

# Assessing graduate attributes: Engaging academic staff and their students

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*The expectation that graduates are able to demonstrate the attributes needed for learning, work, and life is shared by employers, the community and graduates alike. Universities have accepted and responded to this expectation by defining a list of desired graduate attributes, requiring that these are embedded in all university programs. This focus on teaching and assessing graduate attributes over the last decade has proven to be a major challenge for universities, since academic staff find changing their assessment practices one of the most confronting tasks they face. Thus, assessment of graduate attributes is proving to be an indicator for uncovering the challenges behind this work, namely academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes and learning and teaching. Assessment is proving to be the litmus test of what academic staff value as the outcomes of their teaching. In this paper, we draw on the literature to present an opinion piece that summarises the drivers for assessing graduate attributes, outlines progress to date, identifies and acknowledges the 'elephant in the room', namely the role that academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes play in their approach to teaching and assessing these, and considers the impact of these beliefs on staff engagement in an informed and pedagogically sophisticated way in assessing graduate attributes. Only when the custodians of the curriculum, namely academic staff, engage deeply in this work can they ensure the engagement of their students in developing the attributes they need, to be what they want to be.*

**Keywords:** graduate attributes, academic staff beliefs, assessing attributes

## Background

If graduates are to leave university with the attributes necessary for work and life, student learning outcomes must go beyond disciplinary content and include graduate attributes (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994; Hager & Holland, 2006; Harvey, 2006). There is broad agreement by employer groups, professional bodies, the community, as well as students that the development of graduate attributes is a core outcome of university study (ACNielsen, 2000; Precision Consulting, 2007). As reported by Precision Consulting (2007, p. 1) graduates

with relevant attributes ‘...are highly regarded by employers and are seen to contribute to the country’s prosperity and social capital.’ To ensure that every graduate leaves university with the requisite attributes, attributes relevant to the discipline and for employment and life need to be embedded in the curriculum, which means that they are explicitly taught and, most importantly, assessed.

In terms of what is assessed in university curricula, traditionally most academic staff focus more on discipline content than on graduate attributes, with assessment tasks focusing mainly on ‘...the products of learning’ rather than on the ‘...how and why’ of what is to be learned (Anderson, 1998, p. 8). This approach can be explained by the fact that most academic staff perceive themselves primarily as discipline experts and thus, find teaching and assessing students challenging. Drawing on her work around staff professional development and assessment, Sutherland (1996, p. 91) points out:

[t]he reasons that faculty find it difficult to assess noncontent outcomes are the same as the reasons they find it difficult to consider using new teaching approaches. Faculty are experts in their field of study. They have spent their professional lives developing skill and confidence in their abilities as chemists, sociologists, rhetoricians, and art historians. Their training and focus has been on content, and few have been supervised or mentored in teaching and evaluating students.

Therefore, the task of designing and implementing assessment activities related to graduate attributes is often the point at which issues about embedding graduate attributes come to the fore, that is, the task of assessing attributes is the litmus test of academic staff beliefs about learning and teaching and what they value as the outcomes of their teaching.

Paying attention to the assessment of graduate attributes is critical since, as Ramsden (2003) and Biggs and Tang (2007), amongst others have pointed out, it is assessment that actually defines the curriculum and drives student and staff behaviour. While students focus most on what will be assessed and possibly ignore the rest, academic staff tend to focus on content and then assessment. What academic staff choose to assess reflects what they really value and sends a strong signal to students about what is important to learn. Indeed, as Light and Cox (2006) observe for academics, assessing students is one of the most challenging, demanding and emotional aspects of their work. This is also the case for students who often find assessment equally stressful. As Rowntree (1987, p.169) reminds us, ‘[i]f we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedure.’

### **Slow progress to-date**

Thus, embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum, including assessing and evidencing their attainment, has thrown up major challenges for universities (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2003, 2006, 2008; de la Harpe & Thomas, in press; Harvey, 2006). In addition, a number of other studies have found that embedding graduate attributes is not an easy task (Crebert, 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004). Progress has been less than satisfactory, despite efforts over more than a decade. Based on outcomes to date, it is clear that ‘...the overall picture in higher education systems around the world is one of patchy implementation and uptake of...graduate attribute initiatives’ (Barrie, 2006, p. 218).

This conclusion is supported by an analysis of 39 Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit reports (<http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/universities/>) from the first audit

cycle (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2008). This analysis showed that eight reports (20%) included a recommendation pointing to the need for further work on graduate attributes; seven (18%) included an affirmation that the university had identified the need to address a gap relating to graduate attributes; and only five (13%) included a commendation relating to positive achievement in the area. More recently, the first three audit reports from the second cycle, which began in 2008, suggest that little has changed, with AUQA recommending that two universities accelerate the process of embedding graduate attributes across all courses, and one of these endorses a staff development program aimed at implementing graduate attributes.

Studies to date have identified a number of factors that may impede successful embedding of graduate attributes into disciplinary programs. These include a poorly developed rationale for the need for graduate attributes and no sense of urgency; poor or unstable leadership; weak project design, little or inappropriate communication to gain and sustain staff commitment; lack of ownership and shared understanding of how to teach and assess graduate attributes; barriers (structural, systems, time, organisational, etc.) to implementation; lack of identification and celebration of short term gains; poor strategies in place to embed any changes in the organisational culture; and the lack of a critical mass of people who have the vision, passion and drive to champion and embed graduate attributes.

### **Elephant in the room**

As the overview of progress to date shows, embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum is complex and relies on multiple and orchestrated conditions. Ultimately, it hinges on academic staff involvement, either directly or indirectly. For staff to be engaged in this work, they need to hold sophisticated beliefs about their role as university teachers, including beliefs about the value of developing students graduate attributes and how best to do this in line with up-to-date knowledge of student learning. Moreover, that sophisticated belief needs to extend to understanding that teaching broadly covers much more than their class room teaching and, in the context of embedding graduate attributes, needs to include how teachers assess.

However, we detect an ‘elephant in the room’, namely the role that academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes play in their approach to teaching and assessing them. The impact of staff beliefs in respect to the teaching and assessment of graduate attributes is generally ignored or avoided, and often left unspoken. As Newton (2003, p. 50) points out, the perspectives of academic staff who are the ‘... ‘front-line’ actors engaged in implementation of policy’ related to graduate attributes are often neglected when implementing institutional change projects. This is a serious oversight, since the beliefs that academic staff hold regarding graduate attributes has a major impact on their engagement in any institutional attempts to embed graduate attributes in the curriculum — especially when changes are initiated from the ‘top down’. In fact, over a decade ago, Pajares (1992) pointed out that, even though it is a messy area to work in, undertaking research into teachers’ beliefs about teaching is critical given that outcomes of such work can inform practice in deep and meaningful ways.

In the context of graduate attributes beliefs some academics hold about their role in teaching which reflect a teacher-centred, content-focused view of teaching that holds students responsible for any perceived lack of knowledge and skills (Budge, Clarke, & de la Harpe, 2007; Kember, 1997; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Merriam & Brockett, 2007) can be a major impediment in their effective teaching. This is exemplified in the following comments from academic staff involved in a project to embed graduate attributes into their courses:

‘I shouldn’t have to teach this—it should be taught in a specific skills unit.’  
‘I don’t know how to teach this. I’m an expert in X and can’t be expected to teach anything else.’  
‘If we had decent students in the first place, there would be no need to teach these skills.’

de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber (2000).

In contrast, what is needed to embed graduate attributes is a student-centred, learning-oriented view of teaching that recognises the need to support students to develop relevant knowledge and skills, including graduate attributes. Our current project (Radloff, de la Harpe, Thomas, & Scoufis, 2007), funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, explores the values and beliefs of teachers, including how and who should teach such attributes. We will identify teachers’ views across 16 universities in Australia, in particular, whether teachers value graduate attributes and how confident they are to teach and assess them. It will also allow us to identify and further interrogate sites of ‘best’ practice, to inform the professional development required to enhance the use of student-centred learning strategies and thus, the embedding of graduate attributes into the curriculum. We believe this will assist universities to target support and development addressing these beliefs, completing the picture of contributing factors that develop graduate attributes for university graduates.

### **Impact of beliefs**

To embed graduate attributes successfully into the curriculum, including their teaching and assessment, academic staff need to reflect on and articulate their beliefs and, where required, make appropriate changes. Focusing on and discussing the beliefs that academics hold is essential and underpins any attempts at integrating graduate attributes, given that, as Åkerlind suggests, the beliefs or conceptions that academic staff hold, while rarely considered, are fundamental to how they approach their teaching. Thus, any changes to teaching must be underpinned by changes in conceptions of teaching (Åkerlind, 2004, 2006).

Therefore, before any work on embedding graduate attributes is undertaken, staff may need help and support to articulate and change their conceptions. This is essential and cannot be left to chance since there is ‘...little evidence that teachers’ conceptions of teaching really do develop with increasing teaching experience’ (Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005). In other words, more sophisticated conceptions of teaching do not result simply from experience in teaching. A recent study showed that even with intensive involvement in a higher education teacher professional development program, changes to staff beliefs took a year to manifest! (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007). This lends support to the view that ‘[i]t is a long process to change conceptions of and approaches to teaching and [to] actually become a better teacher. First, conceptions of teaching, and moreover, of education and other social issues attached, have to change, and [only] after this, a change in teaching practices and techniques is possible’ (ibid., p.569).

### **Impact of other factors**

In addition to holding appropriate conceptions of teaching, helping students to develop graduate attributes requires an ongoing commitment to good teaching, as well as time and effort to develop quality curricula, teaching activities and assessment tasks that support the development of graduate attributes. Appropriate recognition and reward mechanisms need to be in place to encourage this type of teaching.

In addition, the critical role that the context plays cannot be ignored, given that teacher beliefs about teaching may be context-specific and change in response to aspects within it (Kember & Kwan, 2000; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006). As a result, academic staff may hold one conception of teaching (an 'ideal' conception) but in practice, adopt another one (a 'working' conception). 'Ideal' conceptions have been found to be strongly associated with teachers' beliefs about teaching, while 'working' conceptions are linked to teachers' perceptions of the teaching context (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002; Orrell, 2006; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992).

In terms of leadership, Ramsden et al., (2007, p.153) point out that the '...practices of academic managers and in particular, heads of departments/schools, are critical to the development of a collegial environment that is conducive to effective student learning...[since] variation in teaching quality is associated with perceptions of the academic environment'. It has been shown that teachers are more likely to adopt a student-centred approach to teaching when the leadership style is transformative (that is, leaders inspire, model exemplary practice, collaborate, engage spontaneously and build trust) and where management is collaborative (that is where goals and rewards are clear, there is a sense of openness, and staff feel empowered and are encouraged to openly and freely discuss their learning needs).

Thus, the first step in helping staff to engage in the work around developing students' graduate attributes is for the senior staff — those in academic and management leadership positions and starting with the head of school — to convince the academics involved that these skills need to be taught, can be taught and they can teach them. They also need to ensure that the context is supportive, ensuring appropriate class sizes, workloads and teaching facilities.

In addition, effective teaching — the kind that is required for developing graduate attributes — is more likely to occur when teaching is valued and supported, where there are good processes in place for program development and ongoing quality assurance, including input from external professional bodies; where workloads are not too heavy, where teaching facilities are appropriate, where students have the requisite background knowledge and skills, where class sizes are appropriate, where academic staff have some control over what is taught and how it is taught, and there are opportunities for team teaching (Kember & Kwan, 2000; Norton et al., 2005; Prosser, Ramsden, Trigwell, & Martin, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997; Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell, & Martin 2007).

At the same time, staff must come to the task with open hearts and minds. They must be willing to engage in this work and avail themselves of professional learning opportunities. Engaging in academic professional development activities related to learning and teaching is important, since engagement has been associated with shifts in academic staff beliefs about teaching. For example, the work of Gibbs and Coffey (Gibbs, 2003; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004) from a large-scale research project involving academic staff from 22 universities in the UK has shown that when new staff participated in induction and learning and teaching development programs, they were more likely to adopt a student-centred approach to their teaching. On the other hand, those who did not participate became more teacher-focused, which adversely impacted on student learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued that assessment should include a focus on both content as well as the graduate attributes needed for learning, work and life, responds to employer, as well as

graduates expectations of what a university education should include. However, we have also shown that universities still have significant challenges to overcome to meet the expectations of graduates and employers. We have argued that academic staff beliefs are critical and fundamental to any attempts at developing students graduate attributes, since academic staff are the custodians of the curriculum and the ones who determine what is taught and assessed. Further, it has been suggested that staff beliefs about teaching graduate attributes are exposed when they are required to interrogate and make changes to their assessment. We have pointed out that until the role of academic staff beliefs is acknowledged and addressed, we will continue to tip-toe around the elephant in the room. We have also contended that while acknowledging staff beliefs is the first step in the critical work of embedding graduate attributes, it is insufficient on its own and requires a supportive learning and teaching context. Only when academic leaders engage at the local level with staff in the context of their discipline and collaborate with those in roles that support this work, is there any hope for real and lasting change.

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