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Skills, Attributes, Literacies, and Capabilities: Developing Our Students at Every Level

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Abstract

This Special Issue engages with the concept of 'graduateness' across Higher Education by looking at the skills, attributes, literacies, capabilities, and capacities we seek to foster and develop amongst those whom we teach. This discussion ranges from papers on pre-entry, through transition-in and undergraduate student skill enhancement, to developing academic colleagues' teaching proficiencies and innovation in curricula. The challenge faced by contributing authors was to conceptualise the development of their students' capabilities and capacities in the broadest and most practical senses. In the context of the global response of Higher Education to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically impacted the rate of change in teaching practice within institutions, but often without time, distance, and space for critical reflection, we provide space through a process of considered analysis and evaluation of practices, to consider what has worked, what has not worked, and what would benefit us to take forward. In so doing, we highlight several key themes that emerge: graduateness and employability; literacies and skills; access for all; and curricula design for skills development.

Practitioner Notes

1. Space for innovation is key in enabling the creation of both centralised and embedded provision that will increase our students' capacities.
2. Curricula (re)design is an essential tool in enabling student success, and it must be conducted within frameworks that promote the articulation of attributes and capacities. These (re)designs should be guided and led by those proficient in pedagogical innovation and change.
3. The positionality of Learning and Researcher Developers, and other professional services staff, can often present challenges within the institution, but also affords a unique perspective and opportunity to lead and innovate within the discussion of graduateness and employability.
4. The skills, literacies, and capacities with which we leave our students at the end of their time with us should prepare them to continue in their development beyond university.
5. To ensure that all students get the opportunity to develop these capacities during their time at university, it is crucial to remain aware of widening participation issues, the extent to which some tools and methods can exclude as well as enable access, and to take a holistic approach to adding capacity at every level.

Keywords

Higher education, student development, curricula development, skills enhancement

Introduction

The debate around the development of students' skills and literacies is not a new one (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2019; Hill, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998; Lonka & Ahola, 1995). Speaking in 1883 to an audience of young candidates for the Indian Civil Service at the University of Cambridge, Max Müller commented that: 'to enable young men to pass their examinations seems now to have become the chief, if not the only object of the Universities'. Müller believed, however, that 'there is something else which Universities can teach and ought to teach – nay, which I feel quite sure they were originally meant to teach – [that is] to prepare themselves for the battle of life' (Müller, 1883, pp. 1–3).

By 1976, then British Prime Minister James Callaghan, in a lecture delivered to Ruskin College, Oxford, stated that he believed that:

The goals [of education] are to equip [people] to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. [...] There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots. (Callaghan, 1977)

More recently, McVitty and Andrews (2021) provided an updated version of the 'battle of life' and the goals of education, which the sector would now call 'graduateness' or 'student capabilities, capacities or skills':

Students are undoubtedly graduating into a fast moving world, one which will demand a lot of cognitive input and in which "success" – perhaps best defined as the capacity to live a life that has meaning to you – depends on a complex mix of skills, attributes and behaviours. Employers, too, are demanding an increasingly wide range of hard and soft skills, presenting a challenge for universities in how best to support student skills development.

As universities emerge from the sector-wide upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns, the discussion of which benefits we bring to our students, and how we best equip them to function in this fast-moving world, again is at the forefront of academics', policymakers', politicians', and the public's minds.

This Special Issue engages with these concepts – student attributes, skills, literacies, capacities, graduateness – by bringing together discussions from across the globe that look at the myriad ways in which universities are tackling how we prepare our students for the world (of work, of study, of future life). This discussion ranges from transitions-in, preparatory courses for new undergraduates, through a variety of curricula models and innovations (and developing our staff to teach effectively in the modern Higher Education Institution), to international perspectives on equipping our students for broad, multi-cultural workplace settings.

At the heart of this Special Issue is the key consideration of what we do with our students to prepare them for success, and success in all its various formats, guises, and definitions. We sought a purposefully international perspective on the ways in which institutions, working in different national, political, and cultural settings, engage with ‘graduateness’ and students’ skills. Many of the papers included in this Special Issue were formed and written through the COVID-19 pandemic, but we sought not to create a COVID-response issue. (This has been done excellently elsewhere, including in the recent Special Issue on the cross-cultural effects of COVID-19 on Higher Education (Crawford et al., 2021).)

Instead, we looked to engage with the renewed focus on our students’ development, a lot of which has been overhauled and rethought because of the pandemic, and we looked to the future of preparing our students for the ‘battle of life’. The work of each author in this Special Issue is an example and exemplar of ways in which all areas of Higher Education Institutions, working with students at all levels, can have meaningful impact on the outcomes of and for our student populations.

Student Attributes, Capacities, Literacies, and Skills

The papers within this Special Issue provide insights into a variety of practice around teaching and learning in countries from across the globe. What strikes most, however, is the common themes that run through our work. These themes highlight the focuses of much of our work; significantly, the themes also showcase many of the similarities in how we approach developing, enhancing, and equipping our students for a global and international post-education world of work. In many ways, the discussions throughout the Special Issue echo the challenge posed by Bennet (2018): how do we define the concept of ‘graduateness’ versus the concept of ‘employability?’ Bennet’s (2018, p. 52) answer was:

If we are to educate for employability rather than employment, for life rather than for a job, our concern should move beyond graduate employment to focus on the development of graduates who are prepared to meet the demands of life and work well beyond their discipline. Employability must focus on ability, must form the centre of the curriculum, must embrace diversity, and must integrate the metacognitive capacities with which higher education graduates are not only ready for work, but ready to learn.

From our perspective, as Learning Developers and Researcher Developers (on which, more below), we view Bennet's statement here to be central to our work. Learning and Researcher Development focus on the need to place students at the heart of their educational experience by providing an emancipatory experience that fosters curiosity, creativity, intellectual rigour and inquisitiveness, and an understanding of the 'rules of the game' within and outwith academia. In so doing, we are challenged as a sector to prepare our students to be ready to learn.

To do so, we have drawn together our discussion into key themes. *Graduateness and employability* are central crucial components of our students' successes post-education, but they are also essential elements in building the confidence, capacity, and capabilities of our student body. To promote these capacities and capabilities, we must engage with developing *students' literacies and skills*. When developing courses, frameworks, and interventions to promote students' literacies, we must, however, ensure that we maintain equity of *access for all*. The importance of inclusion and of widening participation cannot be lost in a world of online/blended and post-COVID study. Finally, to embed all the above, we need and require *curricula for skills development*. These curricula require us to innovate our practice, but also to be innovators in our thoughts and expectations around how curricula work. To do this effectively, we argue that academic developers are crucial to supporting staff through pedagogical change.

We believe that the papers in this Special Issue challenge our readers to consider the key themes of *graduateness and employability*, of *literacies and skills*, of *access for all*, and of *curricula for skills development*. Each of these is discussed in detail below.

Graduateness and Employability

The concepts of graduateness and employability are closely related yet distinct. The broadly accepted definition of graduateness is the possession of knowledge,

skills, and attributes that were required to achieve the university degree. In turn, employability refers to the extent to which the graduate is suitable for employment.

The reality is, of course, a great deal more complex and contested. Barrie's influential article, 'A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy' (2004) contextualised his approach by painting a picture of the complexity of the landscape, explaining that while universities globally have discussed the concepts of employability, and gradueness, and constructing sets of attributes for some time, they were frequently doing so from a variety of theoretical stances, utilising different definitions, and with different outcomes in mind.

While Barrie's identification and discussion of this multiplicity of views prompted a great deal of critical reflection on what employability means, what capacities are involved, how we construct frameworks to develop these in our students, and how we evaluate the attributes involved, a multiplicity of views still exists (Green, Hammer and Star 2009, Ipperciel and ElAtia 2014, Kensington-Miller et al 2018, Wong et al. 2022), there remains considerable scope for debate on the relationship between the concepts of employability versus gradueness, on whether universities can keep pace with a rapidly changing workplace, how far universities should align gradueness to the condition of employability, and whether universities should seek to add value unrelated to employability. The discussion has long extended, too, beyond employers and educators, and staff within institutions: Glover, Law, and Youngman (2002) highlighted tension between ideas of gradueness versus employability among undergraduate students.

While the debate is longstanding, constantly acquiring new dimensions and nuance, there has, of course, been a particularly far-reaching disruption in the form of COVID-19. Consider the extent to which the boundaries between employability and gradueness have become more blurred and the relationship more complex, especially in the current post-pandemic context. Broader concepts such as 'resilience' have been gaining ground for some time, perceived as a quality vital to success both throughout and beyond university, but have come to the fore (explicitly and implicitly) throughout and post-lockdown, with students (as well as HE staff (Alhawsawi et al., 2023)) navigating new and shifting working environments with a view to new and urgent demands in terms of digital literacy, maintaining a healthy work/life balance, etc. The issue of the extent to which the workplace, and the workforce, has fundamentally changed for the long term, and HE's capacity to recognise and meet the needs of this changed environment will be an ongoing challenge and topic of discussion.

To reiterate and build upon the point previously made, it would seem that as Learning Developers and Researcher Developers, we are uniquely placed not only to see and reflect the impact of these changes on our students, not just in our 'student first' approach, but also in our perspective 'beyond' the subject-specific, which allows us to consider how to best tackle the challenge of changed attitudes, graduate readiness and employability in a rapidly shifting context, thinking both beyond and across disciplines about a holistic preparedness for life beyond the degree.

Literacies and Skills

In promoting the graduate market readiness of our students, we must take into consideration the variety of skills, capabilities, literacies, and capacities developed through our Higher Education curricula. Student success throughout their studies and into the graduate marketplace requires a solid understanding, grasp and application of a variety of literacies and capacities. These capacities and literacies often underpin but need not be directly related to the specific subject knowledge or content. Various known as 'soft skills', 'transferable skills', 'graduate attributes', and so on, they are essential elements of the curricula we design, develop, and implement. As an Editorial Team, we take the view that 'soft' or 'transferable' skills is an incorrect, misleading term that underplays the importance of these core literacies and capacities. The papers in this Special Issue highlight the ways in which development of student literacies, capacities, and capabilities at all levels is crucial to the success of the Higher Education sector and of our graduates.

Within the Learning and Researcher Development context, we tend to draw on an academic literacies-based pedagogic model. This model, clearly articulated by Lea and Street (1998, 2006), challenges us to consider the broader implications of the skills and attributes we teach. Critical of generic *study skills*, the academic literacies approach requires that 'rather than focusing on student deficits, an approach using the academic literacies model foregrounds the variety and specificity of institutional practices, and students' struggles to make sense of these' and that 'these understandings, when made explicit, provide greater opportunities for teaching and learning' (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 376). While their original works focus on the literacies underpinning academic writing, we argue that this model is applicable across all areas of the curriculum and of student development. We believe that our collection of papers highlights several ways in which students' academic and graduate readiness literacies are enhanced and developed.

That is to say, we here argue for the importance of a broader application of students' literacies and capacities development that covers all areas of subject knowledge and content, graduate market readiness, broader academic capabilities, and a variety of skills for success. Drawing on the critiques of Wingate (2006), wherein she discusses the problematic nature of 'bolt-on' and subject-agnostic resources that try to teach students a generic set of 'transferable skills', we argue that the modern university must recognise the importance of developing our students at every level.

In other words, from pre-entry, through degree programmes/courses, and into the world of further study/work, we have a duty and a responsibility to work in a holistic manner, and in partnership with our students, to enhance all aspects of our students' capacity for success. The examples in this Special Issue discuss some of the ways in which academics, Learning and Researcher Developers, and professional services staff have re-invigorated their curricula and their pedagogy to meet the challenges of producing battle-of-life ready graduates.

We believe the collected works of Learning and Researcher Developers, and from other staff working to enhance the skills of our students, challenges the recent discussion from Richards and Pilcher (2020). Richards and Pilcher's model of student attributes and skills development tries to remove the importance and significance of an academic literacies model based upon the expertise of professional services staff, Learning Developers and Researcher Developers: 'this would involve, we suggest, employing greater numbers of subject specialists to help deliver additional support, and recalibrating the support given by existing staff to more subject-specific areas' (Richards & Pilcher, 2020, p. 13). Contrary to this, the papers included here – alongside much important and valuable work carried out elsewhere (see, for example, Abegglen et al., 2019; Bearman et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Connolly-Panagopoulos, 2021; Crisfield, 2020; Mansfield, 2020) – highlight the key role of these staff in equipping our students for success in transitioning into, through and out of their degrees (McKay & Robson, 2023).

Access For All

The development of skills and capacities must not take solely into consideration where we wish to leave our students at the end of their time in Higher Education, but where we find them, and how we can address their specific needs. Wainright, Chapell and McHugh (2019)'s work on the understanding of Widening Participation convincingly and illuminatingly presents the complexity of the topic and the need to recognise the entirety of the WP student experience in terms of

background, networks, and day to day interactions. Recognising the diversity of our students, of their backgrounds, of their contexts, and of their needs allows us to design centralised and embedded provision, as well as working with academic colleagues, to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in any aspect of the development of graduate attributes. Learning and Researcher Developers occupy a position from which they can cultivate and communicate both an awareness of unseen barriers to access and consider practices and measures to demonstrate how they can be tackled.

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, collaboration between students and staff is essential. Creating opportunities for dialogue, for feedback, for students to have meaningful spaces for input enables Learning and Researcher Developers to ensure that their innovations and interventions are grounded in both in genuine need and the most current experiences. The post-pandemic landscape is one of rapid and shifting change, and it is essential for staff to understand the student experience of this context and the demands it presents.

The shift to predominantly online learning, for example, had a striking impact on many aspects of the academic experience (Barringer et al., 2022; Bartolic et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2021). Conferences became more accessible, resources were created with asynchronous learning in mind, and new possibilities opened up in terms of classroom interaction (Nordmann et al., 2020). While these changes were heralded as examples of how the online pivot could benefit widening participation students, issues around access to technology and digital literacy were sharpened. We would argue that this is an area where the expertise and collaborative work described above is vital to ensure that we can collectively move forward and benefit from new advantages while ensuring that no-one is disadvantaged or excluded along the way. The advent of new technologies such as ChatGPT further underline the need for a strong unified approach where all voices are heard.

Curricula for Skills Development

Much of the focus in the sector rightly lies on refashioning and repurposing our curricula to better promote and embed a broader set of competencies and capabilities amongst our students. Discussion here has ranged from assessment design and practice (Arsenis et al., 2022; Barrett-Lennard et al., 2012; Olwell & Delph, 2004; Sotardi & Dutton, 2022; Zhao, 2022) through overhauled curricula design (Bryson & Callaghan, 2021; Forde-Leaves et al., 2023; Klarare et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022; Wadams & Schick-Makaroff, 2022) to the importance of academic developers in engaging teaching staff with ongoing pedagogical

innovation (Aitchison et al., 2020; McGrath, 2020; Mori et al., 2021; O'Toole et al., 2022; Skene et al., 2022).

These papers recognise the need for innovation in where and how we teach our students to meet the challenges of the 21st century; significantly, they engage with some of the ways in which we might better prepare our students for the graduate market (Wong et al., 2021, 2023; Wong & Hoskins, 2022). A variety of new and adapted curricula designs and initiatives are spearheading our sector-wide responses to these challenges.

The Block framework can, for example, be employed to increase student engagement and retention (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Loton et al., 2022). Similarly, Vertically Integrated Projects (VIPs) offer us another pedagogical framework for enhancing our students' engagement with their professional capacities. VIPs prompt us to reconsider many of the elements of 'traditional' curricula design. By presenting our students with 'real-world research challenges, in conjunction with research staff and academics', VIPs offer a 'richer, more experiential, and self-motivated approach to learning for students' and allows academic staff to 'leverage this largely untapped undergraduate research resource to support their ongoing research projects – and even explore new research opportunities' (Strachan et al., 2019).

All of these innovations in curricula must be supported at a senior level and at a local, small-scale level by institutions. We argue here that, in order to succeed in curricula redesign, institutions must enable staff with time, resource and space for innovation in learning and teaching. Academics and other teaching staff must be sufficiently equipped and enabled to deal with pedagogical change. The role of the academic developer (often also known as educational developer) is, therefore, a crucial component to institutional responses to curricula change that develop our students' skills, attributes, and capacities (McGrath, 2020; Sugrue et al., 2018).

Call To Action

Our aim in this Special Issue was to gather current perspectives on, and practices around, the development of our students' skills, capacities, literacies, and attributes at every level. In so doing, we sought to highlight the ways in which the response of Higher Education across the globe tackles the ongoing challenge of how we develop our students and how we prepare them for the battle of life.

The papers collected herein present a wealth of information and examples of good practice around developing our students from pre-entry to exit. What we see are distinctive and often interrelated over-arching themes: engagement with the complexity of graduateness, the holistic development of students' skills and literacies (including the exploration of some graduate skills not classically addressed in pedagogical literature), the continuing importance for the nuances of access for all students, and the focus on innovative curricula and course (re)design to target student skills and keep pace with new demands.

Each of the papers in this Special Issue target a specific area of work, but our final call to action is that *all* staff in *all* areas of work within our Higher Education institutions should explicitly work on developing our students' skills and attributes. This development should not be surface-level, an afterthought 'bolt-on' or a tick-box exercise; instead, preparing our students for success in life beyond university is the shared work of academics, professional services staff, Learning Developers and Researcher Developers, and students themselves, utilising the unique expertise and experience each group has to offer.

Through collaborative work across our institutions and with our students (Abegglen et al., 2021), we can and we must ensure our students are ready to continue to develop, to grow, to challenge, to critique, to question, and to succeed.

Conflict of Interest

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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