Various groups (e.g. policy makers, students, curriculum developers, marketers, professional associations, industry groups) have different stakes in the articulation and development of graduate attributes.

Efforts to foster the development of graduate attributes (GA) - both explicit and implicit - are on the agenda of many different groups within the higher education system. While at first glance there might appear to be a ‘united front’ in this shared endeavour to foster graduate attributes, there are distinct differences between the intentions and strategies of the different players. It is helpful to be aware of these differences, as they can be highly complementary, especially since the complex multilayered outcomes articulated in higher level conceptions of graduate attributes (see ‘Conceptualisation’ paper) actually require complex, multilayered development strategies. However, there is also the potential for these different groups to work at cross purposes and for agendas to be conflated, resulting in either a failure to recognise and foster the unique contribution of different groups’ strategies or in a mismatch between the assumed and actual expectations of different groups.

There are very few people working in the higher education sector who are not, in some way, connected to the endeavour to foster GA – though not all may recognise their involvement. The range of different stakeholder groups might be broadly described as including:

1. Students – past, present and future
2. Teachers – academics, tutors, laboratory staff, clinical or field educators etc; Teaching and learning advisory and support staff – learning centre, library, academic developers etc
3. University teaching and learning policy makers, managers and funding bodies – University management, Deans, university marketing departments, Higher Education regulatory agencies
4. Employers and Industry – Professional accreditation bodies, graduate recruiters, career services, industry partners
5. Society – Students’ partners and parents, community organisations

Each subgroup within these five categories brings its own particular perspective and agenda to bear on an institution’s efforts to achieve graduate attributes. In part, this reflects the different roles the various groups play within higher education – for instance, as a placement coordinator, or an academic researcher, or an industry recruiter, or perhaps most distinctive of all - as a student.

Different stakeholder ‘roles’ bring somewhat different emphases to bear on the question of graduate attributes – largely through particular contextual relevancies for the various stakeholder groups. Broadly speaking, the different contexts reflect the different groups’ particular contributions to the academic endeavour. The Library, for example, has a particular interest around Information Literacy as a graduate attribute, professional degrees have a particular interest in how graduate attributes align with professional qualifications frameworks, and different sorts of degree accreditation processes emphasise different sorts of graduate attribute outcomes in the agendas of those seeking such accreditation (see ‘Quality Assurance’ paper). Despite the influence of particular contextual ‘drivers’ for different stakeholder groups, there is still considerable variation within these groups. Indeed, the variation in conceptions discussed in the previous issues paper has been observed amongst all stakeholder groups, although synergies between particular conceptions and particular contexts (see Barrie, 2008) do produce a prevalence of particular conceptions among particular groups. To use a simplified illustration to explore this idea further - a Careers group, whose primary role has been to work with graduating students and graduate recruiters in facilitating graduate employment, would understandably have a focus on graduate attributes in terms of immediate employability. Of course, most Careers groups are no longer restricted to working in such a way. However, such an employability perspective on graduate attributes would be somewhat different to the perspective of an academic teaching a postgraduate degree in the History and Philosophy of Science. Yet both parties might champion their efforts as being about ‘Graduate Attributes’ – though what is meant by that term would be different for each group. The problem comes into
sharper focus if we consider how the different parties might judge each other’s efforts to foster ‘graduate attributes’. Measure such as employer surveys of graduate preparedness for job interviews to gauge the success of efforts to foster critical intellectual inquiry during History and Philosophy of Science courses can indeed be problematic. Indeed, the situation might reasonably be expected to lead to accusations that ‘academics do nothing to develop graduate attributes’ or exhortations that ‘we must resist the narrowness of vocational training which is inherent in the graduate attributes initiative’. This is the danger if different groups don’t recognise that they are discussing different things when they ‘talk’ about graduate attributes. This is particularly problematic for students who are ‘told’ by different groups that these different efforts are focused on the same thing – graduate attributes. In the face of these conflicting messages, it is small surprise that institutional quality assurance reviews routinely find students do not really deeply engage with the institutions’ expectations of achievement of GA.

The challenges posed by multiple stakeholder groups is exacerbated in today’s universities as there is often little space for dialogue and discussion between these groups – and many opinions are formed on the basis of little or no evidence. One of the groups whose perspective is most frequently ‘presumed’ is the students, with other stakeholders sometimes ascribing a solely employment-focused perspective to students in their approach to graduate attributes. Interestingly, it is rare that the other groups ask what role those who work in universities, might have had in students forming such a perspective, if indeed this is the perspective students actually do hold. Historically, many of the different stakeholder subgroups within a university have been (understandably) focused on their own efforts to foster GA, but for many universities these various efforts have not been effectively coordinated (see ‘Implementation’ paper), or presented in a cohesive way to the most vital group of stakeholders – the students.

To unpack the detail of the different roles of the various stakeholder groups is beyond the scope of this short issues paper. Instead, the intent is to highlight the need for different groups in universities to recognize and discuss their particular perspectives on graduate attributes with a view to the institution (and particularly the students within that institution), seeing how these might best work together, rather than compete. The relationships between the different perspectives held by stakeholders around ‘employability’ and ‘graduate attributes’ are particularly worth highlighting in the current climate (see Barrie, 2008).

While each of the stakeholder groups might have a particular focus to their efforts to foster graduate attributes, these foci will not necessarily be the same in all universities – the context and mission of the institution itself will influence this. An example of this might be a primary focus on industry or employability by stakeholders in a particular university as a result of the university being more vocationally focused or offering dual sector (VET) degrees with strong links to workplace learning as a strategy to develop graduate attributes. Universities based on a particular philosophical perspective – for example a religiously-based institution in Australia - might have a slightly different perspective on GA as being more about encouraging in graduates particular values and social perspectives. Universities have also pragmatically approached graduate attributes from the perspective of their institution’s strengths. For example; a research intensive university with an international focus and ambition to be a global institution plays on this strength in framing both outcomes and strategies for graduate attributes. A different approach would be expected from an institution with a social inclusion focus targeted on addressing disadvantage in its local community. It is apparent that the mission or values of the institution are embodied in what are specified as graduate attribute outcomes and the strategies used to develop these.