

Style or substance: how Australian universities contextualise their graduate attributes for the curriculum quality space

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Graduate attributes are now a fixture in higher education. They are perceived as statements of desirable graduate learning outcomes, yet this space is becoming increasingly crowded. In this study, we examine how universities contextualise their graduate attributes statements for the curriculum quality space. We analysed the way Australian universities represent the aims and function of their graduate attributes statements on publicly available web pages, in policies and in documents. Identified themes included the way graduate attributes were conceptualised and framed, their location, and how their integration with strategic internal documents and relevant external, sector quality standards was represented. Based on our findings, we make three recommendations. First, that universities critically examine their statements to ensure there is alignment with strategic institutional and sector aims and outcomes. Second, that they develop detailed policy implementation plans to contextualise and integrate them with key strategic, policy, and regulatory documents. Third, that universities develop a standards framework to articulate the relationship between their graduate attributes, other desired graduate learning outcomes, and relevant sector standards.

Keywords: graduate attributes; integration; curriculum; quality; universities

Introduction

Graduate attributes are a widely accepted curriculum construct in Australian higher education (Hill, Walkington, & France, 2016). With their inception in the 1990s (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015) the majority of Australian universities have developed graduate attributes statements that articulate university aspiration for, and stakeholder expectation about, the qualities, capabilities or skills students will achieve on graduation. The initial trigger for their development was a call from employers, and subsequently government, for university graduates to achieve specific transferable and associated attributes that were important for success in their professions (Barrie, 2006). As universities adopted graduate attributes statements, these became one initial focal point for an emerging focus on the assurance of specified educational outcomes.

Australian sector regulatory bodies and legislation accept graduate attributes and generic skills as distinct components of curriculum quality architecture. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Association (TEQSA) makes reference to them, as does the national Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF), which describes graduate attributes as ‘generic learning outcomes’ (Australian Government, 2015). According to the TEQSA glossary of terms these encapsulate transferable, non-discipline specific skills that a graduate may achieve through learning that have application in study, work and life contexts (TEQSA, 2015). Standard 1.4 of the current HESF also refers to ‘generic skills and their application in the context of the field(s) of education and disciplines involved’, and, ‘skills in independent and critical thinking suitable for lifelong learning’ (Australian Government, 2015). In Europe, the Bologna Process has mandated the assurance of comparable quality learning outcomes including the Dublin Descriptors and more recently, individual competencies (Leoni, 2014).

Despite their appearance in university policies and sector standards, how universities relate them to other institutional and sector requirements is not entirely clear. The need for clarification about their aim and function has become more pressing due to the continued expansion of educational learning outcomes and standards into an increasingly crowded curriculum quality space. Examples include the increased importance of professional competencies, degree-level standards required for the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), disciplinary ‘threshold’ standards (Hay et al., 2010), and employability skills. Most of these educational outcomes or standards refer to similar attributes or skills, such as communication, critical and creative thinking, and management of the self and others; the AQF in particular requires attainment of these also be shown at the appropriate standard for each degree type (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

Our experience in developing and assuring learning outcomes and standards led us to question our assumptions about the aims and function of university graduate attributes statements across the Australian sector. In addition to our question about the way other universities relate them to desirable professional and sector standards, we also wondered to what extent universities connect graduate attributes with other institutional strategies, policies and initiatives. We believed that clarifying these relationships would provide valuable support for program teams focused on designing curricula that should also align with strategic university aims, and which assure a range of quality institutional and external outcomes.

To answer these questions, we conducted a documentary review of relevant, publicly available web pages and documents for 41 Australian-owned universities. We applied a discursive, thematic analysis approach to explore how universities contextualised their graduate attributes statements. Our research questions informed overall themes we derived from the research, which included (1) how graduate attributes were framed and conceptualised, (2) their apparent location or custodianship, and (3) how they represent graduate attribute statement integration with other relevant internal institutional policies, documents, and documented processes, as well as external sector and professional standards.

Our findings suggest, firstly, that universities most commonly framed and conceived the aim of their graduate attributes as the development of graduate employability and workforce skills; as articulating university aspiration, mission or values; and, as means of promoting university reputation, brand or point of difference. Secondly, the most common single location of graduate attributes statement on university websites was learning and teaching, including learning and teaching unit web pages. Thirdly, our findings showed that over half of the institutions reviewed did not

publicly represent any integration of graduate attributes statements with other internal, strategic and policy documents. There were also relatively few public references, overall, to key sector quality standards such as the AQF. We discuss the implications of these findings and make three recommendations that we propose as a guide to effective institutional implementation of graduate attributes policies.

Literature review

Historically, the aim of graduate attributes, and their antecedents, has been to articulate desired qualities of graduates, the value of a university education, as well as foreground a ‘pedigree’ associated with particular institutions. In their seminal work on graduate attributes, for example, Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts (2000) discussed earlier, implied characteristics and qualities of graduates of particular, elite universities and colleges. They argued that we should re-imagine these older practices as a universal project of cultivating ‘graduate attributes’, which should become an explicit focus for higher education and be subject to purposeful integration with disciplinary learning (2000). They defined graduate attributes as:

The qualities, skills, and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen.

They also referenced earlier work by Nunan, now out of print, that categorises graduate attributes as:

- (1) The body of knowledge that comprises the disciplinary foundation of a given course of study
- (2) The critical understanding that derives from thinking, communicating applying and evaluating that body of knowledge

- (3) The dimensions of citizenship and service that follow from a view of graduates playing a leadership role in their society, and
- (4) A capacity for employment and personal flexibility (cited in Bowden et al., 2000).

These categories are echoed by Bath, Smith, Stein and Swann (2004, p. 314) who argue that graduate attribute aims are influenced by three overarching premises. The first is that education is a lifelong process and universities have a role in providing a foundation for future learning as well as the development of learned citizens. The second is that there should be a tighter relationship between education and graduate employment. In Europe the Bologna process, triggered by organisational and technological change in industry, called for all universities to develop particular skills, or competencies required for employment (Leoni, 2014) The third premise is that universities could assess educational quality by focusing on the extent to which it leads to particular graduate outcomes.

There is little question now that in Australia and elsewhere graduate attributes still reflect what many perceive as ‘the core achievements of a university education’ (Barrie, 2006, p. 217), including scholarly and civic dimensions (Star & Hammer, 2008; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). Recent examples include work by Aravantakis and Hornsby (2016) who argue that to equip students as professionals and citizen-scholars for a future characterised by major disruption and ‘ongoing structural changes’ we need to focus on a ‘new set of graduate proficiencies’ (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 11). Oliver and Jorre de St. Jorre (2018) also agree that global disruption and rapid technological innovation provide a rationale for the inclusion of this type of graduate attribute. This is an echo of earlier work by Star and Hammer (2008) who argue that the graduate attributes agenda offers universities the opportunity to focus on the

development of attributes that reflect the civic purpose of higher education as well as those associated with employment (Bowden et al., 2000).

Attributes within many university statements also reflect their original aim: to enhance student work-readiness, employability and employment outcomes. As Yorke and Harvey argued in 2005, in addition to a range of personal attributes, research consistently shows that employers want graduates with attributes such as problem-solving, creativity, communication skills, pro-activity and the ability to work with others (Yorke & Harvey, 2005). However, there are varying interpretations of the concept of employability, which have matured over time. Examples include the relatively simplistic lists of employability skills, published by business organisations such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) (See, for example, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002). Others are complex, nuanced conceptions that emphasise attributes as well as career development skills, based on psycho-social concepts such as individual traits, dispositions, and characteristic adaptations (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 36).

The complexity of each of these long-standing aims may create confusion for practitioners. Australian graduate attributes encompass parallel, sometimes overlapping, visions of desirable graduate learning outcomes and apply a multiplicity of concepts, sometimes interchangeably. There is an established body of research whose authors explore the basis of practitioner confusion that is an inevitable result of this level of complexity (Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Barrie, 2006; Oliver, 2013).

Our own experience as practitioners would suggest that this conceptual blurring extends beyond the level of the individual to encompass universities as institutions (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). A literature search uncovered little corroboration or otherwise for our argument. The majority of existing studies deal principally with the

process of implementing graduate attributes in a specific disciplines (see, for example, Treleaven & Voola, 2008), or across programs of study within a particular university (Bath et al., 2004; Oliver, 2013). Within this literature there are also studies that explore existing student capabilities or the development of specific attributes within disciplines or institutions (Thomas & Day, 2014; Williams, Brown, McKenna, Beovich, & Etherington, 2017). Nonetheless, there is a small, body of research, which relates graduate attributes to concerns about educational quality.

A key strand of this graduate attributes research focuses on the desirability of commonly listed graduate attributes and, by extension, the issue of quality educational outcomes. For example, Bridgstock (2009) focuses on the employability aim of graduate attributes in the UK, Australia and Canada. She observes that whilst university graduate attribute statements do often include references to graduate employability or employability skills there has been little done to reconcile these with employer generated lists of employability skills, nor identify existing gaps or tensions (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 32). Oliver and Jorre de St. Jorre's (2018) more recent work also focuses on published attribute lists in Australian universities, as well as other tertiary education providers. These authors review and rank individual graduate attributes according to the frequency of their selection by tertiary institutions. They conclude their work by recommending, amongst other strategies, a selection of particular attributes, which they argue will enhance graduate employability in rapidly changing world. They also recommend the frequent revision of graduate attribute statements by institutions to ensure fitness-for-purpose (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018, p. 825).

Authors of a small number of studies or projects present institution-level frameworks for embedding and assuring graduate attributes. As part of their Australian Learning and Teaching Council project, Barrie, Hughes and Smith (2009) propose a

framework of strategic institutional elements required for the successful implementation of graduate attributes, with outcomes for students and graduates at its centre. It emphasises the requirement for high-level, process stages of graduate attributes conceptualisation, stakeholder consultation and implementation planning. They recommend an implementation process that includes staff development, embedding of graduate attributes into program and course curricula, and assurance of related student learning through assessment practices and quality assurance processes. In more recent Australian institution-level work, Dew, Goscinski and Coldwell-Neilson (2016, pp. 405-406) examined the process of creating and applying an institutional framework to manage the complexity of designing and assuring learning and graduate outcomes that reflect AQF, disciplinary and professional expectations. They propose a multi-dimensional framework to manage the assurance of disciplinary, AQF degree level, and professional requirements, which includes cross-referencing of AQF standards, graduate attributes and unit learning outcomes as the starting point for unit learning assurance.

Other studies underscore the importance of clear institutional aims, policy frameworks and supports to scaffold the integration of graduate attributes (de la Harpe & David, 2012; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). Benson and Enström (2017) report a Canadian case where a newly registered Higher Education provider chose ‘professional skills’ development as mechanism for self-differentiation in a competitive national education ‘market’. As a newer institution, their aim was to ‘reverse engineer’ a distinct flavour of graduate and seed what Barrie (2006, p. 216) refers to as the ‘rich cultural traditions’ of more established institutions. In a more cautionary example, de la Harpe and David’s (2012) national study uncovered a significant disjunction between positive academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes and the reflection of these in their teaching practice. They conclude that individual academic practice must be guided by

leadership and well-conceived policy frameworks that incorporate a clear, well-communicated institutional vision for graduate attributes (de la Harpe & David, 2012, p. 207). Although not an explicit focus of their study, amongst their overall recommendations Oliver and Jorre de St. Jorre (2018) argue that attributes be published, aligned with the aims of institutions and contextualised, ‘in the curriculum, course handbooks and marketing materials’(p. 833).

Conclusions and recommendations of this small body of sector and institution-focused work provide a useful platform for our work in this study. This is because they highlight key organisational practices that may enable universities to better develop and assure graduate attributes. Among these, are explicit organisational sense-making and communicating about the aims and remit of graduate attributes, how they relate to other aspects of curriculum quality, and the implications of these for policy and curriculum implementation. To determine current levels of engagement in Australian universities with these practices we critically examined publicly available Australian university websites and associated documents, using on the following questions:

- (1) How do universities currently conceptualise and frame the aim(s) of their graduate attributes statements?
- (2) How is their integration with other key institutional documents, documented processes and key external curriculum standards such as AQF represented?

Method

We applied a qualitative approach, using documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) to review publicly available data from all 41 Australian-owned universities, including one private university. Our analysis focused on outward-facing, institutional web pages, available policies and curriculum documents relating to graduate learning outcomes. An

institutional website is its ‘virtual face’, which it presents to its chosen audience. In the case of universities, it is students but also academics who are users of organisational information presented there (Meyer & Jones, 2011). As with other documents, institutional web pages deal with the making, and exchanging, of meaning and provide a discursive ‘window’ that enables researchers to examine the way universities contextualise vehicles of curriculum quality, such as graduate attributes policies.

We began data collection and analysis during the first half of 2018, with a refresh to ensure as much currency as possible at the start of 2019. The three researchers visited university websites, collected relevant data and copied this into an A3 size table, hyperlinked to relevant university websites and documents. We revisited websites multiple times for checking and verification of data collected. We analysed collected documentary text using discursive, thematic analysis. In terms of the discursive component, we looked for direct references to particular concepts, but also indirect references and ‘signifiers’ or words that reference or signify particular concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To structure our analysis we used components of the research question as an analytical lens, but made some allowance for the identification of additional, unanticipated themes or sub-themes. We engaged in multiple, iterative, stages of individual review (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to code the data, then identify themes and sub-themes. This data analysis process also included three meetings where the team examined, re-analysed and calibrated (Sadler, 2014) identified themes and sub-themes. Excerpted, colour-coded document text provided evidence of themes arising from analysis of the data, as in the following excerpt in Table 2.

Table 1. Documentary analysis example

University and page links	Graduate Attributes	Apparent location/ custodian	Conception/ Framing	Represented integration
[University 8]	[Graduate Attributes hyperlink]	Teaching and Learning	Employability – ‘[University 8] promises to educate learners for the jobs and skills of the future’	Linked to institutional strategic plan

Findings

Analysis of the documentary data resulted in the generation of three overarching themes related to institutional graduate attributes statements:

- (1) *Conception and framing*. How graduate attributes aims were conceptualised and framed in a particular institution
- (2) *Apparent location or custodianship*. Where it was located on the public website and who appeared to be the institutional custodian
- (3) *Represented integration*. The extent to which graduate attributes statements were linked other relevant sector and institutional standards, learning or quality outcomes, and the extent to which other organisational artefacts referenced the graduate attributes statement.

We list our summary findings, which include overarching themes and sub-themes, here in Table 2 then unpack them in more detail below.

Table 2. Summary findings

Conception and framing	Apparent location or custodianship	Represented integration
Developing employability and workforce skills (12)	DVC Academic (2)	Custodian only (8)
Articulating university aspiration, mission, values (11)	No statement or rescinded (5)	Custodian plus one other reference or link (12)
Promoting university reputation, brand, point of difference (10)	No clear single owner/location (8)	Custodian plus multiple references or links (16)
Developing graduate or student learning outcomes (5)	Policy library only (8)	Link or reference to external, sector standards, regulator (AQF 9; TEQSA 5; HESF 1; Bologna 1)
Unclear (5)	Learning and teaching (16)	
	Other (2)	

Conception and framing

This theme relates to key concepts and discursive framing applied in or around university graduate attributes statements, which give an idea of the intended aim(s). We were able to split university statements fairly, evenly between sub-themes of ‘developing employability and work-ready skills’, ‘articulating university aspiration, mission and values’, and ‘promoting university brand, reputation and point of

difference'. A few universities also referenced the concept of 'developing graduate or student learning outcomes' either in relation to graduate attributes, or as a permutation of graduate attributes. A few universities referenced more than one sub-theme.

Developing employability and workforce skills

The aim of developing employability and workforce skills was referenced by 12 universities and was, narrowly, the most frequent type of conceptualisation or framing and included explicit references to graduate employability, as in this excerpt:

[University X] strives to optimise graduate employability which means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work...across the university, staff at all levels work collaboratively on three enabling plants to optimise graduate employability (University 40).

Other institutions referenced the idea of employability and work-readiness more indirectly: 'The University's strategic plan states that [X University] graduates will be valued by employers for five key skills' (University 34). Others framed graduate attributes in terms of the professional identity:

Graduate attributes warrant to key stakeholders such as employers and other that our graduates have attained a key set of generic and transferable skills that will prepare them for work and life as professionals (University 24).

Younger Australian universities were more likely to reference employability, employment, work-readiness and the professions with only one of the traditional research university statements referring to employers from the point of view of graduate marketability.

Articulating university aspiration, mission or values

Eleven Australian universities appeared to frame and conceptualise the aim of their

graduate attributes statement as articulating institutional or sector aspirations. These were sometimes aspirations for graduates, and sometimes simply institutional or sector aspirations, both of which universities frequently connected with the concept of a higher education mission or other specific values. Documentary text that we grouped under this sub-theme made more general reference to the ‘defining characteristics of a student’s university degree program(s)’ (University 20). Examples also referred to the traditional, civic or ‘emancipatory’ mission of higher education (Barnett, 1990, p. x), captured in references to ‘human rights’ (University 17); ‘responsible citizens’ (University 15); and ‘agents for social action’ (University 13).

The following introductory statement also foregrounds the concept of institutional aspiration: ‘The [university name] Graduate Attributes are consistent with the University’s strategic aspirations and they underpin [our] coursework courses. (University 27)’. Other university statements conceptualise graduate attributes in terms of community aspiration, as well as core learning outcomes:

Graduate attributes are a set of core outcomes that a tertiary education community agrees its graduates will develop during their studies. For students, graduate attributes provide an indication of the university’s and society’s expectations; the development of graduate attributes should encourage and nurture a love of lifelong learning and community engagement (University 33).

However, other examples from this sub-theme seemed to differentiate between aspiration and outcome:

Distinctive Graduate Qualities are aspirations measured formatively rather than summative destinations measured summatively, hence they are qualities rather than outcomes (University 38).

A range of university statements, including those of older traditional universities, post-

1970s, regional, metropolitan and universities of technology reflected this theme.

Promoting brand, reputation and point of difference

Ten graduate attributes statements conceptualised graduate attributes statements as a vehicle to promote university brand, university reputation, and a point of difference.

The following statement highlights both university values and mission, as well as promoting university brand: ‘For the university, graduate attributes provide an opportunity to reinforce and demonstrate its values and mission and to market its distinctiveness’ (University 33). The following excerpt exemplifies this sub-theme:

The [university name] education experience prepares well-rounded graduates who are academically outstanding, practically grounded and socially responsible...
[University name] graduates are distinguished by their broad outlook and openness to different perspectives (University 17).

It is worth noting that statements such as this and others also signified belonging to a particular institutional grouping, as in the following two examples:

The core attributes reflect and build upon the culture of inquiry and innovation that are part of a research university (University 12).

The [university name] is a research-intensive university that seeks to develop graduates of international distinction by providing high quality education (University 20).

In general, statements that referenced concepts such as ‘distinction’ or ‘leadership’ were those of older, elite Australian universities.

Other universities appeared to use their graduate attributes to promote novelty or points of difference. In one post-war, metropolitan university, students were able to select one attribute of their own in addition to those prescribed by the institution

(University 38). A second, regional university framed their graduate attributes in terms of service to a particular bioregion (University 30). A third regional university listed a graduate attribute that was inspired by and linked to a local Aboriginal concept: ‘Practice ethically and sustainably in ways that demonstrate ‘yndyamarra winhanga-nha’ translated from the Wiradjuri language as ‘the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in’ (University 37).

Developing graduate or student learning outcomes

Finally, a few universities framed their aim of their graduate attributes in terms of developing graduate or student learning outcomes. Two of the five actually labelled their graduate attributes as graduate outcomes. This passage refers in particular to wider, international trends in Higher education such as the development and assurance of learning outcomes:

The University’s commitment to graduate qualities reflects a world-wide movement within educational institutions...there is a deliberate focus on the development of particular student outcomes through educational programs (University 11).

While developing employability and work-readiness was, marginally, the single most common conception of institutional graduate attribute aims represented in graduate attribute statements we analysed there was a roughly even distribution between this, articulating university aspiration, mission and values, and promoting university reputation, brand and points of difference. A small number (5) had no clear framing at all beyond the commitment to the development of graduate attributes or sub-sets of graduate attributes such as lifelong learning skills.

Apparent location or custodianship

For five of the 41 websites we examined we found no current statement, eight were standalone-pages with no apparent custodian, and eight existed only in a policy library. In some institutions, graduate attributes statements appeared in policy libraries but were hyperlinked to other locations.

The most common location of university graduate attributes was on learning and teaching sites, and frequently those of centralised learning and teaching units. Of these 16 universities, we found a few on faculty or school-level, learning and teaching web pages. Learning and teaching sites connected graduate attribute statements to program and unit curriculum embedding and evaluation (9), TEQSA or AQF requirements (4), curriculum quality initiatives/frameworks/standards (3), program and/or professional accreditation (2), and case studies or national projects (1).

Other less popular locations included Deputy-Vice Chancellor Academic web pages, 'current students' or 'about our university' web pages, and strategic web pages.

Represented integration

Just under half of the universities we reviewed publicly located their graduate attributes statement on a host site along with references to related ideas, plans, policies, procedures, standards or links to other relevant sites, documents, policies or external standards.

The remainder of the universities we reviewed publicly referenced or linked their statement to no other strategic or quality concepts or documents, or they were represented with one other reference or link. Single references included national standards, such as the AQF, professional standards, or curriculum concept pages. Single links most often referenced a strategic document or statement, the university course

‘handbook’ or enrolment guide for students, a curriculum mapping and design web page, or a policy.

A particular finding of this study was that of the 41 universities we researched just under a quarter directly or indirectly linked their graduate attributes to AQF standards. There were half as many references to TEQSA and a couple of references to the Bologna process, and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), respectively.

Discussion and recommendations

According to our analysis, Australian universities conceptualise the aim(s) of their graduate attributes statement within a relatively narrow range of possibility. That there is, narrowly, a dominant emphasis on employability and work-readiness is unsurprising. What is more surprising is that universities almost as frequently, conceive of graduate attributes as articulating their own (or wider sector) aspiration or mission, and promoting university brand, differentiation and identity. This was particularly the case for older, traditional Australian institutions. Furthermore, each sub-theme signals different, sometimes contradictory, views about the aim of graduate attributes and, by extension, the role of universities.

That our findings highlight institutional references to employability and work-readiness is uncontroversial. They have been a long-standing driver of graduate attribute development in higher education and reflect a well-documented historical shift towards vocationalism. That institutional statements are cross-hatched with references to more enduring, civic ideas about the aims (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018) and ideals of a university education (Barnett, 1990) is also unsurprising. Yet, in this context, our findings highlight another, possible layer of dissonance in an already complex, discursive landscape. Namely, universities may frame their graduate attributes in terms of developing employability and work-readiness. Yet, the same universities omit

attributes that encompass forms of work-related knowledge and skills students need to be successful in the workplace (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018).

If we add this to our finding that older, elite universities largely omitted any reference to employability or work-readiness, then we can draw two possible conclusions. The first is that some institutions are still unclear about how graduate attributes relate to employability and work-readiness. The second is that some institutions are using graduate attributes statements to express a preference for a more traditional university mission.

However, using graduate attributes to underscore a civic, scholarly role for higher education cannot be seen as a neat rejection of the post-Dawkins, ‘enterprise university’ paradigm (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Indeed, graduate attributes framing and discourse reflect other pressures arising from the now dominant conception of higher education as a marketable commodity.

Our findings suggest there is increasing use of graduate attributes statements to ‘brand’ or differentiate universities from competitors. Oliver and Jorre de St. Jorre (2018, p. 823) note this in passing, observing: ‘These claims about attributes sometimes bleed into the marketing of courses’. In some instances, there is a suggestion of superficiality. However, in others the use of graduate attributes statements as points of differentiation may represent a genuine attempt to articulate a sense of uniqueness founded on a specific, institutional context and place. This type of discursive framing may reflect the increasingly active role that universities are expected to play in the life and concerns of their particular local or faith based communities.

In other cases, the use of graduate attributes to distinguish some institutions from others may represent a move, which echoes past traditions. We note, in particular, references amongst older Australian universities to concepts such as ‘distinction’ and

‘research intensive’, and an emphasis on attributes such as ‘leadership’ or ‘global leadership’. Indeed, some statements appear to frame graduate attributes as reflective of a specific institutional ‘pedigree’: the sort of ‘old school tie’ idea mentioned in Bowden et al.’s (2000) work discussed earlier. The key difference, in the case of older Australian universities, is that tacit assumptions about institutional quality have become explicit assertions that reflect a newer, market-driven era.

Our analysis of university graduate attribute framing and conception suggests that these reflect the considerable, ongoing tension and tacit disagreement over the role of higher education, and the place of particular institutions and institutional groupings within the sector, and as part of their communities. Given the relative similarity of the attributes themselves the implication for higher education outcomes is, as yet, unclear.

Our findings also showed that learning and teaching pages and unit pages were the most common single location for graduate attributes statements. Given the centrality of curriculum to the enactment of university graduate attributes this seems logical. Yet, this representative logic is double-edged where web location translates to actual custodianship. Centralised learning and teaching units and the academic developers within them, are perceived frequently as peripheral to core activities of the university and are buffeted by regular cycles of restructure and re-location (Manathunga, 2006). This is despite the fact that their role is frequently to advocate for and collaboratively enact strategic initiatives, such as graduate attributes development, on behalf of the university. Who appears to own graduate attributes is important if we consider the imperative of whole-of-institution leadership for their effective integration (de la Harpe & David, 2012).

Despite any potential advantages or pitfalls associated with graduate attribute statement location within learning and teaching spaces, under half of institutions we

reviewed housed their graduate attributes policy or statement in different areas. Where we found statements or policies on strategic or governance web pages, or even on ‘about our university’ or student facing pages, it is possible to argue that this represents a greater sense of administrative purpose related to the graduate attributes agenda. This proposition is more convincing for the external viewer where there appear to be high levels of integration across many areas of an institutional website, including strategic documents, curriculum frameworks and quality governance web pages. However, where attributes exist on single, policy or outward facing web page, the effect is one of, perhaps unintended, tokenism or perceived distance from the academic heart of universities.

Indeed, a key finding of this study was that over half of the universities we investigated publicly connected their graduate attributes statements with no documents, or with limited other strategic documents or web pages. A viewer familiar with the sector might interpret this finding as reflective of a general tendency to produce policy and documentation in silos: certainly, Australian universities continue to be organisationally complex spaces with diffuse leadership roles and parallel, sometimes conflicting, structures existing side-by-side (Harkin & Healy, 2013). Another possible interpretation is that some institutions do not perceive graduate attributes as relevant to strategic vision, or broader questions of curriculum quality and sector standards. The third interpretation is that university actors make and create such connections in face-to-face encounters that documents and publicly available websites do not capture.

We found general references to external bodies such as AQF, ASQA, professional standards and, in one instance, the Bologna process, however, these were relatively few. Furthermore, even on learning and teaching sites most references appeared as simple text and hyperlinks to program accreditation requirements. We

found few instances of guidance about how graduate attributes and professional standards work together for program or unit learning assurance processes. A few institutions did promote graduate attributes for different degree standards such as bachelors and masters by coursework degrees. One university also included a separate statement for foundation or pathway programs. This approach affirms our view that attributes as statements of desirable qualities or capabilities are not, in a straightforward sense, learning standards. Exceptions may include attributes that reference higher order forms of learning such as critical thinking. Nonetheless, critical thinking is itself an umbrella term, including forms of higher order cognition that vary in complexity and are context dependent (Hammer & Griffiths, 2015). More work is required to tease out the complexities of this relationship.

Recommendations

Based on our findings we recommend, firstly, that Australian, and other, universities critically examine how they conceive of and frame their graduate attributes, including the way it aligns with strategic internal and external outcomes and standards. Successful examples such that of Alverno College in the US highlight the importance of a clear purpose: in their case, graduate attributes were the answer to the question of how to best define the desired outcomes of a liberal arts education (Eastberg, 2011).

Second, that they develop detailed policy implementation plans that ensure meaningful levels of integration with key governance, academic, administrative and student facing areas. These measures provide an institutional ‘scaffold’ or platform to facilitate graduate attribute embedding, development and evaluation (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). Adaptations of institutional ‘maturity models’ such as the version used by Spronken-Smith et al.(2015, p. 1027) for their assessment of institutional engagement with graduate outcomes might also be a useful way of charting institution progress.

Finally, we recommend that universities develop a standards framework that clearly articulates the aims and function of their graduate attributes statement and clarifies its relationship with other desired institutional outcomes, sector standards and professional standards or competencies.

Limitations and possible future research

We based our research findings on the documentary analysis of web pages and documents that are evolving, textual representations of institutional aims and practices, rather than the enactment of them in real life (Meyer & Jones, 2011). These documentary ‘snapshots’ are discursive and may not always reflect the current, lived reality of an institution, the complexity of related work, nor the relationships within it. Furthermore, with increasing documentation now placed behind institutional firewalls graduate attributes documentation for some institutions may be incomplete. Future research might usefully focus on university actor experiences of developing and implementing graduate attributes policies.

Conclusion

Our documentary analysis found that universities applied a narrow range of representation in their framing and conceptualisation of graduate attribute statements. Just under half did conceptualise the aim of their graduate attributes as developing employability and work-readiness. Yet the remainder framed them as articulating institutional aspiration, mission or values, as well as promoting institutional branding and differentiation with a few focusing on developing student and graduate learning outcomes. To some extent, these sub-themes hint at commonly held positions in the ongoing debate about the role of universities in Australia, and elsewhere. Consequently,

while it appears that universities do frequently select attributes in common, some statements have also become a vehicle for institutional differentiation.

How institutions make meaning about the aims of their graduate attributes is probably less important than their level of organisational integration and contextualisation. In cases where institutional discourse is reflective of practice, achieving this will require detailed policy implementation planning that takes graduate attributes beyond the remit of learning and teaching, and learning and teaching units, to encompass strategic, governance, student-facing as well as academic areas of the university. Implementation plans must also include strategies to support designers of program and unit curricula to connect graduate attributes development with other relevant strategic learning and teaching or graduate outcomes-based initiatives, as well as relevant professional and sector standards (7000).

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