Issues Paper 6: Quality Assurance

The way a higher education system, university or discipline monitors and assures the development of graduate attributes is one of the most influential drivers of effective implementation.

The development, by graduates, of the types of abilities described as graduate attributes (GA), is perceived by many in universities and government agencies to be an important and useful outcome indicator of a quality university education. A review of AUQA audit reports and data collected in interviews for the National GAP study indicates that to date, there has been a heavy reliance by Australian institutions on data combined from five ‘generic skills’ questions on the national Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), sometimes supplemented by data drawn from employer surveys and internal curriculum mapping. The review of the audit reports and nationally available CEQ data also confirms the findings of much other research in the field in that; 1) There does not appear to be a significant improvement in graduate attribute outcome indicators for universities with a particular curriculum focus on GA (e.g. universities with a longstanding focus on work related learning) or a focus on particular attributes (e.g. research and inquiry in research intensive institutions); and 2) Many staff and students still have a ‘limited’ awareness of GA (see ‘Staff Development’ and ‘Student Centred’ papers) after a decade of these outcomes being enshrined in institutional policy. Recent international developments in quality assurance are likely to have a significant effect on the integration and achievement of GA in Australian universities.

The Tuning Project in Europe (2004), which has now spread to other parts of the world including the USA (Lumina Foundation, 2009), the ‘Assessment of Higher Order Learning Outcomes’ project in Europe and similar projects currently underway in Australia (AUQA, 2009) have emerged as key drivers towards an outcomes-based approach to quality assurance of standards in higher education. Central to all these initiatives is the recognition that there is a need to demonstrate the achievement of these important GA through assessment. However, these assessment efforts embody the participants’ and designers’ understandings of what these GA outcomes might be. Defining what these outcomes are and how they will be measured will have a significant ‘backwash’ effect on what is learned by graduates and how it is learned. In relation to current efforts to integrate GA in university curricula, the way these outcomes are defined and assessed will shape the way teachers will integrate – or not – the teaching of GA in their courses. In many ways the discussion about the ‘assurance of learning outcomes’ has the potential to impose a GA curriculum on higher education, and it will be important for those in universities who have already been working towards the development and assessment of GA to engage in this debate.

While such quality assurance developments offer a potentially useful step towards gathering direct evidence of the achievement of graduate outcomes, it still does not demonstrate that the achievement of these outcomes actually has a benefit for society or for the graduates themselves. The contribution of GA to national economic prosperity and to enhancing the human capital of our society are questions currently under investigation in several countries.

With the exception of some disciplines which have already moved towards outcome-based accreditation requirements, a relatively narrow range of quality assurance strategies is used in relation to GA in Australian universities. Central to many institutional QA strategies is the conduct of the curriculum audit or mapping. This typically includes noting the provision of core ‘generic attributes’ subjects or the mapping, based on staff reporting of the inclusion of GA in the teaching and assessment of subjects in the course curriculum. The staff report might be via data drawn from databases of subject outlines, responses to staff surveys, or third person audits of subject outlines. The focus of staff report QA strategies can range from claims of inclusion in subject learning outcomes, claims of inclusion in curriculum, claims of inclusion in assessment criteria or tasks.

In some cases the report is substantiated with descriptions or evidence of the teaching or assessment practices. This might include claims of access to particular curriculum strategies, (most commonly work integrated learning) although the ‘opportunity’ to participate in such curricula is not always linked to a requirement to generate evidence of the achievement of GA. The other commonly
used QA strategy uses data gathered from student surveys relating to the perceived inclusion of institutional GA in their subject or course learning experiences. Though this type of data is often routinely collected, both university AUQA reports and study respondents suggest it is only infrequently used to inform and direct improvements. Course and subject assessment data are rarely used by universities as part of their GA quality assurance strategy (see ‘Assessment’ paper for some of the reasons why). One area where assessment is beginning to be used as QA strategy is in the provision of supplementary assessment techniques such as student portfolios. Student portfolios – and in particular ePortfolios, are presented as a QA strategy on the basis of their potential to contribute to efforts to foster GA. However in much the same way that workplace learning is a resource for – rather than a guarantee of, the development of GA’s, the incorporation of an ePortfolio as a component of GA QA strategy is only convincing to the extent that the portfolio engages students in articulating convincing evidence of intended GA. Moreover – unless the portfolio integrates data from course assessment, it runs the risk of positioning GA as separate from and unrelated to discipline learning outcomes (as noted in other issues papers). Indeed in this situation a portfolio based on an additive conception of generic skills development might be more of an indicator of a lack of quality than evidence of good quality in GA practice. The other element of GA quality assurance which is lacking is evidence that the currently used GA indicators (e.g. the CEQ scale) reflect actual high quality staff and student engagement in the development of graduate attributes. A recurring theme in discussions and AUQA reports was that despite extensive audits and reports of surface compliance, many staff and students remained sceptical and unmotivated to really engage in fostering GA. This highlights the disjunction between current quality assurance approaches and the findings of research into student learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and graduate attributes (Barrie, 2007) that demonstrate that it is the way students and teachers engage in learning and teaching (what they perceive are the intended outcomes and how they might achieve these) that shapes the quality of the learning that results.

Just as assessment can drive student learning behaviours, assessment (in the form of quality assurance) can drive university ‘teaching’ behaviours when it comes to GA. At present the QA strategies and proxy indicators commonly used by Australian universities appear somewhat limited in that they do not capture the complexity or variety of the types of graduate outcomes espoused by universities and do not motivate or measure staff engagement in teaching GA, or actual student learning outcomes.