The way a university coordinates and approaches the implementation of its graduate attributes policy is often neglected.

Whereas all Australian universities have embraced the specification of graduate attributes, the comprehensive integration of those attributes into the curriculum so as to ensure specific graduate outcomes, has been adopted with varied enthusiasm and commitment.

Striving for Quality (2002)

The indications from institutional interview data and the first-round (2002 – 2007) Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) audits, are that overall, graduate attributes (GA) implementation has made little progress since the above finding was reported in 2002. Even where successful implementation is claimed, the evidence typically advanced is generally restricted to policy statements (‘if they’re named, they’re developed’) and relatively surface mapping activities (‘the subject outlines say they cover these GA’), rather than more convincing forms such as student report-based mapping, consistent use of assessment criteria and standards explicitly linked to GA learning outcomes or validated examples of student learning outcomes.

Approach to implementation of GA policy
In many institutions, explicit institutional implementation strategies to accompany GA policy statements are absent. Where explicit implementation strategies do exist, they range from approaches which leave implementation to the discretion of individual academics, to approaches where implementation is done ‘for’ teachers (typically by external experts who develop new curriculum add-ins), and to approaches where implementation is done ‘to’ teachers, typically through compliance requirements. Conspicuous by their absence are implementation strategies based on effective motivation of university teachers to engage in teaching and curriculum development to embed GA (see ‘Staff Development’ paper). What is also often absent is a clear overall mapping and central coordination of how different institutional GA development strategies relate to each other and interact to create an effective implementation of policy (e.g. articulating the valuable, though quite different, contributions of ‘study abroad’ schemes and ‘library self-study plagiarism modules’ to the institutional GA development strategies).

Institutional priorities and processes
Universities are large and complex organisations in which GA implementation is one of a number of strategic priorities competing for attention at any one time. Traditionally, research has been prioritised over teaching and learning initiatives because of its links to funding and promotion systems (Drummond, Nixon & Wiltshire 1998); so it is unsurprising that GA are reported as ‘not a priority for the majority of staff’; that university implementation approaches have either not been developed; or that although working parties are established, their plans are not followed through or managed according to effective project protocols. The complexity of university activity and management systems can also make it difficult to track comprehensive initiatives such as GA implementation across the committees that deal with it or to create or highlight logical links with related initiatives, such as the introduction of ePortfolios. Significant change generally requires corresponding adjustments to policy, resourcing and other administrative arrangements either influenced by or with the capacity to influence the intended change. Graduate Attributes implementation has been hampered when necessary accommodations have been neither identified nor addressed, particularly those relating to assessment, program approval processes, quality assurance requirements and workload allocation. ‘Staff fatigue’, management discontinuity, the absence of mandated reporting requirements or consequences for non-implementation, and legal implications have all been cited as disincentives to committed implementation. There are typically very few teaching and learning initiatives that potentially have impact across all disciplinary and organisational boundaries in the way that GA implementation does, and the complexity and range of applicability of GA implementation make it a clear contender for a correspondingly comprehensive change-management approach, to ensure both breadth and continuity of implementation.

Underlying conceptions
Even where there is strong institutional policy commitment to GA; implementation approaches and
processes can be problematic. Audit and reporting approaches involving mapping of GA against courses and programs have been the most common elements. However, the introduction of GA constitutes a cultural and conceptual, rather than an auditing challenge for many academics. Therefore, an overly technical or instrumental approach, one that emphasises mapping and the development of course templates, is unlikely to make much headway with those academics who are less concerned with the ‘how’ than with underlying assumptions and motives – i.e. the ‘why’. Staff who view GA as irrelevant or overly vocational and a threat to the underlying purpose of a university education; or ‘a top-down’, ‘fatuous administration exercise’ or ‘impost’ generally fail to ‘see any coherent underlying reason’ for pedagogical changes to develop GA and can understandably resist such approaches to implementation. So, while mapping is an important element, all academics, resistant and otherwise, also need the opportunity to engage with the purpose and nature of GA in order to develop the ‘ownership’ or ‘buy-in’ necessary for both the spirit and letter of GA implementation. For such ownership to be developed academics must be convinced there is a worthwhile benefit – for learners and for themselves (see ‘Staff Development’ paper).

Drivers and leaders

External quality assurance agencies and professional associations have exerted a significant driving force on GA implementation. The influence of professional organisations is strongest in vocational programs such as engineering, medicine, accounting or dentistry because of their ability to confer or withhold accreditation, however there is no corresponding driver for GA implementation in broad, generalist programs such as Arts and Sciences.

Institutional quality assurance processes such as AUQA have focussed attention on GA implementation across all programs and degrees. However, for some staff and students there remains an implementation “disconnect” in institutional responses to these audits. This is a disconnect between what they see as a superficial lip-service to policy statements and what they perceive as necessary; a deep engagement with the GA agenda, which entails considerable extra work and some transformation of their colleagues’ perceptions of GA, and the way teaching is defined and valued by their institution. Effective GA implementation strategies are recognised by these staff as needing to deal with more than policy information and compliance; they need to address institutional culture and organisational change.

Leadership has emerged as a key determinant of the effectiveness of GA implementation. A lack of high-level leadership and central coordination of GA implementation strategies and a lack of visible local leadership are frequently cited barriers. Purely ‘top-down’ leadership can result in perceptions of GA as ‘administrative imposts’ or ‘directives’ and consequently elicit responses of resistance or apathy. Compliance strategies may achieve superficial engagement in GA implementation but are also more likely to strengthen resistance in the long term, rather than to reduce it. Purely bottom-up strategies can be equally ineffective when they fail to persist in the absence of institutional support and competing priorities.

Visible leadership from senior management is essential but leadership is most effective when distributed across administrative levels. Leadership is not only the province of traditional and permanent roles such as VC, DVC(A), Dean and Program and Course Coordinator, but also evident in roles and structures created specifically for GA implementation. These include GA teaching and learning subcommittees, course review teams, and designated school ‘champions’. Leadership at senior management level is least effective in facilitating GA implementation when rhetoric is not accompanied or supported by systematic and practical support in the form of resource allocation, recognition and reward and the co-ordinated and continuous efforts of faculty and school leaders such as Heads of School.

Informed leadership is a key to the success (or otherwise) of GA implementation approaches. Institutional leaders who have developed an understanding of the varied conceptual assumptions inherent in the GA agenda, who are sensitive to the complex interplay of institutional factors and who have secured access to appropriate resources; will have the greatest likelihood of impact on the extent to which GA are embedded in the student experience. However the ability of any implementation strategy to meaningfully motivate and engage university teachers and others in the university community in efforts to achieve graduate attributes is fundamental (see ‘Quality Assurance’ and ‘Staff Development’ papers).