

## Ascertaining the development of graduate attributes: the student perspective through self-assessment.

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### Abstract

*AUQA recommends that CQUniversity develop strategies to embed generic skills and attributes into the teaching practices. This research project focuses on class activities which promote an understanding of these attributes and an appreciation of how the curriculum contributes to their development, that is, activities which aim at 'preparing today for tomorrow'. The project surveys students' self-assessment to determine the success of the preparatory program, STEPS, in developing the desired STEPS graduate attributes. The trials indicate that the major impact was on students' self-awareness and belief in their capacity to learn and commitment to learning; the lesser impact was on their self-management skills and ability to cope with change. The preliminary results inform curriculum design and delivery to meet the educational challenge of the 21 century and facilitate the transition into, and increase retention in both preparatory and first year higher education.*

### Background

This session addresses the ongoing concern of the educational accountability movement in the 1980s and 1990s about the systematic assessment of learning outcomes in postsecondary education (Boylan, Bonham, Whitre & George, 2000, cited in Boylan, 2002). Internationally and nationwide, universities have focused on how **graduate attributes** develop within the total university experience. As a result, they are explicit about, define, and show how their graduate attributes are integrated into the curriculum. They also encourage students and lecturers alike to **reflect** on the **broader purpose** of **university education**.

The purpose of enabling programs such as STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies) is to prepare students for tertiary study, that is, to promote the development of graduate attributes. To this end, an examination of students' perceptions of how well the STEPS program has helped them develop these attributes provides staff with valuable information on **learning** and **teaching outcomes** as well as possible **curriculum improvement**. As such, it has the potential to impact on students' retention both at the preparatory and degree levels. The outcome of this project is of vital importance not only to STEPS staff but also to decision makers within CQUniversity who continually need to consider the **efficacy** of the program as a **CQUniversity entry path** and in view of the

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institution's commitment to *producing student learning*, rather than simply *providing programs of study*.

The overall aim of the project is to **support the learning needs of STEPS students** through the establishment of an exit activity centred on the graduate attributes checklist. This project aligns with CQUniversity Learning and Teaching Management Plan, and it is guided by the *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. In addition, the project is in line with the 2006 AUQA Report recommendation 6, and it supports the recommendations of the 2007 CQU Institutional Assessment Framework (IAF) Portfolio (In-house document – PVC Academic Services).

### **Preparatory class activities**

Students' course and teaching evaluations reveal students' difficulty to relate their learning to everyday life. In an effort to address this issue, the practitioner devised class activities which would help students draw the link between their learning and the desired generic attributes of their program of study. To this end, the 23 attributes were introduced in small doses at strategic points throughout the duration of the program. Further, attributes are displayed on individual posters around the room (on walls, desks or floor). At the end of a class, students select the poster that most reflects their learning during that session. They share it with the other students and give examples of how the lesson helped them develop this particular attribute. Other students join in the discussion by relating their own experience. These sessions prove very helpful as they have the potential to add another dimension to learning and teaching. By opening a window on the broad perspective of the program, such discussions act as a summary of not only the content but also the generic skills learned.

### **Brief report on preliminary study**

To ascertain the extent to which STEPS had contributed to the development of the program's desirable graduate attributes, a survey was created asking students to rate the 23 attributes on a scale of one to five with one being Very High and five Very Limited development respectively.

Administered to 32 students, the online survey was processed electronically and the data was sorted on the rating average. These results of this trial survey or preliminary phase of the project confirm the premise that STEPS graduates have acquired not only the academic skills but also the self-awareness and confidence to undertake undergraduate study. They also confirm anecdotal evidence that students perceive time-management skills and their ability to work collaboratively and productively as the weak link.

### **The Nuts and Bolts Session**

*Presentation (8 minutes)*

This section presents a brief description of the following:

Background

- Developing students' awareness and understanding of graduate attributes

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- Encouraging students to share their perceptions of which graduate attributes have been developed in some learning/teaching activities of a STEPS program
- Allowing students to evaluate the extent to which graduate attributes have been developed in them in a STEPS program.

### Findings

- Students' ratings of the extent to which they perceive graduate attributes had been developed in them in a STEPS program
- The results of analyses conducted to determine which attributes were perceived as having been (a) most developed and (b) least developed in them in a STEPS program
- Comparisons of the results of the preliminary study with anecdotal evidence

### *Discussion and discussion feedback (22 minutes)*

This presentation is followed by a discussion (12 minutes) on the implications of the research for support delivery and suggestions for best practice. Participants will be divided into three groups, each group discussing one of the following questions.

- Given the low score with regard to 'manage time, balance competing commitments, and meet deadlines', how can we best help students to manage themselves, and ultimately, improve their chance to complete their study?
- Given the low score with regard to 'work collaboratively and productively', how can we support students to become effective team members?
- Could the high score attributes such as 'develop self-confidence in capacity to learn, and develop an acceptance of individual responsibility and obligation' be used as stepping stones to promote the development of the low score attributes (time management and effective team members)? What form and shape could this bridging take?

This session will finish with feedback from each group and wider discussion (10 minutes)

### References

2007 CQU Institutional Assessment Framework (IAF) Portfolio (In-house document – PVC Academic Services)

Australian Universities Quality Agency (2006). *Report of an Audit of Central Queensland University February 2006*. [Electronic source]. Accessed 5 August, 2008. <http://www.quality.cqu.edu.au/FCWViewer/view.do?page=1959>

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