

Mapping the Arts Curriculum: Losing our Way or the Road Map to the Future?

Graham Forsyth

University of New South Wales; Associate Dean (Academic), College of Fine Arts

In the last few years especially, the notion of Graduate Attributes, and the expectation that they will be mapped through university curricula, has become increasingly standardised in the Australian university sector. Universities more and more articulate their role and purpose through a description of the qualities of their graduates (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995), while these qualities are at the same time becoming increasingly generic and non-specific. My focus in this paper is on the impact these approaches to curriculum development and management are likely to have in the Fine Arts and Design tertiary education sectors, and on the lessons to be learnt from a recently undertaken and partially completed curriculum mapping process at the College of Fine Arts UNSW.

Graduate Attributes, considered as non-disciplinary, broader-range life-skills or capacities, are not in themselves a novel phenomena. Education in the humanities especially has long been supposed to have a transformative impact on students, enabling them to lead a full and truly human life; a view held by figures such as Aristotle and Matthew Arnold, amongst many others. Yet the recent focus on Graduate Attributes is distinctive in that the humanistic construction of a 'rounded and encultured individual' has been largely superseded by a utilitarian vision of employer requirements. The important development here, at least in the Australian context, has been the emergence, first under Labor, but intensified over the last 10 years of Liberal Government, of the expectation that universities need to justify themselves for their use of government funding and their position as 'privileged' institutions. This climate of accountability and quality assurance, combined with demands from employers for graduates who can function more effectively in the workforce, has led to a high level of focus on tertiary education as leading, not just to disciplinary knowledge and professional skills and capacities, but also to more generic graduate attributes. These attributes emphasise the skills, which we are told, employers are increasingly focussing on: capacities for communication, teamwork, leadership, analytical and critical thinking.

As the Higher Education Council in its influential 1992 report, *Achieving Quality*, put it, these generic attributes are 'the skills, personal attributes and values which should be acquired by all graduates regardless of their discipline or field of study. In other words, generic skills should represent the central achievements of higher education as a process'. (HEC 1992:20) Or as Bowden et al have put it, 'graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings ... that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future (Bowden et al, 2000: executive summary).

Although this approach is supported by a laudable focus on life-long learning (which supposes universities provide the preconditions for learning as much as the content to be learnt), it is difficult not to see in this proclamation of the 'central achievement' of higher education a decline in the perceived importance of particular knowledge or skills in favour of a set of more general dispositions. And the suggestions that the focus is on the general development of the individual should not blind one to the fact that universities are articulating these attributes largely in response to Government and employer pressure for universities to produce more employable graduates, better fitted to the workplace, and to better articulate their role in the face of Government and community scepticism (Barrie, 2006).

An issue I will touch on later in this paper is the impact of this shift from specific to generic in fine arts and design education.

It also needs to be recognised that the generality of these attributes follows on from accountability, in that the attributes are clearly also designed as benchmarks in order to 'performance manage' universities, and so need to be applicable across the diversity of institutions and disciplines. The government sponsored the development of the Graduate Skills Assessment instrument in 2002 by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to test generic skills of graduates in the domains of logical thinking, critical reasoning, written communication and interpersonal understanding. Although an original proposal to make it compulsory lapsed, 'Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future' (2003) continued to encourage universities to administer the test and employers to use it in selection procedures, and the risk of its introduction as a measure of performance has focused university attention on the need to develop these generic skills their students.

The impact has been that a large number of universities are seeking to demonstrate the attributes that their degrees develop. One of the issues has been how do you show that attributes that are broader and more generic than professional skills and knowledge have been developed in graduates? Universities, as the Federal Government acknowledges, have been slow to take up the option of testing graduates using ACER's Graduate Skills Assessment. The alternative many have adopted has been the process of mapping sets of graduate attributes onto the curricula of courses and programs.

Curriculum Mapping can be traced to the work of Fenwick English in the 1980s, who saw curriculum mapping in terms of making the curriculum more transparent and, in particular, highlighting the links between the different aspects of the curriculum: learning outcomes, learning opportunities, assessment, teaching and so on. As he wrote: 'The real genius of mapping is to give a broad picture of the taught curriculum' (English, 1984). Curriculum mapping has been presented as a powerful tool for managing the curriculum.

But as Barrie amongst others has argued (Barrie 2006:235) there are a number of troubling issues in using curriculum mapping to demonstrate how universities develop graduate attributes. The first is that by and large universities have adopted a 'top down' approach to writing a list of attributes, in response to primarily external pressures, and these have often been produced almost overnight (see Clanchy & Ballard, 1995). As Barrie has argued:

The extent to which the rhetoric of such statements actually represents a shared understanding of the outcomes of a university education is a matter of conjecture. The extent to which present day university teaching and learning processes actually develop such outcomes in graduates is even more contestable.

(Barrie 2006:216)

It is true that most institutions make it clear that the university attributes need to be contextualised by individual faculties. As UNSW's Academic Board put it:

A statement of broad graduate attributes has meaning when expressed to students and staff in the context of the discipline. Thus, the Faculties are responsible for expressing these University Graduate Attributes in the context of the professional area, discipline and program level, and for their explicit development and assessment within the curricula.

(UNSW Academic Board AB03/67)

But the process of contextualisation has often been as unsystematic and 'top-down' as the university-wide process of listing attributes.

And this is where Barrie's other problem becomes important. In a study in which he interviewed academics on their understanding of graduate attributes, it was clear that there was no single understanding of graduate attributes held by academics mapping curricula or developing courses.

The finding of qualitative differences in academics' understandings of the concept of graduate attributes suggests that as an academic community, we are not all talking about the same thing when we talk about graduate attributes. Indeed, this research would suggest that the definition of graduate attributes (as generic skills)... could mean different things to the different people charged with developing and delivering a university education. (Barrie 2006:234)

Differences range from seeing the attributes as precursor skills needed for university learning, to complementary skills used during learning, to translations of university learning into real world contexts, to enabling capacities that lie at the heart of university learning.¹

¹ Abilities that infuse and enable all scholarly learning and knowledge. These abilities are seen as integral to disciplinary knowledge (Barrie, 2006:229).

In the absence of an agreed understanding of the generic skills that all graduates should possess, contextualising them in faculty-specific terms, or mapping them through programs can remain an empty exercise. Program maps which pinpoint a particular attribute, whether communication skills or an appreciation of diversity, as something developed in a particular set of courses can often remain divorced from what students actually do and learn and also from what academics teach and assess. Generic outcomes are recognised as such because they are generalisations which can be readily accepted as important, but they are as a consequence difficult to recognise or tease out of the curriculum and even more difficult to assess.²

I would argue that the key problem is the tension between the notion that these attributes are both generic and also contextualised in terms of a discipline, especially as mostly little concrete guidance is given in as to how the attributes are to be understood. The situation is exacerbated by the preference to integrate the development of these attributes into existing disciplinary-focussed courses. Yet the alternative, of adding in additional, specific courses to address particular graduate attributes (usually ones such as information literacy, communication skills, ethics and professional responsibility), simply treats these generic capacities as additional disciplinary skills and knowledge, thus undermining the goal of the specifically skilled graduate exhibiting these broader capacities and competencies.

Fine arts and design at the university level have inevitably been caught up in the drive to integrate graduate attributes. And these disciplines do appear to be ideally suited to exemplifying broader graduate attributes. Fine art as a subject discipline especially is often portrayed concerned with encouraging the development of individual artistic practice and enabling the student to articulate and define the social and cultural context that they are working within. As opposed to the apparent tension between core disciplinary knowledge in science, engineering or mathematics, fine art and design already expect students to realise generalised capacities, to become transformed as persons (e.g. 'realise their creativity') as well as achieve more specified competencies.

Studio art classes, for instance, are generally project-based, where students are required to complete one or more projects or pieces of work, and where the curriculum, especially at latter stages of a program, is relatively unstructured and open-ended. Even in earlier years, where more specific skills are often taught, assessment practices usually aren't addressed to the specific competencies, but to an overall capacity demonstrated in a work of art, or a series of works. Moreover, learning and teaching in fine art and also design to a large extent not just involves the development of creative and aesthetic skills, talents and abilities, but also critical, contextual and conceptual skills. It could be argued that for artists working at the outset of the twenty first century, the conceptual basis is the crucial aspect in the development of students and the creation of works of art. Students need to have experienced a variety of physical and intellectual challenges to

² 'In this conception the graduate attributes may not be explicit, that is, they may be so embedded that they are rarely articulated or made explicit as course learning outcomes. This poses a particular challenge for assessment.' (Barrie, 2006:236).

enable them to understand that boundary pushing, problem solving and learning through failure are the cornerstones of a fine art course and what it is to be an artist.

At the 2004 ACUADS Conference held in Canberra, Tony Jones from the Art Institute of Chicago gave a keynote address where he argued that the BFA is the new MBA, in that it is in fine arts education that we now see the development of the more general capacities for innovation, management and creativity so critical in the business world.

It is here, however, that some caution is needed. As was discussed earlier, Graduate Attributes have a particular history and context. They have emerged as a mechanism of accountability to government and employers, and with at least the intention of being used to rank universities on a common scale, irrespective of discipline - an intention that may still be realised. As such, the ease with which education in the fine arts and design appear to fit the generic attributes model of higher education should not blind us to the need for caution.

This is because, although more often than not the stated intention is that graduate attributes will be fully translated into discipline-specific forms, as part of the process of embedding them into specific degrees, their very generic quality continues to require them to be fundamentally external indicators.

We can see this in two areas, one the conclusions of a Curriculum Mapping exercise undertaken at COFA I will discuss later and the other in the operation of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, which the Federal Government uses to distribute substantial funding to universities on the basis of a score across a range of indicators of learning and teaching quality. The important indicator in this discussion is the use of graduate reporting, via the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), on the perception of the achievement of generic skills. In the CEQ graduates are asked to rank their satisfaction with their course or program in terms of imparting analytical, communication, problem solving, team work skills etc., and universities received funding, in part, on the basis of how their answers.

Evidence from Britain as well as Australia shows, however, that graduates have difficulty in recognising these life-skills (analysis, communication, problem-solving, team work) in their fine arts and design tertiary education. I would argue that this is because although the questions may appear to be discipline agnostic, they bring with them a panoply of assumptions which tie notions such as communication skills or team-work skills back to particular activities, especially focussed on the workplace. Neither the government's desire for a simple benchmark nor employers need for graduates better fitted to the workplace, has allowed the generic attributes to necessarily address the capacities most appropriate to a fine artist or even a designer.

It may be thought that I am being unfair here. As I have said earlier, the fine arts seem peculiarly suited to being assessed in terms of the development broader capacities, and almost all the documentation on graduate attributes emphasises the importance of placing these generic

capabilities in the context of a discipline³, which surely suggests that the distinctive forms of team work or communication in the arts will be recognised.

The problem here is that once the hard work is done to 'embed', 'elaborate' or 'integrate' generic statements on outcomes into the curriculum of a particular course or program little may have been achieved. Either the requirements are integral to the course, in which case the reformulation of them in terms of these university-wide graduate attributes will be formulaic, or there will be a 'bolt-on' approach of adding in teaching in specific skills. Yet teaching these skills requires assessment of them as well, with a drift away from a project-based, more holistic education to a series of independent competencies. Few fine arts educators would be happy with the reported requirement at the University of South Australia, for example, that curriculum documentation indicate what component of student time per subject will be allocated to the development of specific capabilities (Bowden et al, 2000).

COFA began a process of mapping graduate attributes into our fine arts and design curricula mid way through 2005. The approach taken was to develop a mapping tool in the form of an excel spreadsheet which enabled a range of information on a course to be correlated and cross-referenced. Initially course outlines were mined to provide this information on handbook entry, year of study, pre-requisites, stated course aims and student outcomes.

The key component of the map was, however, the use of student activities as the linchpin, to which student outcomes were correlated. Teaching staff were interviewed on activities their students undertook, and for each activity they were asked to link it to outcomes for the students. The key questions here were a) what do you want your students to demonstrate through this activity, and b) what are the criteria you use to know that a student has demonstrated these outcomes? The goal was to put the focus on outcomes for students, rather than account of what the staff member teaches or imparts. These would be the common currency allowing maps to be generated across whole programs and also allow these outcomes to be correlated with UNSW or COFA graduate attributes. Unlike many mapping processes, at UNSW and elsewhere, graduate attributes were not directly correlated to courses, but only via clear statement of concrete student activities in class and elsewhere and their outcomes. The aim here was to move away from the often superficial glossing of attributes into courses, by requiring them to be tied to concrete activities and outcomes.

Although the project is not yet complete, some preliminary findings suggest the need for a more cautious and nuanced approach to the mapping of graduate attributes into studio courses. Project-based assessment and teaching, especially in studio classes, often have multiple aims and outcomes, and are not always easily tied to limited set of activities. That is, it has been difficult for teaching staff to fill in the first column in the COFA tool – the list of student activities. For example, although a latter year student may be completing an artwork, as part of an ongoing project of development as an artist, it is difficult, or even impossible for the teacher to pre-define the activities

³ See for example, Bowden et al, 2000: 'the development of generic capabilities has little meaning until they are elaborated within the context of a discipline'.

the student must undertake in this project. There has at times been a sense of artificiality in the distinction of activities.

It has also proved difficult to move from activities and goals to graduate attributes, at least other than at a formulaic level. Communication skills are 'found' in every crit session or seminar presentation, but as Barrie has pointed out, in the absence of a shared understanding of what an outcome like 'communication skills' means in an area like fine arts, the actual development of these outcomes is highly debatable.

The difficulties staff has in mapping generic graduate attributes onto their project-based courses is mirror, I believe, in the difficulty students and graduate have in recognising their acquisition of generic graduate attributes. Tony Jones might be correct in seeing successful graduates in the visual arts needing to have skills in project-management, problem-solving and high-level communication skills, but we all know of artists who lack at least some of those skills, and yet who are undoubtedly successful in their field.

English's goal of mapping is to make the curriculum transparent, to staff, students and managers. Such a goal is desirable and worth pursuing, but caution is needed to ensure that the ultimately crude instrument of graduate attributes is not allowed to drive the process and produce a false clarity, at the expense of a true intelligibility.

References

Bath, D.; Smith, C.; Stein, S.; & Swann, R., (2004) 'Beyond Mapping and Embedding Graduate Attributes: Bringing Together Quality Assurance and Action Learning to Create a Validated and Living Curriculum', *Higher Education Research & Development*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp 313-328.

Bennett, N.; Dunne, E.; & Carre, C. (1999). Patterns of Core and Generic Skill Provision in Higher Education'. *Higher Education* 37, 71–93.

Barrie, Simon C. (2006) 'Understanding What We Mean by the Generic Attributes of Graduates *Higher Education* vol. 51 pp 215–241.

Bowden, J.; Hart, G.; King, B.; Trigwell, K.; & Watts, O. (2000). 'Generic Capabilities of ATN University Graduates'. <http://www.clt.uts.edu.au/ATN.grad.cap.project.index.html>

Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1995). 'Generic Skills in the Context of Higher Education, *Higher Education Research and Development* 14 (2), 155–166.

English, F.W., (1984). 'Curriculum Mapping and Management', in: B.D. Sattes (ed.) *Promoting Schools Excellence through the Application of Effective Schools Research: Summary and Proceedings of a 1984 Regional Exchange Workshop*.

Goldsworthy, A. (2003). 'Developing Generic Skills: Examples of Best Practice'. *B-HERT News*: Issue 16, April. Available at http://www.bhert.com/documents/B-HERTNEWSNo.16_001.pdf .

Higher Education Council, *Achieving Quality*, (1992). Report.

UNSW Academic Board AB03/67 7/10/2003.