The Future of History: Towards a meaningful measurement of student learning in regional universities

Robert Mason
robert.mason@usq.edu.au

Abstract: Regional universities are in a transitional period in which student engagement and learning are re-evaluated. In an effort to maintain course quality, the Australian government introduced the 'Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency', which is tasked with measuring students' acquisition of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills'. This task has particular implications for regional universities, where courses have higher proportions of cross-faculty and cross-programmatic enrolments because of economies of scale and budgetary constraints. This paper focuses on the acquisition of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' in the Arts Faculty of the regional University of Southern Queensland. The paper suggests different learning expectations of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' amongst students enrolled in History courses. It points to the implications for these differences in learning outcomes, and the particular pertinence of this given the new framework for measuring learning and teaching in Australian universities.

Introduction

The 'Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency' (TEQSA) was created by the federal government in 2011, and will establish a new framework by which undergraduate students' learning is to be measured. TEQSA will focus particularly on universities' successful inculcation of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' in their students, to be demonstrated primarily through the presence of 'Threshold Learning Outcomes'. As this paper discusses, such terms possess a particular resonance in Australia's many regional universities, where cross-Faculty enrolments are high and the student demographic is likely to differ from metropolitan universities.

The paper questions the importance of students' differing approaches to skills and attributes amongst students from different disciplinary backgrounds, using the case study area of History. The paper argues that the community of academic Historians must respond to the changing regulatory environment with innovative assessment practices, consciously mapping the progression of 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' across the various majors into which the discipline feeds. Whilst recognising the utility and opportunities presented by the new context, the author points to the particular problems likely to be experienced by regional universities and urges the need for additional research into the implications of students' differing approaches to disciplinary learning.

Background

Exploring 'Graduate Attributes and Skills'

The Higher Education Council report *Achieving Quality*, stated presciently in 1992 that 'Graduate Attributes' could be considered "the central achievements of higher education as a process" (Bath et al., 2004, 313). As such, they go beyond discipline-specific expertise, developing qualities that "prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future" (Hughes and Barrie, 2010, 325). In contrast, 'Graduate Skills' are more practical skills that can be characterised as involving lower levels of cognition. Whereas 'Graduate Attributes' are often determined at the institutional level, 'Skills' are more likely to be specific to particular disciplines or programs. Over time, universities throughout Britain and Australia have refined and standardised their approach to 'Graduate Attributes and Skills', recognising that they form an important means to understand students' learning experience.

Recognition of the importance played by 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' has caused universities to invest significantly in the process of mapping their acquisition across programs. Many Australian universities now view this process as a central determinate for quality assurance purposes. Far less clear, however, is how specific academic disciplines ought best to respond. Unlike some areas, such as Education, History (and other

Humanities subjects) does not have professional accreditation requirements that impinge on academics' freedom to chose content. This does not mean that academic historians have not invested effort in developing discipline-based learning in universities (Healey, 2000), but the process remains highly contested and uneven (Clark, 2009). Within the United Kingdom, a similar circumstance resulted in the government driving significant change in the quality assurance process.

The application of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' in Australia has changed markedly in recent years. In part, this is reflective of broader international developments in the 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' in tertiary education institutions (Brawley, 2007). The Australian federal government's decision to introduce TEQSA has created a new regulatory framework, in which the assurance of quality learning and teaching is central. Humanities subjects must shift from a relatively autonomous structure to one in which students' acquisition of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' must be demonstrated more rigorously and explicitly. Some initial discussion has occurred in Australia regarding changes to survey and capstone courses (Calder, 2006; Calder, 2007), but has not yet been widely implemented.

Along with the majority of Australian universities, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has made an explicit commitment to map 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' across its programs. Unlike the model favoured at many other institutions, however, USQ has decided to foster five broad 'Graduate Qualities'. These more generic 'Qualities' are discipline expertise, professionalism, global citizenship, scholarship and the capacity for lifelong learning. Their development reflected a consultative 'bottom up' approach that involved academic staff in various disciplines. Informed by scholarly debate, USQ's focus was to capture the particular needs of its various cohorts and disciplines in both international and local contexts. At the course level, each of the five 'Qualities' is broken down into assessable 'Skills', which are more reflective of an employability framework (DEST, 2002; Business, Industry & Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007)).

USQ is unusual in its close association of 'Qualities' with employability. In contrast, its concern with global citizenship, broadly conceived, reflects more closely what Barrie (2004) has identified as a marked tendency throughout Australia to emphasize 'Attributes' (or 'Qualities') associated with civic skills. This association of civic skills and internationalisation is a marked development in the Australian curriculum. These two focal points of civics and employability appear likely to be targeted by TEQSA as core aspects of successful Australian graduates.

Within disciplinary areas, such as History, USQ's 'Qualities' are broken down into more easily measurable and assessable 'Skills'. Each of the ten 'Skills' exist in associative frames with the higher level 'Qualities', in a similar manner that Barrie outlined as the case at the University of Sydney. As noted, USQ's 'Skills' are tied particularly closely to employability. This raises some problems in non-vocational subjects. Whilst the Faculty of Arts has mapped students' acquisition of 'Skills' to the program level, it has not yet done so formally at the disciplinary level. Although students remain clear about the applicability of History (Nye et al.., 2011), it is clear that the introduction of TEQSA requires a more systemic process.

The Regional Context

Having discussed the context in which 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' have developed in Australia, the paper now discusses their particular application in regional contexts. Although the paper identifies likely issues and opportunities, it is important to note that its primary aim is to demonstrate the need for further research. It does not purport to offer that research directly. Nonetheless, USQ offers a potentially significant case study of a regional university, with a representative demographic and the added variable of large numbers of distance learners.

Regional universities throughout Australia are in a transitional period in which student engagement and learning are re-evaluated in preparation for TEQSA. Moreover, this occurs as competition for undergraduate enrolments is set to increase once caps are removed from student enrolments in 2012. The risk that renewed competition for students will lead to a decline in standards explains the decision to establish TEQSA. The manner in which quality assurance and standards in learning and teaching are measured has particular implications for regional universities, where courses have high proportions of cross-faculty and cross-programmatic enrolments. This circumstance derives from economies of scale and budgetary constraints, but blurs disciplinary boundaries and learning to a higher degree than universities where this is not the case.

The typical student demographic for History courses within USQ's Faculty of Arts is of mixed gender and age. Generally, on-campus students are school-leavers who are the first generation in their family to attend university (Burke, 2009). The more numerous web-based students are likely to be women, seeking to balance work, parental responsibilities, and professional development (Ada, 2007). Although aptitude differs markedly between students, and there is a significant difficulty in engaging online learners, a number of salient characteristics exist beyond this basic demographic characteristic. Particularly significant is the high number of cross-Faculty enrolments, of which the most noteworthy group originates in the Faculty of Education.

Work on the recent Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project on disciplinary standards has suggested that attainment or development of 'Graduate Attributes' might be assured through the development and assessment of related minimum 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010b). There is still uncertainty about the form of assessment process that will be used to measure the acquisition of such minimum standards given the diversity of the student cohort's learning needs. This becomes particularly vexing in the Humanities, where there is significant demarcation between disciplines, and where students are permitted to take a range of courses across various subjects.

Regional universities, such as USQ, will experience particular issues as they respond to the regulatory framework's new interest in the acquisition of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills'. Large numbers of students study Faculty of Arts courses for non-Arts qualifications (such as the Bachelor of Education or Business). This is particularly pronounced for areas such as History and English Literature, which are embedded features of Education programs. Such tendencies will increase as the University's Springfield campus expands, and Arts courses are progressively offered at that location.

Indeed, a significant proportion of History students (as well as other disciplines) takes only individual elective courses in the subject. Such flexibility is a precondition for courses which are embedded in multiple majors and programs. This poses potential problems for the systematic interpretation and development of specific 'Graduate Attributes' across majors, particularly where the meaning of skills such as 'critical thinking' can differ widely in even the most basic manner. For example, "Humanities scholars are more likely to approach a problem with the intention of developing a deeper understanding of it; they will analyse or critically evaluate the problem, rather than try to 'solve' it" in the sense of Public Relations scholars situated within the same School (Green et al.. 2009, 21). Such deep differences in disciplinary approach and discourse can prove very disorientating to low-socio-economic students eager to achieve the best possible mark in assessments across their degree. The nature of such individualised enrolment patterns raise questions regarding students' differing approaches to 'Graduate Attributes and Skills', and by implication, their ability to acquire them within individual courses and across programs.

The Students' Perspective

History courses have generally utilised traditional teaching strategies, emphasising essay writing and the critique of data. The renewed emphasis on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, however, has increasingly generated new developments in learning that draw more explicitly on social constructivist approaches. This is in part driven by improved internationalisation of the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching through organisations such as the 'History SOTL' network pioneered by the University of Indiana (among others). Teaching academics have long been aware of students' cognitive processes, and are passionate of History's relevance in the contemporary world. However, this has not always been embedded in course contribution in a systematic manner.

Scholars (such as Moore, 2004) suggest that different modes and frames of thinking influence students' engagement with content and their assumptions about the content's applicability. Thus Education students' desired skills for History courses are more likely to relate to educational and pedagogical contexts than professional historical ones. As Lim (2001) advocates, it is vital that course structures allow students to take individual control of the development of skills. Better appreciating students' engagement allows course content to be related to specific life experiences and anticipated workplace functions (Sandlin, 2000). Whilst Education and Arts students require different skills on graduation, a successful course structure must embed what Kimbell (1998) terms 'presence' to encourage higher level attributes amongst all students. Where students feel empowered to engage with others, the different approach and theoretical frameworks informing higher level learning need not be an impediment.

Students of USQ have a further distinguishing factors, namely the embedded provision of blended learning online. As History prioritises what Enwistle (1997) has described as 'Deeper Learning', courses must accommodate and facilitated the synthesis and application of historical examples in the contemporary context. Yet, the 'cognitive presence' (Anderson, 2004) required for deeper learning online is particularly difficult to foster in online and blended learning. This is all the more problematic when students in History courses are always derived from different disciplinary backgrounds, and many will only be taking the course as an elective. Ensuring all students feel skills are relevant to their anticipated future profession is a significant challenge. Yet, despite recognising this academics prefer to follow "haphazardly shared folk wisdom … forming notions about teaching isolation, and … often totally ignorant of the pedagogical discoveries of colleagues teaching in the next classroom" (Pace, 2004).

Such an approach is neither sustainable nor desirable, but it is cost-effective in financially insecure regional Arts Faculties. The methodical acquisition of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' relies on a closer recognition of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning on the part of the disciplinary community. One part of the new regulatory environment is the creation of 'Threshold Learning Outcomes', which will be assessed by the TEQSA. 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' can be conceived as being the central standards that any student in a particular major can be assumed to possess on graduation. Described by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council as "core/minimum learning outcomes" (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010a), they are a central component of the federal government's attempt to guarantee standards. Although they remain in development, discussion documents have been developed by a discipline reference group and widely circulated to the community of academic Historians. With no previous experience of professional accreditation or of stipulated standards, it is likely that some Historians will view the development with some concern. This is particularly the case in regional universities, which lack the resources to fund whole scale re-writing of majors.

Whilst establishing a situation in which governments have influence over universities' academic content may be a cause for serious concern, the development of agreed standards ought to be a moment for reflection and opportunity. The 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' will act as the formal measurement of the 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' to secure quality assurance in the sector. TEQSA has been legislated into existence following the publication of the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education*. However, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has been at pains to emphasise that the outcome of the new audit environment should to be improve outcomes for students and employers by increased teaching quality. It is not intended to impose content, but to ensure minimum skills are attained across all of Australia's graduating History students.

The draft 'Standards Statement' that is in circulation is noteworthy for explicitly listing graduate Historians' likely employers (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010b). This is a noteworthy development from previous trends in tertiary education institutions in Australia, where civic aspects are generally emphasised above employability. This may, in part, be derived from the international aspects of the debate. The 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' are not simply derived from the 'Graduate Attributes and Skills', but also speak to the Australian Quality Framework for graduate qualifications. Moreover, overseas scholars have been directly involved, and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council took care to link their work to the United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency and European Tuning descriptors (both comparable exercises) (After Standards Reference Group, 2011). This shift towards employability need not hamper USQ. Indeed, its decision to use 'Graduate Qualities' and a collection of generic 'Skills' desired by employers now appears to have been prescient from an Arts perspective.

At the disciplinary level, the 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' offer the opportunity for course renewal that takes more account of 'Graduate Attributes and Skills' and the student learning experience. In an attempt to ensure that the initiative was not obstructed by wary academic historians, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council has sought to use a consultative approach. In this way, they hope to generate a sense of ownership of the process, necessary for lasting change that goes beyond superficial alterations to courses (Curro and McTaggart, 2003). This has been helped by international developments that have asserted History's signature pedagogy and distinctive identity. Yet, in regional universities, where History disciplines rely financially on Education students, content is already circumscribed by the need to cater fully to the national curriculum. Although History's importance has been stated increased in the new national curriculum, the curriculum has encroached on the provision of academic content at tertiary level for those universities teaching large numbers of Education students.

The Threshold Learning Outcomes do not (in themselves) undermine academic freedom. Indeed, the discussion points circulated have focussed on traditional aspects of historical inquiry, including analysis, argument,

research and critical reflection. It is not yet clear how these will be measured however. The British experience of outside audits by academic peers, suggests that 'Skills' will need to be mapped into courses more explicitly to provide tangible evidence. Only seven out of the thirty Australian universities offering a History major currently use capstone courses that could measure 'Graduate Skills' (After Standards Conference, 2011). It is most likely that students' acquisition of the 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' will be determined by a variety of data, ranging from assessment items to student feedback. Nonetheless, the resourcing implications for regional universities, and the learning experiences of their particular student cohort, are noteworthy.

It is important that the new environment is seen as an opportunity, rather than a threat from which to withdraw and resist. The experience offers the opportunity to reinvigorate courses and majors, and to improve standards in a measurable manner. The mapping of 'Graduate Skills' across a major offers one effective tool to diagnose students' cumulative progress and to check that standards are being achieved. Since the skills of historical inquiry can only be acquired sequentially and over time, an explicit process of mapping would allow skill acquisition to be embedded in a measured manner across the major. Clearly, such a time-consuming exercise would disadvantage smaller regional universities, whose position is already more complicated by the dispersal of their students across various fields of study.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that any question relating to student learning experience, quality assurance or embedding attributes is particularly problematic in Arts faculties where disciplinary discourse varies greatly. Even basic terms, such as 'critical thinking' are "treated differently in different disciplines. These problems are augmented in regional universities, where a relatively small proportion of students in any one History course will be majoring in History. As demonstrated, this raises the important point that there is a significant difference between embedding progression in one course, and embedding it across 'a' major (when not all students will be in that designated single major). History has traditionally encouraged 'autonomous learning' as a means to mitigate this. However, TEQSA's role in measuring the acquisition of Threshold Learning Outcomes, in order to demonstrate efficacy of Graduate Skills and Attributes, would render this option redundant. The problem is especially acute in USQ, where very large numbers of students are from other faculties. In an environment where the emphasis is on skills over content, how should a teaching academic respond to the real needs of Education students to acquire content knowledge in line with the national curriculum?

The rapidly changing teaching environment has significant implications that require a flexible and forthright response. One obvious issue is the urgent need to develop a suite of assessment items that recognise the diversity of student learning and student needs on graduation. Despite the continued emphasis on essay and documentary analysis in History assessments (vital to train professional historians), this may not always fulfil the expectations of students in other programs. Projects driven by the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council are important opportunities, but they assume large Schools and Faculties in which the number of students enrolled in History majors outweigh those in other programs. This is rarely the case in regional universities, and the revitalisation of course material will create a significant resourcing issue that cannot be easily solved. Before regional universities, and distance education providers, instigate wide-ranging changes it is vital further research is conducted into how different student cohorts engage with 'Graduate Attributes and Skills'. Once this is clearer, there will be increased opportunity to tailor assessment tasks that can demonstrate 'Threshold Learning Outcomes' with greater efficacy.

Acknowledgements

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