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Toeing the line: mapping graduate attributes on to assessment in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Ana Maria Ducasse

La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia
a.ducasse@latrobe.edu.au

The tide has turned on graduate attributes from faculty level imposition to program level definition. Changes in awareness in the scholarship of teaching mean that graduate attributes, alignment and assessment are required by faculties. The aim of alignment is a positive effect on curriculum renewal. The result of such changes ultimately benefits the student experience. This paper discusses a particular process, a method for gathering domain experts' opinions on a predetermined list of graduate attributes in order for the attributes to be meaningful within diverse disciplinary contexts in a faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS).

Keywords: graduate attributes, teacher centred leadership, alignment.

Introduction

To enable the changes in awareness required in the scholarship of teaching, a willingness to participate and lead changes is an essential attribute from teachers in each discipline. This paper contributes to the growing literature and practice in the area of the parallel development of leadership among teachers and graduate attributes at discipline level (Pederson 2002). The study has three stages. Each stage forms part of an innovative method is used to gather data on different levels based on a procedure developed by (Turner & Upshur, 1996). It is innovative because it states differences between levels instead of describing particular levels. Domain experts are firstly asked to verbalise what a pre-determined list of graduate attributes means to their discipline. Next the curriculum and levels of attainment at each stage in a major are discussed. Finally, once experts' perceptions of a graduate attribute for their discipline are expressed then possible assessment tasks that align with differences between levels can be developed by the teaching staff as a whole and consequently be incorporated into the curriculum.

Literature and practice: developing leadership and graduate attributes

As universities increasingly make processes that students participate in more transparent, greater emphasis is placed on the transformative effect of studying a particular course in a particular institution. The "generic outcomes of the educational experiences...beyond the content knowledge that is taught" as expressed by Barrie (2007:439) have come to be known as 'generic skills' or 'graduate attributes'.

The scholarship of teaching implies considering the student experience as paramount. Therefore, by clarifying intended outcomes at the start of a course, and aligning teaching to the outcomes such transparency enables students and lecturers to understand the way forward in partnership over the length of a course. For the students these attributes embody the result of studying a course at a particular institution. For lecturers their course becomes part of a

whole learning process in their discipline. It is intended that by knowing these outcomes at discipline level the learning and the lecturing experience is enhanced.

However, Barrie (2007) argues that academics have different perceptions of graduate attributes on both a structural and a referential level. This paper builds on academics' different perceptions of the same attribute by examining the manner in which domain experts across a faculty collaboratively elaborated on attributes they projected as outcomes for students exiting their courses. These attributes, most of them from an imposed and preset list, were considered by the academics as fundamental for success as graduates from their particular area of study.

In the context below graduate attributes (GAs) were new to the Faculty of HUSS. Ten graduate attributes were agreed upon by the academic committee. The study below was developed to counteract the possible wholehearted rejection of these 'meaningless' GAs resulting from a hierarchical 'imposition' across the faculty. The intention was to enable the predominant stakeholders, the lecturers, to engage with the list of ten GAs and to express what each GA meant at discipline level. Creating a feeling of ownership of the GAs so that they would be accepted across the faculty called for a particular style of leadership.

The type of educational leadership required for creating this opportunity is essential for successful uptake at subject level within a discipline. As a theoretical basis teacher centred leadership is the foundation for eliciting domain experts' input into a procedure such as verbalising the meaning of graduate attributes. As Crowther puts it (1996:317) "Teacher leadership is a concrete and identifiable entity". In this study this power has been harnessed to convert possible hierarchical imposition into personal engagement. The result has been uptake enabled through facilitation and collaboration. It called for leadership from among the ranks as proposed by Smyth (1989:191) who puts forward that educational leadership

"... has little to do with hierarchical impositions... [and] it has a lot to do with enabling the best' ideas to emerge wherever they come from, through a process of informed and rational debate."

Hence the definition stage which was to give meaning to the GAs was to be carried out before they could be used with any meaning at discipline level.

The intended outcomes were that as a result each discipline would have a working definition which could be refined and adapted before uptake. Uptake in this context included aligning teaching and assessment with the attributes. A positive flow-on effect would finally reach students, through detailed discipline level information about the aims of their course, with the inclusion of such information in unit guides.

Participants

The objectives of the project would be met by engaging the faculty staff in an informed and rational debate with their colleagues. The intention was to discover and map across 12 disciplines what the bald list of attributes above meant to the stakeholders.

Beyond the practicalities of recruiting participants across four schools within a large faculty, the project had three stages defining, aligning and uptake at subject level. A series of workshops were held with different faculty groupings due to the limitations of a concise paper

only Historical and European studies and Visual Arts are reported on below. Each workshop also had different stages. The methodology is described then each stage is set out below.

Methodology: differences between levels instead of describing particular levels

Before the project, members of the faculty toed the line by pasting in the following list in their course outlines without paying further attention – they simply complied. This list was the basis for the project:

1. Effective communication in writing, speech, and/or other media across a range of genres.
2. Problem-solving skills.
3. Social, ethical and cultural understanding of self and others.
4. The ability to work as a team member.
5. The ability to work independently.
6. Planning and time management skills.
7. The ability to use a range of techniques to tap creative ideas
8. The ability to perform critical analysis and synthesis, and develop and evaluate arguments.
9. The ability to locate information relevant to the question at hand.
10. An interest in life-long learning and in understanding the global context of learning and knowledge.

The methodology requires participants to discuss and note in the grid the *differences* in year levels as opposed to what was covered *in* each year level with regard to a particular graduate attribute. Then the assessment was discussed. As each attribute was discussed notes were written up in a workshop grid. See Figure 1.

Effective communication in writing, speech, and/or other media across a range of genres			
Effective communication in writing means:		How is it assessed now	
Year level	Difference in GA between levels	Is the GA teachable?	How could this GA be assessed?
1st year to 2nd year			
2nd yr to 3rd yr			
3rd yr to 4th yr or exit			
4tr to exit or further study			
Exit skill attained	Effective communication in writing		

Figure 1: Workshop outline sample

Defining: what does a predetermined list of graduate attributes mean to domain experts ?

The first stage of the methodology set out above was to define what the list of GAs meant to each discipline. The participants were groups of three academics from the same area working through and verbalising what their discipline orientation was to each attribute and their perceived differences in levels over a major.

In response to what does “Effective communication in writing, speech, and/or other media across a range of genres” mean in your discipline, Table 1 below shows a range of different orientations by the domain experts towards the first attribute discussed. Subsequently, each of the attributes was discussed in turn but space limits the reporting to only the first attribute.

Table 1: Mapping across disciplines in the School of Historical and European studies

	Archaeology	History	Spanish
Effective communication in writing	Logical and clear identification of problem. Logical and clear presentation. Appropriate use of evidence. Appropriate use of disciplinary jargon	Sentence structure Essay structure Being articulate Argument style	Clarity Succinctness Ability to address topic Coherence Appropriate register Discipline specific vocabulary
Effective communication in speaking	Succinct and clear presentation of problem and argument. Ability and readiness to engage in critical discussion and exchange of ideas. Ability to ask pertinent questions	Dialogue Listening Fluency Tact Confidence Presentation skills	Getting to the point Ability to listen and to respond Adequate interaction Managing speech speed No mumbling i.e. articulating
Effective communication in other contexts	Ability to observe, record describe archaeological evidence Ability to present in images, field notes, data bases and statistical analyses for use by other researchers	Visual literacy	N/A

In order to compare with a completely different discipline area, the data from the School of Visual Arts (elicited from four domain experts) are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Mapping across disciplines in the School of Visual Arts

Visual Arts	
Effective communication in writing	Ability to write in a clear way
	Ability to understand forms of writing
	Writing text and content
	Articulate communication of ideas and concepts
	Being able to communicate the meaning of viscous materials
Effective communication in speaking	To verbalize concepts and communicate them effectively
	To verbalize visual perception and means of communication
	To build an appropriate genre specific vocabulary
	Understanding of cultural ground
Effective communication in other contexts	Effective communication in other media
	Appropriate response to requirements of brief
	Use of appropriate media to resolve project intention
	Gauging the meaning of the works of others
	Affecting others' perception
	Appropriate use of the medium to fulfil assigned task
	Understanding the practical application of the medium
	Appropriate clarity in the form of the work

It should be noted that not all groups verbalised for all of the attributes. In addition space was provided for extra missing attributes to be suggested for the discipline and not covered by the original list.

The work summarised in the figures above required much collaborative effort. A content analysis of the results shows elements such as 'clarity' for example being repeated across disciplines. Mapping could reduce the multiplication of expressed attributes across a school or across similar disciplines. The advantage of asking separate disciplines to report on their orientation individually, before cross program fertilization, enables the discipline particular features to stand out.

Aligning: curriculum and levels of attainment at each stage in a major

The second stage was to engage with issues of alignment. Were the graduate attributes skills teachable? Were they being assessed? Would there be reasonable claims in the future for attainment of the attributes in question? These questions produced a great deal of discussion which falls beyond the scope of the paper.

Uptake

In the final stage, GAs are discussed and actively worked on by teachers to take on meaning. They are incorporated into teaching and course design. This is facilitated by the small group of workshop participants taking the completed workshop outline back to their subject areas to meet with other academics. By discussing with them as a whole group how to align assessment with the outcomes expressed the ideal can become reality. Innovation in curriculum requires matching teaching objectives and assessment. Alignment with graduate attributes is a way of starting from the large picture before working out the fine details. By deciding what different attributes mean to their discipline in particular, lecturers have a

collaboratively defined foundation from which to work from while devising assessment and the attainment of the GAs.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the growing literature and practice in the area of the development of graduate attributes at discipline level. The type of educational leadership required for creating such an opportunity is essential for successful uptake at subject level within a discipline. Active consideration, as compared to passive compliance, has been shown to be important in this research which has highlighted that by working through the meaning of graduate attributes at a discipline level the engagement with GAs is elevated to a position where academics have a space for the necessary discussion regarding alignment, assessment and planning for attainment to take place.

Further studies could investigate student perceptions of the same attributes. This would shed light on how they perceive each attribute and what they understand it to be mean both at course commencement and course exit.

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