Graduate attributes in the BA

- Data about the graduate attributes for programs were collected from project participants, via program websites and from program reviews or publicity materials. A single dataset was developed which traces the graduate attributes used by Institutions, Faculties, programs and disciplines. This dataset is available from the DASSH website.

- The project team noted through the project life that there was a shift in the use of graduate attributes from generic institutional attributes to increasingly specific attributes. The team also noted that there exists the potential for leaning too far towards specific outcomes that do not prepare students for the “chameleon” like nature of the modern work force that requires constant adaptation to new environments, and development of new skills (Barnett, 2004; Begley, 2007)

Key Findings

- All the information collected indicates that critical thinking and skills in communication (both written and oral) are core attributes of programs within the field of Arts. The key attributes/skills specifically articulated as essential to programs within the field of Arts include, in order of frequency:
  - Critical thinking;
  - Communication (written and oral);
  - Independent thought;
  - Social awareness. Interestingly, problem solving and teamwork are mentioned infrequently as are creativity and innovation.

- Participants at many of the round table meetings noted that demonstrating that programs deliver the graduate outcomes and that students have acquired them is a problem. For the most part, particularly in the generalist program, project participants view student outcomes as serendipitous.

- There is little evidence that the Bachelor of Arts is structured to ensure that students demonstrate these skills upon graduating. Consistent assessment across a modularised, atomistic program appears to be a challenge.

Identification of areas requiring further investigation

- Few participants provided a clear description of the purpose of the BA. Most referred to the key outcomes of the BA in terms of ‘communication skills, critical thinking and the ability to adapt’. Assessment was seen to be the training ground for communication skills and critical thinking, but the ability to adapt was perceived to be an outcome of the flexible nature of the program. Participants viewed the fact that students could choose to study anything they desired (within timetable and availability constraints) and the consequent gain in student ability to adapt, as a feature of the program. It is not clear whether these were simply the opinions of the informants or whether these features are intentional outcomes of the program.

Follow up projects might be guided in further research by the areas identified through this study as key questions:

- What is the key graduate attributes of the BA?
- Do we really teach critical thinking or opinion thinking? How does it differ in different contexts? Do students value it?
- Are the subjects offered because of academic expertise and interest or because they form part of a curriculum outcome?
- What are the essentials in each discipline?
- To what extent is there coherence within the disciplines across the BA?