

Strategies for promoting student engagement with graduate capabilities

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Universities are not able to predict or guarantee job opportunities in students' intended field of interest, but institutions can assure that students are given opportunities to develop capabilities that will help them find or create meaningful work (Oliver, 2015). Course-wide (whole degree) approaches to articulating and embedding learning outcomes are important to scaffolding and aligning the development and assessment of graduate capabilities. Of equal importance is making students aware of the skills, understanding, and personal attributes that they have achieved so that they can articulate and evidence their capabilities to employers (Oliver, 2013). Getting students to engage with graduate capabilities and think ahead about employment is a challenge. Here we report on student perceptions of graduate capabilities, learning outcomes and preparation for employment, following implementation of an institution-wide course enhancement process to embed and articulate graduate capabilities and communicate them to students.

Forty-five students participated in group interviews and their responses were subject to qualitative analysis for commonly recurring themes. Focus groups were completed in two stages, with data analysis and adjustment of the questions in between, to enable validation and deeper understanding of the themes identified. As per previous studies, our analysis suggests that students find university-wide outcomes too generic to be meaningful. Most students thought that the course learning outcomes were more useful for: clarifying course and employer expectations; making students aware of their capabilities; guiding self-assessment of skills relevant to disciplines or employment, and providing examples and a language for promoting themselves to employers. Our analysis also suggests that providing students with Course Learning Outcomes without explanation of their relevance has little impact. Students reported having focussed most on the achievement of Unit Learning Outcomes; because these are highlighted by teachers, associated with assessment, and perceived as more practical or relevant to disciplines. Our case study illustrates the importance of assessment design and consistent, student-focussed communication in engaging students in the development of graduate capabilities and in the curation of evidence. Students also suggested that advice from employers, professionals and recent graduates, and exposure to work-integrated learning experiences could help make graduate capabilities more meaningful.

Oliver, B. (2013). Graduate attributes as a focus for institution-wide curriculum renewal: innovations and challenges. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(3), 450-463.

Oliver, B. (2015). Redefining graduate employability and work-integrated learning: Proposals for effective higher education in disrupted economies. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 6(1), 56-65.