

# **A developing pedagogy for integrating generic skills in course delivery: a collaborative approach**

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## **Abstract**

*Developing curricula which integrates graduate attributes or generic academic skills is recognizably a complex teaching and learning challenge (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2007-8). Clearly there is a need to develop a shared vocabulary, and also a better understanding of the distinction between skill development within disciplines and the integration of those skills which may be transferable across disciplines. This case study will explore the developing pedagogy for embedding generic skills in a unit offered by the Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences at Deakin University. This unit is delivered to a very large first year student cohort across three different campuses and to students studying in off-campus mode. The case study will evaluate the achievement of learning outcomes which include the integration of discipline knowledge and skills, and also examine the advantages and disadvantages of curricula development through collaboration between Language and Learning Advisers and discipline specialists. Participants will be asked to consider the challenges of attempting to integrate generic skills in course delivery.*

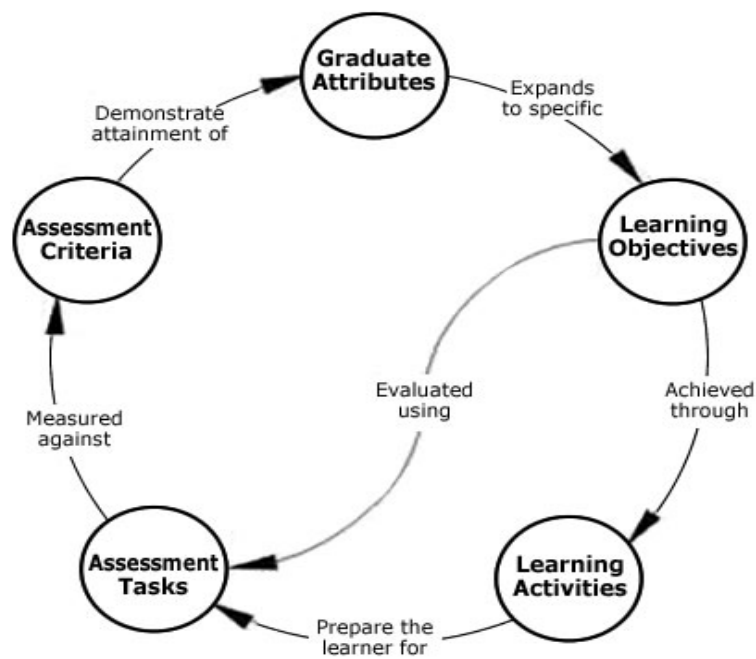
## **Introduction**

Most universities in Australia have adopted a set of graduate attributes which all students are expected to acquire at some time during their study. However, although this focus is not new, curriculum development aimed at integrating skills development and content delivery has been slow. The literature puts forward a number of interrelated factors to explain this, one being that the graduate attribute agenda has been managerial-driven, and has been promoted by sources outside universities such as employers and governments (Leggett et al. 2004; Leveson, 2000; Sumison & Goodfellow, 2004). It could also be suggested that practical considerations such as insufficient resourcing has contributed to the limited success of this approach. Again there has been debate about the transferable nature of generic attributes across contexts and whether or not the notion of graduate attributes is more relevant to vocational training (Moore & Hough, 2005; Sumison & Goodfellow, 2004). There is no shared vocabulary in the graduate attribute debate, and no agreement on the relative importance of specific skills. As such, few universities can provide evidence of curricula which aim to systematically develop graduate attributes (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2007-8).

The National Graduate Attributes Project (or National GAP) which commenced in 2007 seeks to explore the constraints universities face in advancing student experiences aimed at fostering the development of graduate attributes. The Issues papers published as part of this project identify graduate attributes as being conceptualised in different ways within different universities and acknowledge that these different understandings have influenced curriculum design. Clearly the

development of lists of graduate attributes which all students are expected to acquire at some time during their study and the notion of simply adding in some generic skills development to existing courses is a somewhat simplistic approach to a complex teaching and learning challenge. The project Issue paper ‘Conceptualising’ concludes that conceptualizing graduate attributes involves representing “complex outcomes which reflect new notions of ‘knowledge’ or ways of thinking or dealing with the world . . .’ (Australian Learning and Teaching Council 2007-8, p. 5).

Given the challenge of articulating graduate attributes, it should be acknowledged that although the case study being presented here has been contextualised within the graduate attribute and generic skills development debate, it represents a more limited translation of skills development than the definition provided above by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The strategies described in this case study facilitate learning outcomes which allow students to further develop discipline knowledge, and although skills development is situated within the health unit, many of the skills will transfer to other discipline contexts. This case study focuses on generic skills development rather than discipline-specific graduate attributes. It is based on an integrated generic skills curriculum, which offers the advantages of being relevant to the discipline and of being seen as highly relevant by the students. It requires the development of learning outcomes which not only reflect discipline knowledge, but also include the development of specific generic skills. Jolly (2001) provides some guidance for implementing integrated skills development by linking learning objectives, learning activities, assessment tasks, assessment criteria and graduate attributes, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: A process of implementing graduate attributes (Jolly 2001)**

## The Case Study

One way to plan and evaluate models of integrated skills delivery is a collaborative approach between Language and Learning Advisers and discipline specialists, with language and learning advisers providing an outsider's view. Crosling and Wilson (2005) describe this as the disciplinary staff being able to "identify and articulate the goals of the disciplinary community" while the learning adviser "has the resources to interpret and therefore explain these as writing practices" (p.7). In a first step towards that type of approach, a number of Language and Learning Advisers, each working on different campuses of Deakin University began meeting with the discipline team who were responsible for the delivery of a first year unit in the faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences (FHMNBS). This collaborative approach initially commenced with a number of meetings to discuss how first year students enrolled in the FHMNBS might be supported in referencing correctly and avoiding plagiarism. However, it has now become an action research project with a wider focus on a developing pedagogy to support students' academic literacy in a health unit offered at first year level.

The unit is a core Faculty-wide undergraduate unit that is available on all of the Deakin University campuses (Burwood, Geelong and Warrnambool) as well as in off-campus mode. It has a very large enrolment of approximately 1,700 students with input from four lecturers and approximately 20 sessional tutors. The curriculum is delivered using a mixed mode or blended learning approach that includes face-to-face, videoconferencing and online learning for both on-campus and off-campus students. The unit enables students to obtain fundamental knowledge and understanding of health concepts and issues.

The initial meetings between language and learning advisers and the discipline team focused on the first two assessment tasks in this unit. Assessment task 1, a reading review is a developmental learning task aimed at facilitating the development of academic literacy. Assessment task 2 is a research assignment which builds on the skills developed in assessment task 1. The development of curricula to support these assessment tasks was based on a number of key understandings including:

- the need for explicit teaching of generic skills
- learning outcomes which include both discipline knowledge and generic skills
- a scaffolded approach to the assessment tasks.

The curricula consisted of the development of hurdle tasks which included online and face-to-face workshopping of responses to learning activities, based on resources produced by the language and learning advisers to support the development of generic skills such as:

- reading a lengthy academic article
- paraphrasing and summarizing
- writing a well constructed paragraph

When reflecting on the scaffolded approach to assessment tasks 1 and 2, the teaching group identified a range of possible changes to delivery of the unit. These include:

- production of additional resources to support other assessment tasks
- provision of professional development for tutors who are involved in delivering the learning activities.
- narrated PowerPoint presentation and seminars.

As part of this action research model this presentation will provide a further evaluation of curriculum changes to this unit in 2010, and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses/challenges of a collaborative approach to curriculum development and teaching and learning in a large first year health unit.

## Session outline

**Icebreaker activity** (5 minutes)

**Presentation** (5 minutes) Outline of the case study

**Small group discussion** (10 minutes)

Participants to consider one or more of the following questions.

1. By the end of first year what generic skills do you think first year students should have acquired?
2. What are some other approaches (at other institutions) being used to integrate skills into the development of units offered at first year level?
3. What are the challenges faced in attempting to integrate generic skills?

Each group will be asked to record their responses, and the presenters will circulate a summary of small group discussions to all participants. This format provides an opportunity for participants to continue to network with colleagues.

**Presenters and whole group discussion** (10 minutes) Presenters to draw together the ideas that have been discussed by the participants.

## References

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