Issues Paper 4: Curriculum

Curriculum planning for graduate attribute development, general curriculum structure (e.g. modular, postgraduate entry) and pedagogical features (e.g. PBL, WIL) influence the development of graduate attributes.

Australian universities’ choices and decisions about curriculum play a major part in their efforts to develop graduate attributes. Different understandings about how graduate attributes might be developed by students are implicit in the graduate attributes curricula choices made by institutions and more generally, decisions about curricular policies and approaches can delineate the range of graduate attributes (GA) strategies available to staff and students in ways that foster or inhibit the achievement of graduate attributes.

Turning our attention first to the range of curricular structures explicitly used by universities to foster graduate attributes reveals a variety of approaches to fostering GA, as the following examples illustrate:

1. **Foundation curriculum/generalist degrees**: Some curriculum approaches encompass aspects of the liberal arts model as a prerequisite degree. In this approach a multidisciplinary or generalist undergraduate degree is a prerequisite to subsequent disciplinary or professional degrees. The first degree is explicitly focused on the development of the sorts of broad intellectual capabilities included in many Australian university statements of GA. This explicit focus on GA may be highly beneficial in fostering such outcomes. However this approach suggests efforts may be required to assist students in linking their learning in the first degree to employment contexts as well as to the more contextual learning of disciplinary GA in subsequent discipline studies.

2. **Foundation curriculum**: In a variant of the previous approach, the foundation curriculum provides a GA curriculum as the first year of existing disciplinary degrees. This approach uses the first year of students’ studies – rather than the first degree - to provide a generalist curriculum claimed to be rich in focus on GA and, in particular, to provide opportunities to broaden students’ perspectives on knowledge. Such first-year transition curricula are a particularly effective strategy for addressing the development of the foundation generic skills that have been implicated in improved first year transition and retention. Again this is potentially an effective strategy to develop GA but is more likely to develop foundation-level generic skills than the embedded contextualised attributes students are intended to develop as graduates. These are better served through subsequent curricula approaches embedded in disciplinary studies.

3. **Co-curriculum**: In this approach GA subjects are embedded as a co-curriculum strand alongside disciplinary curricula. The graduate attributes co-curriculum might be limited to first year or it might be a strand that runs through all years of a degree. This approach has the benefit of allowing sequential development of more complex GA throughout a degree. However, it remains limited in that there is the potential for the GA curricula to be isolated from the disciplinary curricula. For students this often results in the perception of a lack of relevance of the GA curriculum to their disciplinary degree and can also promote lower-level decontextualised generic skills outcomes rather than the contextualised GA outcomes espoused by most universities. This curriculum approach manifests in various ways. Most typically it is through the provision of ‘generic skills’ subjects which are available to students across the university or by the provision of a series of generic skills units developed specifically for students in a particular degree. In countries with a longer history of GA implementation, such additive generic skills curricular strategies are recognised as being significantly limited. While not usually intended as such, the addition of work experience, internships or paid employment for university students as an element of a degree can be perceived by some staff and students as just such ‘add-on’ generic skills, unless efforts are made to clearly identify the contribution of these experiences to student learning in a degree program. Work-based learning experiences (professional/ clinical placements, pracicum etc) have long been a feature of professional degrees and provide an excellent opportunity for the development of professionally-relevant skills and abilities. However, since
for most universities GA are about more than just professional skills, care needs to be taken to avoid WIL activities focussing only on a subset of GA when in practice they can provide much more. The challenge of all such co-curricula approaches are that they may develop only one type of graduate attribute (eg either decontextualised low-level generic skills or employment-related skills) and are mistakenly perceived by staff or students to be a sufficient proxy for the achievement of all aspects of GA. This can lead to various undesirable outcomes including the perception by students that the other parts of their university studies do little to foster GA, and staff to consider it reason to continue to teach these other courses in ways that (for example) focus on transmission of content rather than the development of GA in the context of that content.

4. Integrated graduate attributes curriculum: The most prevalent GA curriculum approach in Australian universities is to integrate the development of GA within the usual discipline-based degree curriculum. Such an approach has the potential benefit of fostering the higher-level, contextualised and disciplinary relevant GA espoused by universities for their graduates. It is however much more difficult to implement effectively. It requires the teachers and curriculum writers to approach GA as being the outcomes of disciplinary studies not something that is additional to those outcomes. To achieve such an outcome requires more than a surface curriculum mapping approach (see ‘Quality Assurance’ and ‘Staff Development’ papers); it requires work with teachers and students to reconceptualise the outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment processes of the university curriculum. It should be recognised that such a reconceptualisation of university teaching and learning has been the goal of two decades of enhancement initiatives in Australian universities. For instance, efforts to implement inquiry-based learning curricula and pedagogies are predicated on the need to foster a different order of learning outcomes and learning approaches in students and represent the shifts from traditional content-transmission models of curriculum. However, such pedagogical changes are difficult to implement for various reasons (see ‘Staff Development’ and ‘Assessment’ papers). Moreover, when graduate attributes are integrated in teaching and learning in this way they can become less explicit and slip out of focus for teachers and learners.

5. Extra curricula approaches: Some universities have recognised the rich potential of extra-curricula learning for the development of GA and increasingly such opportunities are explicitly harnessed for this purpose. Initiatives in the extra-curricula category include service learning, student exchanges and study abroad programs, membership in clubs and societies and student participation in the academic community alongside staff in research, governance and public intellectual activities. Such opportunities are often only available to a select few undergraduate students, although there are attempts in many Australian universities and internationally to broaden access to such experiences through, for example, undergraduate participation in service based learning. Potentially these extra-curricula activities can suffer from the same limitations as co-curricular skills courses. Most success in this area has been linked to parallel efforts such as the introduction of student portfolios used to document student learning from their experiences. To fully realise the potential of such experiences for fostering graduate attributes then such portfolio assessment records need to be integrated with records of learning from other opportunities such as classroom teaching (see ‘Assessment’ paper).

More generally it is instructive to consider the implications of curricula degree structures commonly in use at Australian universities. Perhaps the most significant is the current emphasis on modularisation, with its focus on isolated learning in single subjects and which contrasts sharply with the in integrative learning possible with a whole-program approach. This can be exacerbated when sessional or specialist staff teach and assess parts of an already atomistic curriculum. Modularisation of the curriculum carries with it the need to teach and assess discrete components of learning, often to the exclusion of more integrative learning outcomes (including GA) that are developed across several subjects. Modularisation brings with it the promise of flexible learning pathways, potentially offering students a choice in the graduate attribute learning experiences they seek out, although in practice it is generally highly prescriptive and offers students little choice in directing their own learning pathways. The traditional approach to supplementing “deep” disciplinary studies with “breadth” (e.g. allowing or requiring a set number of units of study outside the confines of the discipline) clearly has the potential to broaden students’ views of themselves or their discipline, in other words to potentially develop valuable GA. The introduction of integrative capstone experiences and courses is another curriculum strategy gaining prominence in Australia. This potentially offers a way of redressing the disintegration of learning outcomes unintentionally fostered by curriculum modularisation.

There are many different curriculum approaches employed by universities in developing GA and each offers a different contribution to their development. Given the propensity of any one approach
to foster a particular aspect of GA, (e.g. generic skills versus disciplinary graduate attributes), and
given that more complex GA outcomes are supported by achievement of less complex generic
skills outcomes – then a range of curricula approaches is required if the full range of graduate
attribute outcomes are to be fostered. Such a multi-faceted curricular strategy requires whole of
degree and ideally whole of university oversight to ensure careful sequencing and coordination
(see “Implementation” paper) if the different curriculum strategies are to complement and support
each other to achieve GA.