Business Edge Breathes Life into Graduate Attributes

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Introduction

While many people commonly think of the term “attribute” to mean “a quality or characteristic inherent in or ascribed to someone”, universities view the term more broadly. They expend considerable resources and energy to define and imbue in their programs distinctive graduate attributes which are relevant to individuals and, hopefully, also to graduates collectively. By implication, universities are of the belief that graduate attributes can be nurtured in students in ways which enable them to acknowledge the inherent worth of such attributes and to adopt them as their own. At Edith Cowan University (ECU), a mandatory part of the Bachelor of Business degree is devoted to a program designed to equip students with those generic skills that are the embodiment of ECU graduate attributes in the workplace.

Our challenge

The Faculty of Business and Law at ECU is heading the Australian university response to concerns raised by the Business Council of Australia that: “Universities and TAFE Colleges are turning out graduates who are not ‘job ready’ and have skills better suited to academic pursuits”. Our challenge was to develop a rigorous, relevant and competitive program to best prepare our students for the workplace.

The program

The Business Edge program consists of four compulsory units across the three years of the undergraduate Bachelor of Business degree. Over the last two and a half years, a small Faculty team has developed and refined the program, which grew from the Management Development program run at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Students complete activities individually and in teams linked to relevant business situations and sometimes in conjunction with business operators. A facilitative, rather than lecture-based, approach to learning is used to encourage students to become competent business operators and more reflective learners. The program has grown from 349 students in semester one, 2007 to 43 classes and over 1,127 students completing the program locally and on-line in semester two, 2009, as well as 65 additional students offshore.

The Business Edge philosophy

The conceptual framework (which amalgamates University, Faculty and industry publications) guides all Business Edge activities. The values of the University and of the Faculty link to the Faculty’s graduate attributes, which in turn relate to the Employability Skills identified by industry.

The student experience

Students across all years have worked with local businesses on a variety of practical and strategic activities. A Business Edge student finished in the final four in the 2008 WA Business Icon competition and the first Business Edge employer placement involving charity and government organisations was conducted in semester one, 2009. We are constantly looking for ways to engage students and to create a community beyond the weekly seminar. Areas which have required refinement over our three year journey have included encouraging cross-cultural cooperation, developing teamwork skills and increasing the ability of students to truly think critically and to have the confidence to express their ideas.

Conclusion

The emphasis on reflective learning and on the process of activities rather than merely the end result provides the best platform for students to consider and demonstrate the graduate attributes. Making these attributes more explicit is an important focus for future semesters. It is only through the behaviours of our graduates that we can recognise the acquisition of graduate attributes. Changing behaviours drive our continued efforts and confirm the intrinsic worth of the graduate attributes for our students, employers and the community.

Questions for the future

• How should we best direct our future efforts to reflect the changing employment context experienced by our students?
• How could we make the connection between activities completed by students and the graduate attributes which underpin these more explicit?
• Should we be involving other stakeholders in Business Edge? Who?