Over the hermeneutic horizon: Boundedness and supercomplexity in the development and assessment of generic graduate attributes – the inter-relationship of scholarship, context and practice

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Abstract
Neither scholarship nor development work in relation to university teaching lend themselves to atomistic approaches which focus on only one aspect of the teaching and learning experience. In much the same way that ideas such as ‘systems thinking’ and ‘constructive alignment’ argue for the importance of considering and aligning, the multiple aspects of teaching and learning, there is a similar need for a connection between the key elements of institutional efforts to integrate and assess graduate attributes. While many institutions have attempted such integration, there is little evidence of any Australian university systematically achieving this. A nationally funded research study currently underway in Australia has focused on the possible reasons for this and has identified the disconnect between different aspects of the system as one of the key reasons why efforts to embed generic attributes and efforts to improve assessment practices have made limited headway in recent years.

It considers the challenge of the underlying literatures for these areas being isolated and rarely considered holistically, for instance the work on assessment standards has progressed in isolation for the work on conceptual bases of graduate attributes. In parallel it considers the structural boundedness of aspects of organizations and of personnel as these relate to the task of embedding graduate attribute development and assessment. Using the metaphor of the ‘hermeneutic horizon’ as it applies to teachers, students and leaders/administrators, the paper argues that only by taking into account the inter-relatedness of a series of contextual aspects, along with the coalface activities of teaching and learning, can the complexity of task be understood. Thus, current understandings of the context in which teaching and curriculum occur are exposed as the limiting factor in both scholarship and curriculum development. The paper then considers the challenge of linking these different issues in a more scholarly way taking account of the barriers and affordances to institutional implementation strategies from the perspective of research and scholarship.