

From content knowledge to transferable skills: challenges for disciplinary education in light of the development of graduate employability attributes

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Graduate employability attributes have become one of the key emphases in teaching and learning activities at the university level. It is frequently mentioned along with a statement that the degrees students are currently pursuing may lead to unforeseeable new jobs. Therefore educators need to be strategic in defining what excellent graduate employability attributes constitute and how they can be achieved in curricula. This leads to the question of how higher education institutions, particularly universities, can embed the development of seemingly 'generic' or 'transferable' skills to suit the future needs of students in their employment. With this strong emphasis on employability, it is no longer sufficient for educators to simply integrate so-called 'academic skills' into their teaching, learning and student experience agenda. What needs to be delivered is learning that sets its scope beyond academia and university, and that would prepare students to cope with unforeseeable career pathways in their future. In this case educators need to focus more in their curricula the creation and application of new knowledge through authentic learning, instead of the dissemination and consolidation of the existing knowledge learnt from didactic learning.

One of the first year Engineering units at Monash University well represents this trend. Co-developed by a team of faculty academics and learning skills advisers, the unit integrates seamlessly 'content/discipline knowledge' and 'generic/professional skills'. In doing so, it aims to teach not only technical knowledge but also approach to problem solving, leading students to gain the optimum learning experience that holds its currency beyond university. As the unit was implemented, some of the challenges also became clear. For example, shifts in the nature of lectures and tutorials from mostly demonstration and knowledge dissemination to more authentic and interactive learning have demanded educators to employ highly sophisticated and often unfamiliar pedagogies. This was particularly the case for tutors. As it is the case in many STEM disciplines, tutors are often postgraduate research students with diverse (if any) teaching experience and expectation of the role, and it has appeared a crucial challenge for the educators to effectively facilitate not only the students but also the tutors with appropriate resources, materials and instructions.