

Teaching generic skills: eroding the higher purpose of universities, or an opportunity for renewal?

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Abstract

This paper explores opportunities and challenges presented by the development of graduate skills in Australian universities. We challenge the dichotomy that conceives of a fundamental disjuncture between the idea universities as institutions of vocational education and the more traditional conception of universities as key institutions in the formation of reflective practitioners, social critics and good citizens. Despite the challenges inherent in implementing the graduate skills project, we conclude that stakeholder consensus around the value of graduate skills represents a valuable opportunity for universities to regain control of the higher education agenda and renew their traditional, higher purpose.

Keywords: generic skills, graduate attributes, higher purpose of universities, knowledge society, mass education, universities, vocational education.

Introduction

Significant changes in Australia's system of higher education have challenged universities' traditional identity as selective institutions whose role is to induct an elite group of students into higher professions and ways of thinking. In the current context, universities still struggle to identify their higher purpose in an era of vocational mass higher education. Some commentators have argued that university stakeholders, and universities themselves, have become pre-occupied with the employability of students at the expense of higher education's traditional focus of citizenship and social critique. However, this claim rests on what is

arguably an artificial dichotomy between this traditional ‘higher’ academic purpose, and employability requirements.

We begin by providing a brief background of changes to higher education that has challenged the traditional role of higher education. Next, we explore the nexus between graduate skills and the position of higher education in a ‘knowledge society’. Because of its focus on process, skills-based pedagogy is a useful way of addressing issues such as student transition into higher education, the development of appropriate educational standards across disciplinary curricula, and the development of lifelong learners. Further, because teaching students graduate skills can facilitate their mastery of disciplinary knowledge, and develop their sense of judgement, such a project is not inconsistent with the development of the civic capabilities needed in the ‘knowledge society’. For all of these reasons, we are firm advocates of graduate skills, properly conceived. However, we believe that the success of this project also rests on frank acknowledgement of some of the challenges faculty potentially face in implementing this ambitious project. These challenges include: inconsistencies in interpretation and, by extension, disagreement over who is responsible for skills-based teaching; associated risks in implementation, including financial costs and staff training, and finally; the possibility of mixed student responses to changes in teaching brought about by adopting a skills focus. Despite these challenges, we conclude that the graduate skills project offers universities a unique opportunity to reclaim and clarify what is conceived as the ‘higher purpose’ of higher education: the creation of reflective professionals and good citizens.

Changes in Higher Education

The past twenty years have seen significant reforms in Australia's higher education system relating to both research and teaching approaches. Significant milestones in the debate and reform agenda include the 1988 Dawkins reforms, the 1997-1998 West Review (*Learning for Life*), David Kemp's 1999 research policy statement *Knowledge and Innovation*, the 2001 Federal Senate Inquiry *Universities in Crisis*, the 2002-2003 *Crossroads Review of Higher Education* leading to the *Backing Australia's Future* reforms (BAF) and most recently, *Building University Diversity*. A convergence of policy reforms in the industrialised world has led to the corporatisation of universities, and the implementation of user-pays policies regarding access to higher education (Bostock 2002). Taken together, these reform packages herald the arrival of what is variously called the Enterprise University (Marginson et al 2000), University Inc (Henry 1999), or Hire Education (Lowe 2004). Continued under-investment by government in the higher education sector has contributed significantly to the commercialisation process, with a drive for both national and international fee paying students to make up funding shortfalls (Harman 2004). This, in turn, has resulted in increased student numbers, a phenomenon also linked to the shifting role of universities over the past twenty years (Schapper et al 2004).

Expectations about the role of universities have undergone enormous change over the past two decades. In broad terms, the traditional expectation of universities was that they were elite, research-centred institutions whose role was to reproduce a professional, intellectual class. In recent years, this expectation has shifted to a more vocational, mass educational focus, with universities playing a central, if vexed, role in the formation of professional, white collar employees (Marginson 2000, p. 98; Marginson et al 2000, p. 28). Candy has linked this shift to the emergence of an 'information society' (2000, p. 267), where greater

pressures are placed on professionals (in particular) and workers (in general) to both manage and master particular kinds of knowledge (but see also Barrow 2004; Boud 2000).

An added dimension of this shift in role has been the transformation of students into paying 'customers'. This transformation has occurred as a result of increased competition amongst universities for full-fee paying domestic and international students, combined with the increasing, and differentiated, cost of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Under such circumstances, students naturally expect educational value for their money (Sharrock 2000). Thus, an unlooked-for consequence of the 'student as paying customer' model is an increase in student expectations of teaching quality and learning support in universities. This, along with recent government policy, which rewards tertiary institutions for high levels of student satisfaction (Illing 2005, p. 1), has placed the spotlight on universities' teaching role.

The move towards vocationalism, internationalisation and mass education has attracted students from a variety of ethnic and educational backgrounds who are enrolling in far greater numbers. Academic staff responses to this phenomenon can be conceived as a whole range of positions between two extremes. One extreme frames the increasing diversity of the student cohort in terms of 'crisis' (Kirkpatrick et al 2002, p. 74), and focuses largely on what students lack. Proponents of this view argue that on top of declining government investment in higher education, large numbers of both national and international students currently start their university degree without the skills necessary to engage competently in their chosen discipline. In 1996, a study by Postle et al. (cited in Lawrence 2003, p. 4) showed that academics did not perceive students' learning difficulties as a reflection of their teaching practice. Instead, interviewees defined students' problems as requiring remedial intervention

from support staff, such as learning advisers. Six years ago Craig McInnis' (2000, p. 24) study found that many staff complained about 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' creating a 'problem' for universities. Our own experience has shown us that such attitudes persist, although it would be difficult to quantify how great a proportion of academic staff continue in this belief.

At the other extreme are those who argue that teaching must change to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse cohort. One particular manifestation of this position is represented by 'student-centred' pedagogy (Prosser et al 1999), which argues that university teaching must adapt itself to student ability rather than the other way around (Biggs 2003, p. 3-5). From the perspective of increasing diversity, some argue (Wood et al 2003; Schapper et al 2004; Whalley 1997) that university curricula must provide opportunities, not only for international students to succeed in their chosen university, but also for local students to benefit from their presence. This is because the changing nature of employment in an increasingly globalised world makes intercultural competency an important part of the professional formation of graduates (Ballantyne et al 2004). Both perspectives on the student-centred position acknowledge the fact that many students who come to university do so for reasons of employability, rather than a burning desire for knowledge or even the drive to excel in a particular profession (Biggs 2003, p. 3-5).

The Nexus Between Graduate Skills and the Role of the University

Of concern, therefore, are claims by business peak bodies, such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) (2004) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) (Balzary cited in Maiden 2004) that many university graduates do not have appropriate 'soft skills', including 'communication, teamwork, problem solving, ongoing learning, creativity,

cultural understanding, entrepreneurship and leadership'. Universities themselves have responded, both by developing policy relating to graduate skills, and by designing and delivering various teaching and learning initiatives that address skill development directly (Barrie 2004). Despite this response, a recent BCA report (2006) claims that employers continue to be dissatisfied with the skill level of university graduates.

Universities should be concerned about claims of a skills deficit of their graduates. This is because such criticisms pose a challenge to them, both in their new role as vocational education providers, and in their traditional role as teachers of 'higher knowledge'. As the Business Higher Education Round Table (cited in James et al 2004, p. 175) has suggested: 'The contemporary focus on graduate skills is really part of a bigger, as yet unresolved, debate about the purpose of university education and how to develop educated persons who are both employable and capable of contributing to civil society'. In a knowledge society, unskilled graduates represent a failure on two counts: firstly, in terms of employability and, secondly, in terms of the universities' traditionally conceived role in the formation of capable citizens. This is because, in societies saturated with information, the ability to master knowledge, rather than be mastered by it, is the hallmark of both a capable knowledge worker, and a good citizen. In this context, as Candy argues (2000, p. 276), 'universities have the responsibility to model the highest standards of probity and rigour with respect to the development and wise use of knowledge'.

For graduates and citizens to truly master knowledge, the emphasis on what is taught and how it is taught in universities must shift from the traditional focus on 'content', to one which emphasises 'process': what graduates can do with knowledge. As Barrow (2004, n.p.) argues, there is now a greater emphasis on graduates,

Being able to understand, assign significance and interpret through developing intellectual skills like problem-solving, logical thinking and information gathering, with a subordination of the acquisition of knowledge and the facts that underpin the discipline.

Their being able to do so not only has ramifications for learners as graduates, but also as active citizens capable of understanding and challenging the social and political world for the public good. After all, modern social movements construct issues of concern via the media (Lockie 2004, p. 47; Avritzer et al 1997, p. 99), often using a mixture of civil disobedience, political lobbying, alternative discourses and potent symbolism. All of this requires a high level of facility in knowledge interpretation and representation.

However, some have argued that the continued focus on graduate skills and other indicators of employability increasingly reflect a narrow ‘managerialist’ agenda (Heath 1999; Marginson 2000, p. 98; Tomlinson 2006). Pamela Heath (1999, p. 1) argues that there is, ‘a fundamental incompatibility facing university teachers involved with the education of students/citizens/future workers where education is increasingly geared for the workplace in a complex, global, technological society’. Such critics tend to contrast this agenda with the more traditional ‘enlightenment’ view about the role of the university: the pursuit of higher knowledge, and the formation of good citizens who can challenge the dominant paradigm (Barrow 2004). John Tomlinson’s assertion about the responsibility of universities is characteristic of this view: ‘It is an obligation to provide a supportive education environment, which educates students to live in society rather than simply equipping them to become pliable peons in the global market place’ (2006, p. 57). Two broad themes emerge

from these criticisms. First, that universities should produce graduates who are critical, autonomous citizens. Second, that universities should produce graduates who are reflective (self-reflexive) professional practitioners with a strong sense of vocation, and a social justice perspective.

Yet, the dichotomy between ‘skilling employees’ and contributing to the creation of reflective practitioner/citizens rests on an overly simplistic view of what skills-based pedagogy entails. This view is arguably a product of the persistent devaluing of skills-based teaching and the institutions traditionally associated with it. Stirling et al (2006) attribute this devaluing of skills back to a split between the teaching of theoretical and applied knowledge in the 1960s. At this time the Martin Committee recommended the creation of a two-tier system, with universities on the top and technical and advanced education colleges on the bottom. The latter were intended to ‘equip men and women for the practical world of industry and Commerce’, while universities attended to ‘the development of knowledge and the importance of research’ (Martin cited in Stirling et al 2006, p. 181). Because of this legacy, skills-based pedagogy is often perceived as being more aligned with a technical ‘training’ or ‘coaching’ approach to teaching and learning.

Criticisms that skills-based teaching and learning is too mechanistic may certainly be valid in some instances. Indeed, confusion and disagreement over whether we are teaching graduate competencies, skills or attributes can be seen as a marker of real differences in understanding of what skills-based pedagogy entails. Research on skills-based pedagogy (Barrie 2004; Moore 2004) has shown that some practitioners approach skills-based teaching from remedial, generalist perspective. Generic workshops and on-line skills development modules that are separated from disciplinary learning run the risk of promoting a shallow, technical

approach to teaching and learning. The ‘graduate skills assessment’ test devised by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), exemplifies the pitfalls inherent in adopting too generalist a perspective. Critics (Beckett 2004, p. 500; Chanock et al 2004, p. 28) have argued that the test is poorly targeted, de-contextualised and, as such, cannot measure the kind of skills employers are looking for in university graduates. According to Glen Rogers and Marcia Mentkowski (2004, p. 348) graduate skills, ‘may ensnare pedagogy and student learning in mechanistic conceptions of how to perform’. In this case, students ‘go through the motions’ or produce a ‘facsimile’ of prescribed academic literacies.

Yet part of the reaction of critics to skills-based pedagogy may also be based on a deep learning ideal (Biggs 2003) that, of itself, offers insufficient recognition of how a new learning context affects the learner. In our experience, the initial stages of the student ‘apprenticeship’ in university literacies can often appear shallow and mechanistic. However, we would argue that going through the motions is a logical initial response to an unfamiliar learning environment. As Kate Chanock (2001: n.p.) affirms: ‘It is once people feel confident in the conventions...that they can do original things within them’. This is echoed in Patricia Cartwright and Lynne Noone’s study on integrating tertiary literacies into undergraduate programs that recorded academic teachers’ reflections on their own adjustment to new methods in their teaching:

Generally, I feel I’m groping my way [sic] with the strategies, and so I have a tendency to stick to the steps formulated, no matter what. Though, I do imagine that as I get more familiar with the structures, and with incorporating them into my tutorials, I’ll learn to move away from the steps a bit (2000, p. 51).

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that students sometimes produce a facsimile of what they think their teachers want. Explicit skills-based pedagogy that makes transparent the expectations of disciplinary staff goes some way to addressing a long-standing injustice inherent in the traditional role of undergraduate students. Namely, that 'Students are expected to write as experts, but are marked as novices. They are expected to 'invent' the university when they could be oriented to its culture' (Chanock 2001, p.1). From this perspective, skills-based pedagogy is not about 'spoon-feeding' or technical 'training', it is ultimately about teaching process, where process includes higher order activities such as analysis, critical thinking and ethical behaviour. As David Beckett (2004, p. 497) explains: 'Both competency and its close relation, generic skill, are shaped as much by a sensitivity to "processes" of learning, as they have been shaped in policy and practices up to the present, by concerns over the outcomes of learning'. If taught as process, developing skills such as written communication includes teaching higher order cognitive skills, of which the essay or report is itself only the final artefact.

Because, at its best, skills-based pedagogy is a way of making academic discourses, literacies and expectations explicit, it is a good vehicle for inducting students into the culture of the university. Put differently, skills-based pedagogy can be used as an effective means of explicating, 'the tacit knowledge of [university] teachers' (James et al. 2004, p. 176). This can enable students to engage confidently with the knowledge of their own discipline (Ballantyne et al 2004; Bath et al 2004), thus becoming the critical, autonomous learners so prized by traditional academe (Phillips et al 2004, p. 280). Because it provides explicit cues for students, skills-based pedagogy might also be seen as one way of addressing the learning requirements of an increasingly diverse cohort of university entrants (Kirkpatrick et al 2002, p. 73; Schapper et al 2004, p. 191). This includes both Australian and international students,

both of whom struggle to understand the differences in expectation they encounter in their transition to the new learning context (Green et al 2004).

Providing explicit teaching on the kind of processes students need to follow in order to be successful university learners is not just useful for transition into universities. The overlap between teaching academic literacies and higher order graduate skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, can help educators clarify and articulate the different levels of complexity students should be expected to engage with over the course of their degree. Assessment should aim to develop skills to different levels, depending on the stage of students' program of study. It is almost a truism to insist, as does Sally Kift (2003, n.p) that, 'higher level abilities should be demonstrated by final year students'. Yet, in our experience, students are not always challenged beyond the level, which allows them to 'get by' in their discipline. Adopting a whole-of-program approach to skills development challenges this remedial approach, and is more likely to produce capable students and employable graduates (See Kift 2003, for example).

Because it occurs (Boud 2000; Kift 2003; Rogers et al 2004) through practice and (formative) assessment, skills-based pedagogy provides an avenue for the development of lifelong learners. As David Boud (2000, p.158-159) argues, facilitating lifelong learners requires more of universities than ensuring students do well in appropriate forms of assessment. Students must also be able to assess their own performance in learning tasks they will face during the course of their lives. As professionals, they will need to know how to judge whether they have met standards that are appropriate for the task they are undertaking. They will also need to know how to seek feedback from the environment, whether in the form of peers, policy or superiors (Boud 2000, p. 158). Skills-based pedagogy makes teacher

expectations of desired learning outcomes explicit to students, and enables students to ‘own’ the criteria by which they are assessed. This allows students to begin the process of developing the judgement they will require as lifelong learners.

Because of the current emphasis teaching on students what to do with knowledge, and how to judge their own performance, the development of appropriately skilled employees and self-reflective practitioners (Hayward et al 2004, p. 127; Boud 2000, p. 154) arguably sits on a continuum with the formation of good citizens. We believe that graduates who are both able creators and manipulators of knowledge, as well as capable of informed judgement are also potentially good citizens. From this perspective, there is no reason to accept as an inevitability the premise that skills-based pedagogy represents a scenario where ‘the needs of the people as citizens and social members’ (Heath 2000, p. 43) are subsumed to the needs of the economy. A more serious concern is whether teaching process, alone, can contribute to ethical employees/citizens. Peter McLaren (cited in Heath 2000, p. 10) alerts us to the possibility that universities may be developing students’ skills with the sole purpose of enabling them to ‘adapt to a changing world’. This gives little thought to the prospect of harnessing such skills for the purpose of pursuing justice and equality: where social and economic systems are subject to critique on ethical grounds.

The potential for developing graduate skills without developing any sort of ethical capacity is a real concern. Certainly, developing students’ critical thinking and/or problem-solving in the context of their chosen discipline should enable them to adopt a critical perspective on the practices within it. For instance, an important locus of ethics instruction for any profession would logically revolve around the decision-making process (Key et al 1998, p. 333). From the point of view of process, ethics can be treated as an explicit dimension in developing a

students' tertiary literacy within a particular discipline. Still open to question, is whether this leads students to adopt a critical perspective in relation to other practices and other forms of knowledge outside of that discipline. This would presumably depend on students' ability to transfer the skills they have learned to other contexts (See Moore 2004; Rogers et al 2004, p. 348) for positions on the possibility of skills transfer). For this reason, those wishing to ensure that students develop ethical dispositions, which extend beyond the practices of their profession would need to teach it as a discreet entity beyond the ethics-as-process components such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Opinion is still divided over whether ethical dispositions in graduates are better developed through an embedded approach, as stand-alone theoretical content, or as a combination of the two (Keinzler et al 2003).

The Question of Graduate Skills: Challenges

That we are enthusiastic advocates of the graduate skills agenda is clear. Yet this enthusiasm is tempered by our experience to date, which has highlighted the challenges faced by faculties wishing to seriously engage with this important project. The first of these is not just disagreement about what skills-based pedagogy entails, but who is responsible for developing and teaching it. The second is that even if there is broad agreement that graduate skills should be embedded in disciplinary programs, this itself throws up other challenges, such as the necessity for university faculty to invest substantial resources, the necessity for teaching staff within them to adopt changed teaching practices, and the real risk that students will not (initially) welcome such changes with open arms.

Simon Barrie's (2004) study of academic understandings of graduate attributes shows that interpretation of graduate skills development varies widely, from the most simple view, that

skills are a separate precursor to learning, to the most complex, that skills are abilities, ‘which sit at the very heart of discipline knowledge and learning’ (Barrie 2004, p. 265-266). This inconsistency of interpretation not only has the potential to derail or misdirect the kinds of curricular renewal universities must undertake to forward the graduate skills agenda, it may also result in circumstances where skills-based teaching is consistently devalued and outsourced by faculty. Our experience in facilitating explicit skills-based teaching within our faculties has shown us that many university teachers still maintain a strong belief that they have been employed to teach ‘content’ rather than graduate skills. Skills are seen as *mere* ‘by-products’ of disciplinary learning, preferably taught in pre-orientation courses. Indeed, graduate skills development is often left to able, but otherwise marginalised, learning support staff in centralised learning support units (Stirling et al 2005, p. 180). This relatively common division of labour is a significant barrier to universities fulfilling their new role as sites of professional formation because it often results in skills being addressed in overly generic and remedial, rather than developmental terms.

Yet, the temptation to ‘outsource’ skills-based initiatives is understandable, given the investment of resources required for a whole-of-program approach. Adopting such a model places a significant financial and human resource burden on already cash-strapped institutions. To begin with, university faculties must provide substantial backing, including time, money and support for staff tasked with skills-based research, curriculum development and implementation. Our experience has also shown that costly, sometimes unpopular, staff development processes may be required so that university teachers habituated to ‘delivering’ content can engage confidently with, and contribute to, skills-based pedagogy.

Staff concerns about adopting new ways of teaching, and their perception of increased risk should not be ignored. Our experience has shown that skills-based teaching does not always find universal favour with students. For this reason, staff adopting this approach must be prepared, and supported, to receive mixed feedback from students in course evaluations. Sally Kift's (2002, p. 23) reflection on her faculty's experience in skill-based curriculum renewal is worth quoting at length:

It would be naïve to assume that student reaction to an explicitly skills-based approach will be completely or even necessarily favourable. Student response to a change in focus *from* content *to* skills development embedded in content may be mixed. At present, law students (who cannot be that different from their counterparts in other disciplines) evidence a strong utilitarian ethos. As for academic staff, capability development will also require a dramatic culture shift on the part of the student body, in this context from passive to active learners.

Our own experience, and that of others (Cartwright et al 2000), affirms this. There is the real possibility that academic staff will perceive as too risky new forms of teaching, which expose them to mixed, sometimes polarised, student responses to embedded skills-based pedagogy. As Cartwright and Noone (2000, p. 53) found, 'many students experienced a sense of cognitive dissonance when they were confronted with our literacy strategies that were different from what they expected tertiary learning to be'. Furthermore, we found that the precision required in teaching processes cuts both ways; students do not always rejoice in learning precisely what is expected of them. The risk of a mismatch between student expectation and academic teaching is compounded in business faculties, such as our own, where students are strongly encouraged but sometimes ignore advice to complete their degree

in the recommended order. As a consequence, first year courses often have many students enrolled from second and third year, all with different skill levels and learning requirements.

Added to the very real risk of mixed student responses to skills-based teaching, is the challenge, for convenors, of managing the expectations and performance of teaching team members in relation to new teaching requirements. Kift argues that, 'as front-line course providers' tutors are essential to the successful attainment of course objectives (2003, n.p.). Yet, tutors are just as likely as their full-time colleagues to hold strong preferences for content over process. Unless there are positive incentives and adequate support for full-time academic staff to take on added leadership and mentoring responsibilities, few will see the shift as one worth making.

Aside from the specific burdens produced by this shift to explicit skills-based teaching, a number of broader trends also have the potential to undermine it; these will not be explored at length here but it is worth noting that external factors such as increased competition between universities, decreased government funding, the casualisation of academic staff, and increasing numbers of students with an increasingly diverse range of culture and ability, all work against the kind of large-scale institutional and cultural change required for universities to wholeheartedly embrace skills-based pedagogy.

The existence of these challenges does not mean that universities can afford either a tokenistic response or inaction in relation to the issue of graduate skills and skills-based pedagogy. That there appears to have been little public concern over the continued decline in funding indicates that universities have yet to convincingly clarify their role in such a way that demonstrates their current value to society (Sharrock 2000, p. 154), let alone employers.

In this sense, it is still the case, as Simon Marginson suggested several years ago, that, ‘the practical reconstruction of the University is [still] running ahead of academic analysis’ (Marginson 2000, p. 99). From a pragmatic perspective, delivering on graduate skills offers universities the opportunity to demonstrate their relevance to employers in the ‘knowledge society’. However, a fuller exploration of what it means to engage in skills-based pedagogy from the perspective of empowering graduates as able and critical citizens offers universities the opportunity to examine and clarify their higher, historic purpose in the current context. In this sense, graduate skills are a paradox. On the one hand, skills based pedagogy can be seen, initially, as a form of student training where students are led through elementary ‘ways of doing’ required by their particular discipline. On the other hand, further development of such skills enables students to engage in higher order thinking within their discipline.

Conclusion

Higher education stakeholders, rather than universities themselves, have so far been the dominant voices in the public debate on graduate skills. Yet in a ‘knowledge society’ institutions, which ‘represent knowledge work at its highest’ (Candy 2000, p. 276) are much better suited to the task of conceptualizing graduate skills, and what they might mean for our graduates, whether as employees or citizens, and for us, as theorists, teachers and designers of the graduate skills project. Conceiving skills-based pedagogy and the needs of the market as one seamless whole masks the inherent complexity of the type of skills required of successful graduates, and is based on the assumption that teaching them somehow works counter to the traditional aims of university teaching. Yet in an era where knowledge work is increasingly important, and where citizens must negotiate ever increasing waves of information, this dichotomy is problematic. Because embedded skills-based pedagogy can help undergraduates successfully navigate their transition to higher education, engage critically

with their discipline and make informed judgments about their own performance, we argue that it is also a timely means for universities to clarify and re-articulate their traditional role in the formation of reflective practitioners, good citizens and social critics.

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