usual course curriculum for all students. From the perspective of these strategies, graduate attributes do not interact with discipline knowledge and the attributes are essentially generic, although different attributes might be more or less important in the context of different disciplines. The term ‘generic skills’ is often associated with this understanding.
Translation conceptions of attributes

Other university strategies address graduate attributes as important university learning outcomes that allow students to make use of and apply discipline knowledge. These strategies position graduate attributes as clusters of personal attributes, cognitive abilities and skills of application. While still separate from discipline knowledge, graduate attributes are no longer seen as independent of this knowledge. Instead, the graduate attributes interact with, and shape, discipline knowledge (for instance, through the application of abstract or context-specific discipline knowledge to the world of work and society); and are in turn shaped by this disciplinary knowledge. Because of the relationship between graduate attributes and knowledge in the different disciplines, in these strategies, attributes are differentiated by the discipline context. Rather than being generic, graduate attributes are specialised and differentiated forms of underlying generic abilities are developed to meet the needs of a specific discipline or field of knowledge. Because of their intimate relation to discipline knowledge, these attributes are commonly developed within the context of usual classes, either as part of the standard course content, through the usual teaching processes of that content or (from a student-centred perspective) through the students’ engagement in the course. The term ‘graduate attributes’ is usually associated with this understanding.

Enabling conceptions of attributes

Other university strategies address graduate attributes not as learning outcomes parallel to discipline knowledge, but as abilities that sit at the heart of discipline knowledge and learning. Rather than clusters of attributes, graduate attributes are understood as interwoven networks of these clusters. These interwoven attitudes and capabilities give graduates a particular perspective or world-view (a way of relating to the world, or to knowledge, or to themselves). In these strategies, graduate attributes provide the skeleton for discipline knowledge and are learnt as an integral part of that knowledge though they are a set of ways of thinking and being which eventually transcend the discipline context in which they were originally acquired. They might be learnt as an integral element of students’ experience of courses, or through students’ engagement in the broader experience of participation in the university community. From this perspective, graduate attributes have the potential to outlast the ‘knowledge’ and contexts in which they were originally acquired. Moreover, they provide a framework for ongoing learning of new knowledge. In this conception graduate attributes can incorporate aspects of the development of institutional values and broader dispositions (Barnett 2000).

Individually, these four different conceptions lead almost inescapably to very different institutional strategies for universities. Depending on the type of strategy adopted, very different sorts of outcomes will be achieved. Some strategies – for instance, separate ‘skills’ courses, are likely to lead to the development of low level ‘generic’ skills, unconnected to other products of university learning. Other strategies, such as the involvement of employers in defining course learning outcomes, the use of industry cases and guest industry lecturers and importantly, the introduction of work related learning experiences, can lead to the development of the sort of work-ready capabilities that will ensure a smooth transition to the current work context for which graduates are being prepared – a good outcome as long as that work context is the one in which the graduate is employed, and the work context does not change. However, work contexts do change, and careers are not always planned and rarely linear. Other GA outcomes suggest learning strategies that go further and involve changing the educational experiences of the university rather than simply adding to them. These strategies integrate the development of GA within a newly broadened teaching and learning experience of discipline learning (one that encompasses learning in classrooms, work contexts and other social learning contexts), and harness the underutilised learning potential of the other aspects of the student experience. Such changes can develop graduates with the sort of flexible ways of working and living that many see as the hallmark of future careers and life in a global society. Importantly – these more complex understandings can still recognise the role and value of strategies to achieve less complex outcomes, but are not limited to only those outcomes.

Perhaps the key issue that has emerged so far relates to the ideas and assumptions underpinning the words ‘generic’ and ‘skills’. It is helpful to ask: Are we interested in the development of graduates with the attributes needed to deal with tomorrow’s new ways of knowing and working? Or do we instead think that traditional university teaching gives graduates what they need -as long as we add in the development of some generic skills? An interest in generic skills suggests these graduate outcomes will be no different regardless of whether the graduate studied engineering or music. Nor will they be different if the graduate studied at a research-intensive university or a vocational college. It suggests GA are simple things, easily described in a short list or even a survey, rather than complex outcomes reflecting new notions of ‘knowledge’ or ways of thinking or dealing with the world, which are far more challenging to articulate. The term ‘graduate attributes’ invites complexity, and its accompanying challenges, and has much to recommend it if what we are talking about is a renewal of university teaching and learning experiences to produce graduates for a knowledge society.