Issues Paper 7: Staff Development

The way a university enables and engages staff in efforts to foster graduate attributes contributes to implementation effectiveness.

The challenge of achieving graduate attributes (GA) is a complex one that requires strategies across all levels of a university’s educational enterprise. However, at the centre of all that universities might seek to do to achieve GA are the staff of the institution; those who design and deliver teaching, who provide teaching support and ancillary services to students, and who design and implement the institutional structures that enable and assure teaching. This diverse community of staff at various levels and with diverse responsibilities requires support and capacity-building to enhance their ability to successfully implement strategies to achieve GA. This support and development takes a variety of forms and no single staff development strategy on its own is likely to be adequate. However, unless staff are convinced that making the effort to develop their institution’s GA will actually lead to worthwhile outcomes for their students and themselves, they are unlikely to do much. The key to convincing staff lies in engaging with conceptual change in relation to their understandings about GA, providing practical support for teaching GA and creating a culture that values and rewards efforts to foster GA.

Conceptual change

At the heart of many of the challenges to embedding and achieving GA are the different understandings the various members of the academic community have of GA (see ‘Conceptualisation’ paper). Efforts to support staff in more effectively engaging in developing GA need to first and foremost address the diversity of these understandings. If staff do not believe that such GA outcomes are important they will neither include them in their teaching nor will they fully support student engagement in co-curricular or extra-curricular GA development strategies. This is not a surprising conclusion and closely parallels the findings of two decades of academic development research into teaching which highlights the centrality of staff development focussing on changing teachers conceptions of what is taught and how learning happens (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ho et al, 2001). If a teacher really believes that teaching is about transmitting the content of a text and believes that learning is constituted in the simple recall of what has been broadcast in a lecture then they will continue to teach in that way. This sort of conceptual change approach to staff development necessitates providing opportunities and stimuli for staff to recognise and question their current conceptions of GA and, where appropriate, to develop more complex understandings that are compatible with the outcomes universities actually intend for their graduates. An example of a strategy that might address this is public discussion around the institution’s espoused attributes, participation by the broader university community in developing faculty relevant interpretations of the institutional statement, and debate and discussion as to which strategies the university might apply to developing these different outcomes. Opportunities for teachers to come together to reflect on their teaching – what they all think they teach and how they go about teaching it, are increasingly rare and most often occur in the context of post-graduate courses in university teaching or teaching and learning fora, symposia and conferences.

Conceptual change staff development strategies such as these typically involve more than a one-off intervention and usually require an ongoing commitment from participants. Such ongoing commitment is typically not rewarded by institutions, which means that staff who are generally time-poor are rarely motivated to participate. However in the absence of attention to the underlying beliefs about GA, efforts to enhance skills in teaching such attributes rarely achieve long-lasting success. Attention to underlying conceptualisations of GA is important not only for classroom teachers and course designers. These same conceptions shape the actions of university policy-makers and those who design and deliver GA implementation strategies and design and deliver learning support. Rarely do current staff development strategies provide opportunities for high level university policy makers to reflect on and develop their understandings of the conceptual and pedagogical basis of GA despite the fact that they are expected to design and implement policy in this area. In a similar fashion, many of the members of the university community intimately engaged in university efforts to foster and achieve GA are rarely engaged in mainstream teaching and learning development activities. This means that many librarians and career development counsellors may not see the relevance of engaging in teaching and learning staff development...
activities, or they may simply not be invited to engage. The way universities’ staff development activities in the area of GA reach out to employers is even less apparent. Staff development needs to work with the underlying conceptions and strategies of all these different stakeholder groups (see ‘Stakeholders’ paper) if these groups’ efforts are to be brought into a more synergistic alignment.

Practical teaching skills development
The development of practical teaching strategies to enact the conceptual understandings of GA that universities espouse is vital. While staff who hold a particular belief about GA are likely to seek appropriate was to teach such attributes, these ways are not always readily apparent amongst the more familiar (or financially/environmentally imposed) traditional content lecture transmission techniques. Opportunities to acquire practical teaching skills are a key element of GA staff development strategies. Such strategies have been the main staff development approach in Australian universities over recent years and in the past have typically taken the form of voluntary workshops on teaching techniques and the development of web-based or text-based resources or ‘toolkits’. However the impact of such teaching development workshops and resources is questioned in many institutions. Only a small proportion of university teachers attend teaching workshops and typically the same people regularly attend such workshops – but usually these are not the teachers who most need to participate. Sessional and casual staff, who currently provide up to 50% of the teaching in some universities may not be able or willing to attend additional workshops, and may not be paid to do so. Teaching tips, exemplar case studies and teaching toolkits appear to be rarely used and on their own do not support the spread of improved teaching practice. Practical skills development is important however as it can potentially support staff in efficiently learning how they might do such things as write learning outcomes that capture their personal understandings of GA and effectively communicate these intended learning goals to students, employ the different teaching techniques that might foster their development or above all, design and implement the assessment strategies that encourage students to learn and demonstrate GA. While the development of resources and toolkits can support teaching development such practical skills development is best provided in context through situated academic development strategies including teaching mentorship and co-teaching arrangements which draw on the resources, skills and expertise that in many cases already exist. Such contextual and practical staff development work is only possible if the local experts can be identified, resourced and motivated to contribute to the learning and teaching development of their peers in this way.

Provision of graduate attribute teaching systems and structures
Closely aligned to the development of practical teaching capacities in staff is the provision of teaching systems that inherently provide or enable such capacities. Some examples of this might be the provision of a software tool to support the assessment of GA, or the provision of a template for writing learning outcomes that foregrounds the inclusion of GA, or the provision of a set of assessment statements for a field placement that articulate GA. Such resources can do much to enable staff to enact a commitment to teaching GA and can in some instances help staff to identify and change their existing conceptions, if the resource is clearly based on a different conception. However, the reverse is also true in that such systems inherently articulate the developer’s conception of graduate attributes, which may not be congruent with that of the institution. A learning outcome template that suggested GA learning outcomes statements should be added as separate statements to a list of discipline content outcomes would promote a non-integrated approach where GA are somehow seen as separate from the learning of the discipline (see ‘Conceptualisation’ paper). These influences may not always be readily apparent, yet their effect can be pervasive. Such resources offer a tempting solution for staff seeking support in teaching and assessing GA and it is important that those developing and promoting such resources are aware of any potential limitations such systems impose. In a similar manner the institutional teaching systems and structures within which teaching occurs can be a barrier to the best intentions of academic staff and staff development. A commonly cited example is the combination of class-size, classrooms and lack of time for teaching conspiring to ‘deflect’ effective GA teaching strategies.

Leadership development
Efforts to support staff in developing appropriate conceptualisations of their teaching of GA and to equip them with practical teaching skills to enable them to deliver on these understandings, will not lead to changed teaching and learning practice in relation to GA unless the culture in which the staff member is teaching or working is supportive of such changed practice. The importance of leadership in achieving change in teaching and learning has been widely recognised and it is perhaps naïve to expect that leadership ability does not of itself require support and development. Leadership development programs for Course coordinators, Heads of Department, Deans and Senior university executives rarely focus on teaching leadership; however such leadership is a vital ingredient in creating a climate and culture in faculties that is conducive to staff members engaging
in the teaching and curriculum development work that is required to achieve GA. Decisions about staff workload allocations, the provision of resources to support teaching and curriculum development and the way engagement in teaching development is recognised and rewarded all help shape the culture in which teaching development takes place. Clearly, decisions at a course or faculty level are also driven by decisions at an institutional level, and senior executives have even less time for reflection and staff development than those they lead. The needs of this group demand a new approach to teaching development for senior executives, one that is cognisant of their competing priorities and time limitations. Not least is the need for staff development for staff developers themselves in relation to GA. It is apparent that all the different domains of traditional staff development activities; for instance, tutor development programs, new staff induction programs, teaching and assessment development workshops – have much to contribute to a university’s overall efforts to foster GA development; however, those providing leadership of such activities may themselves not be experts in GA development. Ensuring all those involved in the different facets of leadership in relation to GA have access to suitable opportunities to develop their capabilities in relation to the task is an area of staff development currently overlooked in many Australian universities.

Clearly, staff development cannot be considered in isolation from the other elements of an institution’s GA system; however, the link that is somewhat surprisingly most commonly lacking is the link between staff development and students. The impact of an institution’s efforts to foster GA has no effect unless it engages students; yet staff development rarely engages with students except at one step removed as a source of data about teaching or through the work of other members of the university community. There is a pressing need to bring students more closely into the staff development experiences of their teachers and the other members of the university community. In doing so it may be possible to address the serious disconnectedness between institutional GA strategies and the students’ experiences and outcomes of university learning.