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# **Graduate qualities in course design, teaching and assessment – academic and student perceptions**

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There is a push worldwide in universities to increase employability of students through the development of graduate qualities. This paper explores the extent to which course coordinators within a university coursework business Masters degree incorporate graduate qualities in the design, teaching and assessment of their courses. Student perceptions of their own graduate quality learning and assessment are also investigated. The paper argues that while staff accept the theoretical concept of graduate qualities, in practical terms they are influenced more by discipline demands and personal preferences. A more coordinated and explicit articulation of graduate qualities within courses and across programs is needed so that improved outcomes are achieved and evidenced.

Keywords: Graduate qualities, course design, teaching, employability.

## **Introduction**

Employability skills have emerged as a key issue for universities wanting to produce work-ready graduates (Curtis & McKenzie, 2001). The term 'work-ready' incorporates two elements: relevant discipline specific knowledge and the skills necessary to operate within a professional environment. Traditionally, universities tended to focus on the acquisition of discipline specific knowledge as the foundation for professional practice (Bartley, 2002; Cranmer, 2006). For example, becoming an accountant meant primarily acquiring accounting skills and knowledge and then developing further generic skills and knowledge on-the-job. However, in recent years there has been a push from employers for graduates to demonstrate a broad range of generic skills such as communication, ongoing learning, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking in addition to being able to demonstrate profession specific skills and knowledge (ACCI 2002; BCA 2006). Employability skills, defined as "the skills not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions" (McLeish, 2002:2), are now regarded as prerequisite to working in contemporary organisations and necessary for ongoing career success (McLeish, 2002; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005).

In response to this shift in employer expectations, many universities, both in Australia and in other countries, have incorporated a range of generic skill outcomes into their degree programs; referred to variously as graduate qualities, graduate outcomes or graduate attributes (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts, n.d.). The assumption is that by incorporating skill development into a student's program of study there is an increased likelihood of the individual achieving graduate employment success. As an example, the University of South

Australia (UniSA), in collaboration with industry, has identified seven key graduate qualities considered necessary to operate at a professional level (UniSA Graduate Qualities: refer Appendix A). Each course (or subject) coordinator at the University is required to incorporate a selected number of these graduate qualities in their course design, delivery, and, importantly, assessment tasks, so that students have the opportunity to demonstrate skill development. Selected graduate qualities are weighted to reflect their relative importance in the particular course with an overall weighting that matches the unit value of the course. By the end of their degree program students should have been exposed to all seven graduate qualities. More recently, course coordinators have been asked to state which graduate qualities are being assessed in each assessment task within their course, and to provide specific feedback to students regarding achievement of those graduate qualities. Clearly the University considers the graduate qualities to be important. The successful implementation of graduate qualities is seen as not only critical to achieving satisfactory graduate outcomes, but also of strategic value, providing a means of differentiation and a source of competitive advantage within the tertiary education sector.

Despite concerted efforts on the part of universities, employers and the business community continue to report that many graduates do not appear to be work-ready, and more specifically, that they lack the necessary generic employability skills to operate at an appropriate professional level (BCA, 2006; Green & Hammer, 2006). So, why does this gap still exist? This paper seeks to address these questions through the findings of an exploratory study into the way in which graduate qualities have been incorporated into a postgraduate business program. It examines the relationship between graduate qualities, course objectives and assessment, as well as the relationship between teaching and learning activities and the development of graduate qualities. Through examining academic and student perceptions, the paper proposes reasons why the inclusion of graduate qualities into course statements may not be achieving the desired outcomes in terms of graduate employability skills, even at a postgraduate level.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted as part of a University funded research project within the Division of Business at UniSA. Data was collected via a program mapping exercise, course coordinator interviews and student surveys. All courses across the Masters in Business program were mapped to determine the weightings allocated to specific graduate qualities and thus the emphasis that could be expected in terms of teaching and assessment activities in that course. The results of the mapping exercise are shown in Appendix B. To explore the extent to which practices are consistent with graduate quality course objectives, face-to-face, structured one-hour interviews were conducted with all course coordinators using the questions shown in Appendix C. The interviews were transcribed and made available to the participants.

To determine student perceptions of the relationship between assessment activities and graduate qualities, the 73 students enrolled in the Masters program were contacted via email and asked to complete an online survey (a copy of the survey questions is attached as Appendix C). Twenty-seven students returned completed surveys representing a response rate of 37%.

The data were analysed in a number of different ways. The mapping exercise provided a table of comparative weightings for each of the graduate qualities in each course across the program. The interviews with course coordinators were content analysed for recurrent themes

arising from the interview questions. Student responses to the online survey were listed by frequency and then averaged to show the mean for each graduate quality. The open ended question at the end of the survey was content analysed for themes in relation to the development of specific graduate qualities. Data obtained through the course coordinator interviews were compared with student responses (in particular the open ended question responses), to provide a broad overview of lecturer versus student perceptions of the relationship between graduate qualities, teaching activities and assessment.

## Results

In the first stage of the study, courses were mapped to determine how course coordinators were distributing the graduate qualities in relation to their course objectives. Within each course selected graduate qualities are weighted to reflect their relative weighting with an overall weighting that matches the unit value of the course. That is, a 4.5 unit course (or subject) should include various graduate qualities with a combined weighting of 4.5 (see Appendix B). The mapping exercise indicated that all but one 4.5 unit course within the degree program had incorporated each of the seven graduate qualities although weightings within courses varied from a high of 2.50 to as little as 0.10 for individual graduate qualities. Only one course coordinator had chosen to omit a graduate quality by giving a weighting of 0.00 for GQ 7 (International perspective).

Scores were also totalled to gain an overview at a degree program, or 54 unit level. The greatest focus was on GQ 1 (Body of knowledge: 14.70) followed by GQ 6 (Communicates effectively: 9.05). The lowest weightings were for GQ 5 (Ethical action and social responsibility: 4.20) and GQ 7 (International perspective: 3.95). The other graduate qualities were weighted as 6.60 GQ 2 (Lifelong learning), 7.05 GQ 4 (Working autonomously and collaboratively) and 8.40 GQ 3 (Problem solving).

Themes arising from the interviews with course coordinators were identified and are discussed in the following sections. Quotes are used to illustrate the varied perceptions of how graduate qualities are linked to course planning, teaching and assessment as explored through the interviews.

### Graduate qualities and course design

The interviews with course coordinators began with questions about how they decided on the graduate quality weightings within their course and the relationship between graduate qualities, learning objectives and course design. Allocation of graduate quality weightings was problematic, in particular the dividing of 4.5 points between the seven graduate qualities:

*'How can I divide a 4.5 number as though it's meaningful, and to whom? God knows what my students make of it. I divide 4.5 in a way that attempts to indicate where my emphasis might be.'*

Course coordinators were under the impression that their courses needed to include all seven graduate qualities. The result was that some graduate qualities received very little weighting thus proving to be quite meaningless. Only one person commented that they did not see the graduate qualities as relevant to postgraduate courses:

*'I give no [GQ] weightings in this course whatsoever, because I follow the rules that these do not apply to graduate courses.'*

Yet the course coordinator had still included weightings across each of the seven graduate qualities and generic skill development was still linked to course objectives. In designing and developing courses course coordinators focussed more on ways to achieve learning objectives rather than ways to develop graduate qualities. For example, one person commented:

*'I never look at the GQs. These are the things [learning objectives] I focus on in the assessment and they probably are linked to the GQs but I don't do it consciously.'*

Coordinators usually described a fairly strong link between course objectives and the graduate qualities but that link was more likely to have objectives driving the weightings of the graduate qualities rather than the reverse. For example:

*'...I do what I think is more important in my teaching strategy to develop methods that are valuable to help students learn rather than consciously say 'that is a GQ. I must do that'.*

Furthermore, course and curriculum design was managed at a course rather than a degree program level. There was no attempt to develop a unified approach in which students would have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate each of the graduate qualities by the time they graduated.

### **Graduate qualities and teaching and learning activities**

Comments from all course coordinators indicated an attempt to develop links between teaching and learning activities and the development of generic skills. However, the focus tended to be on the generic skills that matched their own interests and priorities, or the priorities of their discipline, more than on the University's stated graduate qualities. Activities, both in and out of the classroom, were selected on the basis that they would assist in developing skills such as working collaboratively and independently, communicating effectively, problem solving and thinking critically. Course coordinators recognised the need to assist students in developing a body of knowledge appropriate to their discipline through teaching and learning but this was very much linked to the development of appropriate skills.

*'So all in all, they're learning to communicate, they're also doing problem solving, both individually and collaboratively, and at the same time, we're working on the body of knowledge.'*

One lecturer talked about using classroom discussion to explore issues related to internationalisation and ethical and social responsibility:

*'We have an international body so I ask students to put in their views from their culture. Quite often they talk about their work experience - marvellous opportunity for internationalisation, ethical and social responsibility.'*

It appears, however, that although the skills associated with the graduate qualities generally formed the foundation for teaching and learning activities, course coordinators did not consciously or specifically focus on the University's graduate qualities when selecting teaching and learning activities. The emphasis was more likely to be on ways to achieve course aims:

*'I don't think that my teaching and learning activities have necessarily altered that much as a result of the introduction of the GQs. I don't think I've consciously linked graduate qualities to the previous beliefs that I had about learning.'*

The link between teaching and learning activities and the Graduate Qualities was sometimes recognised in hindsight rather than being a driving force in how the course or the assessment was structured:

*'When you look back at your teaching and learning activities and then look at the GQs, you say, "Oh yes, there is a link?"'*

However, course coordinators did not see the graduate qualities as a driving force. Instead they appeared to be peripheral to teaching and learning activities rather than providing a specific framework.

### **Graduate qualities and assessment**

Both course coordinators and students were asked to comment on their perception of the link between assessment and the graduate qualities. From a course coordinator perspective assessment was most often directly linked to course objectives:

*'I'm aware of the GQs, and I'm aware of my learning objectives and I set my tasks and my approach to address them but I don't set them specifically to, say, 1% of this is measuring that.'*

This is not to say that graduate qualities were excluded from assessment. In fact, problem solving and communication featured prominently in most courses:

*'We try to develop the body of knowledge, promote problem solving and we're specifically trying to promote effective communication.'*

However, graduate qualities tended not to be given priority in designing assessment. The main focus was on assessing if course objectives had been met and, if graduate qualities were also assessed, then this was fortuitous rather than planned.

Students perceptions of the relationship between assessment tasks and the development of graduate qualities were obtained through an online survey which included both Likert scaled questions and an open ended question. While there is some doubt about whether the students were rating assessment specifically or courses more generally, student responses indicated that they saw a clear connection between assessment and the development of some graduate qualities but a more tenuous link with others. Table 1 illustrates the summary of student responses to questions asked in the survey about the relationship between assessment and graduate qualities.

**Table 1: Student response summary**

|   | Responses |    |    |   |   | Average |
|---|-----------|----|----|---|---|---------|
|   | 1         | 2  | 3  | 4 | 5 |         |
| <b>Body of knowledge</b>                          | 1         | 22 | 4  |   |   | 2.11    |
| <b>Effective communication</b>                    | 5         | 14 | 8  |   |   | 2.11    |
| <b>Lifelong learning</b>                          |           | 15 | 11 | 1 |   | 2.48    |
| <b>Ethical action &amp; social responsibility</b> | 1         | 10 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 2.85    |
| <b>Effective problem solver</b>                   | 3         | 18 | 6  |   |   | 2.11    |
| <b>International perspective</b>                  | 3         | 8  | 13 | 2 | 1 | 2.63    |
| <b>Skills to work autonomously</b>                | 7         | 13 | 5  | 2 |   | 2.07    |
| <b>Skills to work collaboratively</b>             | 7         | 13 | 6  | 1 |   | 2.04    |

- Option 1: strongly agree
- Option 2: agree
- Option 3: neutral
- Option 4: disagree
- Option 5: strongly disagree

The most positive student responses were for GQ 1 (Body of knowledge), GQ 3 (Problem-solving) and GQ 6 (Communication skills). This finding was further reinforced through responses to the open ended question. Students particularly noted the relationship between assessment and the development of communication skills, primarily written skills and presentation skills. GQ 4 (Working autonomously and collaboratively) was explored from two different perspectives; the development of autonomous work skills and the development of collaborative work skills. In terms of collaborative skills, comments included:

*‘...a positive aspect of my uni experience is the focus that is placed on teamwork. Teamwork is the future.’*

*‘...the best part of my program was the group work, although it had been difficult at times due to varied workloads.’*

Others saw their study and assessment as helping to develop their autonomous work skills. For example:

*‘...definitely very useful as I am expected to work this way in my occupation.’*

The lowest scores were for the relationship between assessment and GQ 5 (Ethical action) and GQ 7 (International perspective) although responses tended to be more neutral than either positive or negative. That is, students appeared not to have any clear perceptions as to how assessment could measure skill development across these areas. One student commented:

*'I do not believe the assessments provide any developments to personal ethics or social responsibility.'*

In general, students did believe that assessment helped to develop some graduate qualities, primarily autonomous and collaborative work skills, but were less convinced that it impacted on the development of a more international perspective or more ethical behaviours.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that course coordinators support the development of generic employability skills at a course level but that they do not necessarily equate these skills to the university's graduate qualities. Graduate qualities are seen mainly as aspirational statements rather than skills that should be taught in a concrete or measurable way. The consensus was that development of the graduate qualities was subsidiary to achieving course aims and objectives, conveying discipline specific knowledge and developing generic skills such as problem solving, teamwork and communication. The UniSA graduate qualities were not a driving force in the development, teaching or assessment of courses. These findings mirror those of a similar study of graduate qualities in undergraduate programs at another university which found that there were 'very few examples of graduate attributes receiving specific explicit attention within any of the curricula' (Edwards & King 2002, p. 12). It would appear that despite the consistent promotion of graduate qualities at a policy level, course coordinators see them as 'nice to have' but not the priority in their teaching and assessment.

Furthermore, some graduate qualities were embraced enthusiastically and embedded in the course design while others received less attention. For example, skills such as problem solving, working in teams, and communication were frequently incorporated in curriculum and assessment. In contrast, lifelong learning, ethical action and social responsibility, and an international perspective were often omitted or only touched on briefly. The graduate qualities that received the most attention were those that fortuitously connected with the discipline and course content, or matched individual lecturer interests. They were also the qualities that were easier to incorporate into assessment tasks, for example communication skills or collaborative learning skills. It was also evident that graduate qualities were addressed at the course level rather than the program level. There was no overarching strategy to ensure that each of the seven graduate qualities would be taught and evaluated throughout the program despite the university encouraging a more coordinated approach.

Student responses mirrored those of the course coordinators and they agreed that the program was helping them to develop a body of knowledge, effective communication and problem solving skills. They also recognised a direct link between assessment and the development of autonomous and collaborative working skills but saw little evidence that they were developing skills in lifelong learning, ethical and social responsibility or international perspectives. Students also noted that an emphasis on graduate qualities within courses seemed to reflect the coordinators' personal preferences.

The findings focus only on course coordinator and student perceptions rather than actual practices. As a consequence it is difficult to know the extent to which generic employability skills or the more specific graduate qualities are being developed and assessed at either a course or a program level. Yet, clearly there are still gaps between policy and practice. Course coordinators indicate that after almost a decade the graduate qualities remain peripheral to program planning. Why have they been so slow to embrace graduate qualities in more than an

abstract way? First, the study showed staff felt pressured by time limitations to teach the relevant body of knowledge to meet course, discipline, and professional requirements. Skill development, whether generic or specific to the graduate qualities, whilst seen as important, was nevertheless subsidiary to the demands of teaching course content. This finding is consistent with other studies where teaching staff believe that their primary focus should be on subject knowledge rather than employability skills (for example Leckey & McGuigan, 1997; Cranmer, 2006). Second, course coordinators were unsure how the graduate qualities should be applied at a course level and the distribution of 4.5 points could not be usefully or accurately applied in practice. All were of the understanding that they were expected to incorporate each of the graduate qualities in their course rather than at a program level. The University requirement that graduate qualities be covered at a program level had not been clearly communicated to teaching staff. Third, staff displayed personal preferences for various generic skills and thus tended to focus on those in their teaching. Most were unsure how to teach some graduate qualities, particularly lifelong learning, ethical behaviour and social responsibility, or an international perspective. They were more inclined to incorporate the generic skills that they considered an important part of a business degree, but the more 'problematic' skills were not given the same emphasis in teaching approaches even where they were rated highly in the course guides.

Barrie (2005) argues that complexity and lack of clarity leave academics confused about the goals of graduate qualities and how they are to be implemented. In this program graduate qualities were being addressed, but in an ad hoc manner that reflected some confusion about their role and purpose. There was no consistent approach in relation to assessment, neither were there consistent views about their importance and relevance. Links were often informal and indirect, relying on the connections between course objectives and a general awareness of graduate qualities. Skill development was embedded in course design but, in most cases, was not made explicit in either course guides or assessment. Students were expected to develop UniSA's graduate qualities but clearly there was no way to accurately evaluate if they had achieved all the requisite skills or their level of competence. Crebert et al (2004) warn universities that it is 'unrealistic to guarantee' (p. 148) their students will graduate with all the graduate qualities as advertised. Yet, if universities make claims about graduate qualities they must be able to provide evidence that these employability skills have been developed and the level of achievement. Without hard evidence universities are unable to refute employer claims regarding graduate employability skills, or even to identify areas for improvement. Perhaps the problem is not simply that lecturers are failing to adequately address or evaluate employability, but rather that graduate skills are, at least to some extent, discipline specific. None of the coordinators commented on the University's claim that graduate qualities were formulated in consultation with industry. Greater consultation would confirm requirements or reveal differences between the University's and employer groups' expectations.

## **Conclusion**

The University promotes the development of graduate qualities by mandating that they be embedded in course design, teaching and assessment. Students are encouraged to provide evidence of their experiences and achievement of the competencies represented by these qualities. However, this study shows that graduate qualities are not always included meaningfully or effectively in courses, and that graduate qualities as goals or outcomes of the learning experience are rarely successfully articulated. Student experiences suggest, furthermore, that the inclusion of, and emphasis on, some graduate qualities while others are overlooked means that their achievement is uneven. These shortcomings are in part due to

course coordinators lacking a clear understanding of the strategic importance of graduate qualities and assigning them a low priority compared with discipline specific content. Coordinators are also discouraged by unrealistic expectations requiring them to allocate part unit weightings to all of the graduate qualities for inclusion in every course. Greater analysis of the graduate qualities to be achieved across a program, and their relevance, would promote more balanced and inclusive treatment. Overall, an improved strategy for developing graduate qualities in an explicit and balanced way should be implemented to ensure that university, student and employer expectations are met.

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## Appendix A

### Graduate Qualities of the University of South Australia

A graduate of the University of South Australia:

1. operates effectively with and upon a body of knowledge of sufficient depth to begin professional practice
2. is prepared for life-long learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice
3. is an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical, and creative thinking to a range of problems
4. can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a professional
5. is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and citizen
6. communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community
7. demonstrates international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen.

## Appendix B

### Graduate Quality weightings: course level

| Course code       | GQ1: Body of knowledge | GQ2: Lifelong learning | GQ3: Problem solver | GQ4: Works autonomously & collaboratively | GQ5: Ethical action and social responsibility | GQ6: Communicates effectively | GQ7: International perspectives | unit check  |
|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| INFS 5019         | 1.00                   | 0.70                   | 0.70                | 0.50                                      | 0.30  | 1.00                          | 0.30                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| BUSS 5104         | 2.50                   | 0.40                   | 0.40                | 0.30                                      | 0.30  | 0.30                          | 0.30                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| INFS 5023         | 2.00                   | 0.25                   | 0.25                | 0.50                                      | 0.50  | 0.50                          | 0.50                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| ACCT 5011         | 1.50                   | 0.50                   | 1.00                | 0.50                                      | 0.50  | 0.50                          | 0.00                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| COMM 5003         | 1.00                   | 0.50                   | 0.30                | 0.50                                      | 0.20  | 1.50                          | 0.50                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| INFS 5018         | 1.20                   | 0.50                   | 1.00                | 0.50                                      | 0.20  | 1.00                          | 0.10                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| INFS 5037         | 0.70                   | 0.30                   | 0.70                | 0.50                                      | 0.50  | 1.00                          | 0.80                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| BUSS 5194         | 0.50                   | 0.75                   | 0.75                | 0.75                                      | 0.50  | 1.00                          | 0.25                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| BUSS 5139         | 0.80                   | 0.50                   | 0.80                | 1.00                                      | 0.20  | 1.00                          | 0.20                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| INFS 5052         | 1.00                   | 0.50                   | 1.00                | 0.50                                      | 0.50  | 0.50                          | 0.50                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| BUSS 5069         | 1.00                   | 1.00                   | 0.50                | 1.00                                      | 0.25  | 0.50                          | 0.25                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| BUSS 5092         | 1.50                   | 0.70                   | 1.00                | 0.50                                      | 0.25  | 0.25                          | 0.25                            | <b>4.5</b>  |
| <b>Year Total</b> | <b>14.70</b>           | <b>6.60</b>            | <b>8.40</b>         | <b>7.05</b>                               | <b>4.20</b>                                   | <b>9.05</b>                   | <b>3.95</b>                     | <b>54.0</b> |

## **Appendix C**

### Course Coordinator Interview Questions

1. How do you develop the weightings for the Graduate Qualities in your course?
2. To what extent are the Graduate Qualities linked to the learning objectives in your course?
3. To what extent are teaching and learning activities linked to GQs (or methods)
4. When you set your assessment tasks do you try to link them to the Graduate Qualities?
5. How do you decide on the number, length and type of assessment tasks?

## **Appendix D**

### Student survey questions

- 1 The assessment tasks in my program have enabled me to develop a sufficient body of knowledge for my career.
- 2 The assessment tasks in my program have developed or improved my skills as an effective communicator.
- 3 The assessment in my program has enabled me to prepare for lifelong learning.
- 4 The assessment in my program has further developed my commitment to ethical action and social responsibility.
- 5 The assessment in my program has helped me to develop the skills of an effective problem solver.
- 6 The assessment tasks in my program have broadened my international perspective as a professional and as a citizen.
- 7 The assessment tasks in my program enabled me to develop the skills to work autonomously (e.g. research, writing, critical thinking).
- 8 The assessment tasks in my program enabled me to develop collaborative work skills.
- 9 The balance between group work and individual assessment was appropriate across the courses in my program.
- 10 The overall assessment workload in my program was appropriate.
- 11 In this program I have studied
  - a. All courses internally
  - b. All courses externally
  - c. Mixed mode (internal and external)
- 12 Would you like to add further comments?