Improving Graduateness and Employability:
A Career Management Approach

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Introduction

Universities are under increasing pressure to produce the kind of graduates that employers want and employers often report that graduates do not possess the desired attributes for employment (Glover et.al. 2002: 293; Parker & Griesel, 2009; Chetty, 2012; Keeling & Hersh, 2012). Universities are exploring different options to make graduates more “work ready” for a wider variety of work contexts. The challenge for universities is to systematically plan to improve graduateness in a pedagogically sound way within the curriculum.

This paper draws on the view of Bridgstock (2009) who explains that in a rapidly changing knowledge intensive and technologically advancing economy, students require more than a set of graduate attributes that are desirable to employers in the immediate future. The focus should instead be on developing in graduates the attributes that would best serve them, employers and society for the longer term and be relevant for future decades. Bridgstock (2009:32) identifies self-management and career management skills as necessary graduate attributes that would allow graduates to “proactively navigate the world of work and self-manage the career building process” regardless of the dynamically changing and unpredictable work contexts.

The key concepts, graduate attributes, graduateness, employability and career management are explained and thereafter, the use of a career management portfolio as a pedagogically sound, systematic and strategic approach for improving graduateness are explained. Some implications of implementing such an approach are also considered.

Key concepts

Graduate attributes

Graduate attributes is defined by Bowden et. al. (2000), as “the qualities, skills and understandings a University community agrees students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are

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able to make to the profession and as a citizen”. Graduate attributes are acquired through the broader university experience and not solely through the curriculum of a subject discipline and many of the desired key attributes relate to transferable skills that may be difficult to inculcate and assess in the formal curriculum. Cultural values, the curriculum and cognitive attributes contribute to graduate attributes (HEQC: 1996) and therefore the notion of having generic graduate attributes is unrealistic and according to Stevenson (2003), problematic, as it does not acknowledge the contextual nature of learning and creates an artificial divide between knowledge and practice. Therefore graduate attributes are context specific although agreement could be reached among stakeholders to adopt a specific set of attributes for a particular purpose, such as the adoption by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of Scotland of a set of graduate attributes to focus on for the Quality Enhancement Project (QAA: 2011).

Graduateness

The term graduateness is a multi-faceted concept that requires a more nuanced understanding (Chetty 2012: 1). It is commonly used in the United Kingdom and was introduced by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC: 1997). According to Wheelahan (2002), graduateness refers to the combination of graduate attributes at different levels of functioning knowledge, which includes implicit learning and tacit knowledge that a graduate may or may not have acquired through formal study of a programme. Therefore, graduateness is a state of being as a result of achieving a combination of graduate attributes and Wheelahan, (2002) explains it as “the sum being more than the parts”.

Employability

Employability refers to the attributes that graduates possess that influence their assimilation into the national and international labour market (Glover, et.al. 2002). Yorke (2004: 410) defines employability as a set of achievements that are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for gaining employment. He regards employability as a characteristic of the individual, as it is the individual who is assessed for a job.

Glover et.al. (2002) explains that a tension exists between graduateness as a state after the completion of the course, and employability as an assessment of the economic value of a student at the time of graduation. They also concluded that notions of graduateness and employability are becoming much more closely integrated and except for students following vocationally oriented programmes, there is no clear understanding by students of the distinction between the two concepts.
Graduate attributes for employability

The lists of graduate attributes for employability drawn up by universities, governments, researchers and employers are too numerous to count and whilst there are marked similarities, there are distinct differences that make it impossible to draw up a single concise set of graduate attributes. Gunn et. al. (2010) attempts to group the lists according to the approach adopted and provides four models for mapping employability attributes. These are the general model, the research-oriented model, the employability-oriented model and a recent graduate model. The employability-oriented model is based on the work of Bridgstock (2009) and this model provides the framework for the career management approach and career management portfolio that is discussed in this paper. Examples of such skills include problem-solving, communication, teamwork, information technology and self-management.

A Career Management Approach

The approach of developing graduate attributes for enhanced employability assumes that students go to university with the aim of graduating with qualifications that will enable them to find employment in professions related to the programmes they studied. It further assumes that employers seek graduates who have achieved the learning outcomes of the programmes they studied and expect the graduates to possess particular attributes associated with having studied at universities and attained particular qualifications. This suggests a link and necessary alignment between the learning outcomes of a programme and the employability attributes for the profession. These attributes include the knowledge and skills taught and learnt, and assessed through the formal curriculum as well as those acquired by the individual informally outside the curriculum. For example, the general ability to work as a member of the team may be taught, practised and assessed as part of organised group work in the curriculum and/or it could be acquired through being a player in football team.

Learning outcomes, graduate attributes, graduateness and employability are interrelated guiding principles for curriculum design. Students achieve different levels of diverse attributes through multiple ways. Graduate attributes are influenced by many factors outside the formal curriculum such as individual levels of motivation, work exposure, role models, and mentoring and coaching. Most importantly, students have opportunities to develop or enhance personal attributes required for work or for a profession. In other words, students have agency for developing the attributes they require for employability, provided they have a clear understanding of what these attributes are. This should complement the structured learning opportunities provided
within the programme for students to achieve graduate attributes. Examples of such attributes are self-confidence, and written and verbal communication skills.

Students on entering university during the orientation period should be required to acquire information about the programme selected, the nature of the work and the attributes of the graduate. In addition to an outward and forward-looking focus, students should be guided to reflect inwardly on their personal attributes in relation to what is required by particular professions, and if necessary, how they could achieve them. Ideally this should build on career development and career planning done in secondary school but effective career guidance at the school level is often lacking and therefore universities need to purposefully structure career management opportunities for students afresh.

A career management approach that is student-centred and promotes active engagement and active learning throughout the years at university is appropriate training for students who will work in technologically advanced and knowledge intensive work contexts and are likely to change jobs and careers many times during their working lives. Students need to become highly skilled, competent and flexible individuals who are able to acquire new and different kinds of knowledge and skills from those learnt at university.

They need to be life-long learners who are able to assess what learning they need and develop a plan for meeting their learning needs. This approach offers students the opportunity for self-reflection and self-responsibility for personal and professional development, with the aim of improving graduateness and employability. This has long-term benefits for the graduates, employers and society. The role of the university in this regard is to facilitate structured learning opportunities for students’ career development. The use of an individual career management portfolio is discussed as an example of promoting one’s self-management and self-development to increase one’s employability.

**Organisation for Improved Graduateness and Employability**

**At a National Level**

Literature and treatises on current and future education and economic realities suggest that for universities and colleges to be relevant to society, and to meet the needs of students and employers, they need to plan for and implement mechanisms that would advance graduateness and hence the employability of students. However, given the multiple meanings attached to the concepts graduateness and employability, it is necessary to have a common and sharper understanding of graduate attributes among students and academics in a particular programme. Where national and or institutional definitions exist, explicit graduate attributes that are appropriate for careers associated
with particular programmes should be framed within such broader definitions. Hence, conversations among communities of university administrators, employers, academics and students within a programme are necessary to identify appropriate graduate attributes and ways of achieving them.

Ideally, coordination, discussion and agreement at the national level about graduate attributes provide a framework, common understanding, guiding principles and sharing of effective practices for universities. Many national quality assurance agencies and higher education departments have successfully led such initiatives in countries.

The Scottish Higher Education Project on Quality Enhancement in which many universities participated identified eight of the most important graduate attributes at a national level that the 21st century graduate should possess. These attributes are lifelong learning; research, scholarship and enquiry; employability and career development; global citizenship; communication and information literacy; ethical, social and professional understanding; personal and intellectual autonomy; teamwork and leadership. These graduate attributes could be adapted and incorporated by each institution to determine its own set of graduate attributes that reflect the institution’s own mission, vision and strategic priorities. The encouragement to institutions to design and implement projects that would enhance graduate attributes resulted in a sharing of a variety of successful practices by the universities participating in this project (Hounsell, 2011).

**At an Institutional Level**

Every university should have a published and widely publicised statement outlining attributes that its graduates should achieve by the time they graduate from university, either through the programmes they study or through their own initiative. Attributes should be defined, described with appropriate indicators to serve as tools for measurement. Evidence of achievement of attributes need to be assessed and this is best done within the programme. It is at the programme level that development of graduate attributes can be planned, implemented and monitored in a systematic way. Academic leadership at a programme level should to be responsible and accountable for ensuring that there is a rigorous and robust system in place for boosting graduateness and employability. This requires a high level of deliberation and coordination by academics across course divides and years of study to ensure that the achievement of graduate attributes are embedded in and integrated across the curriculum.

Whilst it is generally agreed that institutions of higher education have a major responsibility to ensure the smooth incorporation of graduates into professional life, and hence into society (Gunn, 2012), there are fewer studies that address the pedagogical approaches and practices for achieving them. According to Gunn (2012), generic skills and abilities needed in the workplace should be included in the
curriculum design, and teaching and learning methods used. However, due to the emphasis on the subject content in over-full curricula and a general lack of understanding on how to improve graduate attributes, concerted efforts by universities to define graduateness and employability, to formulate and execute plans for their improvement, and then to measure the success of implemented strategies are still at an elementary stage in most countries.

This paper suggests an active career management approach that anchors graduateness as an integrative main stem in the curriculum structure and that becomes a shared responsibility of the individual student and the programme provider. The primary responsibility lies with the student for developing personal and professional competencies and traits that will enhance individual employability with guidance and support provided by the programme providers.

**Developing a Career Management Portfolio**

A portfolio of evidence may be used by students or professionals to reflect on and provide evidence of learning, training and development, and accomplishments. It may also be used by the student or professional as a tool for identifying growth and development needs or by a lecturer or potential employer of evidence of achievements for assessment and evaluation. Here it is suggested that a portfolio be started by every university student as a personal guide for professional growth and development on entry into university. It should be maintained throughout the student’s university life and also serve as a reflective journal of a personal journey that records not only the highlights, successes and plans, but also the risks, challenges and failures.

There are many benefits of a career management portfolio. Students, through gathering information about a profession will be able to develop realistic expectations about different professions. Students should be guided to understand the global and local contexts of professional practice in various fields since social, technological, economic, environmental and political factors affect professional practice in profound and complex ways. Potential career paths, career opportunities, challenges and risks should be explored in the portfolio. Importantly for this discussion, graduate attributes for employability should be explored and unequivocally and explicitly stated and clearly understood. It is against this backdrop that opportunities for reflection, identification of personal and professional development needs, and planning to address them is done by the student. Staff members in the programme should be trained to provide the necessary opportunities and guidance for the student’s growth and development using the career management portfolio as the basis for engagement.

Guidelines for the format, compilation and use of a career management portfolio are provided by a member of staff in the programme. Electronic portfolios are becoming increasingly popular and faculty members should together plan the structuring of the
portfolio and of the learning opportunities throughout the course of the programme that will enable students to develop a sound understanding of their chosen careers. The programme provider purposefully designs learning opportunities and selects appropriate lenses through which students can view the realities of their professions. In so doing they provide guidance to the student on introspection of personal performance in relation to desired graduate attributes for employability.

Therefore, an individual development plan that incorporates both the personal and professional aspects of the individual’s growth from entry into higher education until graduation offers a proposed systematic approach for a student to improve personal attributes and employability prospects. Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, an individual development portfolio requires a student to understand the desired graduate attributes, to assess personal competencies and identify gaps. The individual student then needs to construct a personalised training and development plan for achieving the explicit graduate attributes. Faculty members can offer advice, guidance and support as well as point out multiple means for students to achieve these graduate attributes. Such methods could include carefully designed work integrated learning opportunities, mentoring and coaching, on-line training and assessment programmes.

They have been changes in the way students communicate, learn, and produce knowledge. Massive open online courses (M00Cs), open educational resources (OERs), global borderless higher education, on-line and blended learning, and social media offers more flexible ways of teaching and learning, and communicating. This has opened up an array of new opportunities for students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

An example of this is provided by Fleming et.al. (2010) who describes the use of a web-based mapping tool that course coordinators used to map the graduate attributes associated with each learning outcome. The benefits of this approach are minimising staff workload, collaborative prototyping, i.e. modifications to be made after consultation with academic staff which enabled incorporation of feedback into the mapping tool and a sense of academic staff ownership of the tool, generation of dynamic reports by users, and ease of access for academic staff.

In the study by Glover et.al. (2002), students emphasised the value of practical work experience and knowledge of the workplace that they had gained during placements. It appears that students feel greater security with understanding the purpose and outcomes of higher education if they can recognise the employment links. The value of work-integrated learning is recognised and is an integral component in the design of a wide range of curricula. Practical engagement in the workplace also has the value of providing students with a realistic view of the graduate attributes valued and their significance within a particular profession.

Ideally, such a portfolio should include evidence, reflection and an individual improvement plan. It should reflect on the relevance, knowledge, skills and
understandings obtained through all modules and courses studied for future professional practice. The portfolio ought to be assessed by a lecturer and the marks count towards each year's grades. This has an implication for staff development as academic staff members would need to be trained in the facilitation, guidance and support of students’ growth and development as well as in being able to assess individual development portfolios.

Conclusion

This is an active student-centered approach in which a student has agency to set goals and develop self-awareness and self-understanding. The student takes responsibility for self-development after analysing personal needs in relation to the desired graduate attributes. Attributes such as professional development and lifelong learning are inculcated in a deliberate and purposeful manner as part of the curriculum. Such an empowerment approach is likely to increase the self-confidence, academic success and employability of students.

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