

# Graduate Attributes and Employability: helping universities and students prepare for the changing landscape

Gavin McCabe, University of Edinburgh Employability Consultancy

*The environment is one where the rate of change is intensifying and the pressure to succeed increases. It is supercomplex<sup>1</sup>, risky and turbulent.*

This depiction is true, both of the operating context for higher education and the world into which our students graduate. Together, these facts influence the provision universities aim to deliver to their students – in terms of learning and teaching, and in relation to the co-curriculum.

Both universities and students want not only to survive but to thrive, prepared to tackle the key challenges faced by the societies of today and tomorrow.

This necessitates the ability to ask tough questions, work across boundaries, to pioneer and innovate, yet control risk. Potential has to be maximised, drawing on wide-ranging strengths and honest self-appraisal, engaging effectively with surrounding environments, professions and communities. These attributes are key to the success of institutions and students alike, and are encompassed in Edinburgh's statement of graduate attributes.

Grasping these challenges as a University, both for our institution and for our students, steers the work of the University's Employability Consultancy and stimulated the development of the University's graduate attributes framework.

## Graduate attributes: the story so far ...

'Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future<sup>2</sup>.'

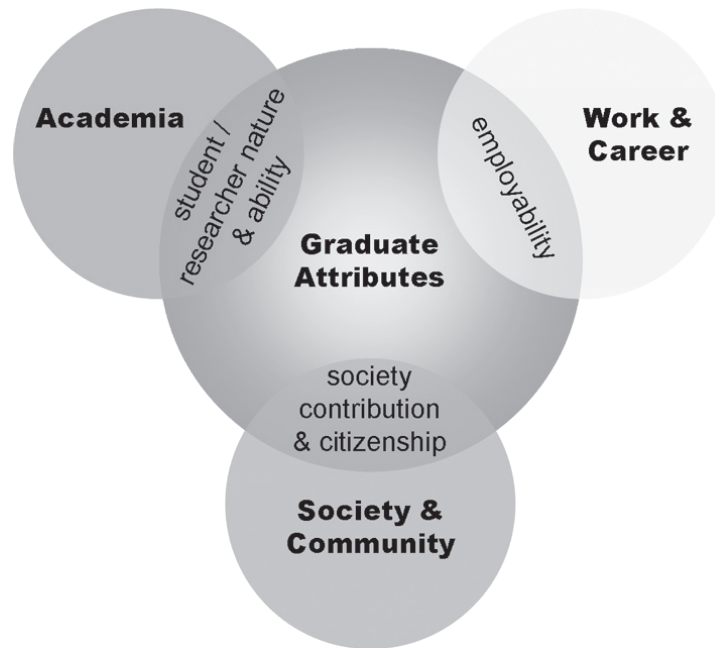
'the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts<sup>3</sup>'

Graduate attributes are not remedial or bolt-on skills; they are skills, abilities and dispositions that transform and enable higher education knowledge and learning and must be translated into a discipline context in order to make full sense.

Research of existing national and international work on graduate attributes, covering both the statements developed and how these were used by institutions, highlighted the work of Simon Barrie, University of Sydney<sup>4</sup>. Barrie's conceptual model appeared to have strongest suitability for the University of Edinburgh context, structure and ethos, and was used to inform the development of our framework and as a basis for further discussions. Cross-institutional consultation with staff and students in 2008 identified *three overarching attributes*, underpinned by *four overlapping clusters of skills and abilities* which describe an Edinburgh graduate.

Each overarching attribute (in the outer ring) can be understood as a blend of the four overlapping clusters of skills and abilities. The particular skills and abilities that comprise each of these clusters will likely differ by academic discipline.





Each of the overarching attributes and underpinning clusters of skills and abilities exists on a spectrum – students will have their own personal journeys, starting and finishing their University lives at different places on the spectrum, but all students will have the opportunity to benefit from the transformative nature of the University experience. Regardless of their starting points, by virtue of the experience offered by the University, all students should make progress on these spectrums, concluding their time at the University better equipped for their futures.

Ours is a complex and highly devolved institution. One of the challenges was therefore to develop a graduate attributes framework that makes sense across the University. This results in two important features:

- the framework is aspirational in nature, rather than only being a statement of current practice; and
- the framework's structure solicits interpretations of the statements that differ between academic domains, while retaining an overall cohesion. This tailoring is necessary to ensure the graduate attributes are relevant to all levels within the University.

### Graduate attributes: differing contexts

The development of student attributes is a constant thread throughout the University's Strategic Plan, whether referring to learning, teaching or research. Apply these attributes to different contexts and we see how they shape our students and graduates ...

- to *academia* – the type of students and researchers they are/can be;
- to *society/community* – their contribution to society and citizenship; and
- to *work and career* – their employability.

As a consequence, work that helps foster our students' attributes impacts on, and is supported by, all aspects of the student experience. It is these graduate attributes that help prepare our students to tackle the ever evolving challenges facing them during and at the end of their studies.

If we view these graduate attributes within the context of work and career, we see students' ability to be successful and have impact, both in the short and long term – in other words, their employability.

The challenges are well known and pronounced within the labour market in particular, but a student who has been given and has grasped the range of opportunities available while at University, will have both maximised the value of their time and enhanced their employability. Such students stand out from the crowd within today's increasingly competitive labour market.

### Defining employability

*'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits*

---

*themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy*<sup>5</sup>.

Employability is *not* the same as gaining a graduate job; rather it implies something about the necessary attributes and capacity of the graduate to function and be successful in a job and be able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout their life.

The University has responded to the drive to enhance employability across the higher education sector by successfully bidding for strategic funding from the Scottish Funding Council, available to 2011. As part of the Employability Initiative the following have been established:

- *Employability Steering Group* chaired by the Vice Principal Academic Enhancement; and
- *Employability Consultancy* which exists as a central resource working with all levels of the University to coordinate, develop, support and promote, existing and new activity designed to enhance student employability.

The Employability Initiative has already undertaken a large number of employability-enhancing activities, ranging from the development of new School- or discipline-specific provision to University level projects. One of these projects has been the work outlined above on graduate attributes.

As noted above, graduate attributes in their fullest sense are much broader than just employability – graduate attributes have relevance to all aspects of the student experience and therefore have a range of linked agendas, e.g. curriculum renewal, HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report), work-related learning, PDP (Personal Development Planning) and ePortfolios.

## Graduate attributes: the story continues ...

The Employability Initiative has worked to tackle graduate attributes from an employability perspective within local and pan-institution projects. However, the work on graduate attributes is linked not just to employability, but to all aspects of the University's student provision and seeks to help the University and its students tackle the challenges of the coming years. Through consultation, this work has produced an aspirational framework of graduate attributes that concurrently allows an overall cohesion and different disciplinary interpretations.

The foundation work has been done. The challenge now is to interpret the framework to our individual settings; to consider and recognise the existing practice that fosters these attributes; to share this to enhance overall provision; but most importantly to share it with our students so that they can best prepare themselves to leave University ready for the challenges awaiting them.

<sup>1</sup> Barnett, R. (2000) *Realizing the University in An Age of Supercomplexity*, Ballmoor, UK: SRHE and Open University Press

<sup>2</sup> Bowden, J., Hart, G., King, B., Trigwell, K., & Watts, O. (2000) *Generic capabilities of ATN university graduates*, Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs

<sup>3</sup> Barrie, S. C. (2004) A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23:3, 261-275

<sup>4</sup> [www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/nationalgap](http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/projects/nationalgap)

<sup>5</sup> Yorke, M. (2004) *Employability in Higher Education: what it is - what it is not*, Higher Education Academy/ESECT

Further information on the Employability Initiative, the Employability Consultancy and the Graduate Attributes Framework is available on the Employability Initiative website ([www.employability.ed.ac.uk](http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk)). If you wish to discuss this further, or are interested in taking forward work on graduate attributes within your own setting, please get in touch – contact details are also available on the website.