

Focus On: Graduate Attribute Statements – what are they, and how can we use them?

What do we mean by graduate attributes?

Many universities, in recent years, have published formal statements¹ of what they believe graduates of their programmes should be capable, in terms of skills and abilities beyond specific subject knowledge. Or, perhaps more correctly, what graduates could potentially be capable of, if successful in their studies and taking all the opportunities available to them whilst they complete their degree programme (including, typically, engaging fully in the wider student experience with clubs, societies, volunteering, placements, etc.). Some of these sets of statements have been used as part of marketing for programmes and institutions, whilst others have also been given more serious consideration for professional accreditation, or to lead to additional certification.

Examples of the types of attributes that many universities highlight include: effective communication, problem-solving/critical thinking, international/intercultural awareness, creative, enterprising, teamwork and leadership, civically engaged, ethically minded. These are often a mix of high level personal and professional characteristics and what used to be called 'transferable skills'. Often the statements can seem aspirational (not all graduates will be, after all, a globally engaged entrepreneur with an ethical mindset and outstanding communication skills) or so focused on employability or community-oriented aspects that they can appear detached from the core academic learning that is still at the heart of many university disciplines.

In principle, answering the question 'what is a graduate' provides an opportunity to reflect on what is distinctive about a 'higher' education, and to explore the frequently contested purpose of a degree and debate whether sufficient, or too much, emphasis is being placed on employability, versus academic achievement, versus 'good citizenship'. Though, perhaps, there are practical models or approaches which can satisfactorily address such diversity of expectation.

Why are graduate attributes important?

Universities have always prepared students for life and work in the wider world, by educating doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, scientists and other professionals. In many cases, also, particularly when participation rates were low, the award of a university degree opened a wide range of employment and career opportunities, often on the basis that the degree itself was a marker of generalised ability and adaptability.

The idea of employability, and a general education, have always been part of the 'idea of the university', though in recent times, debate has arisen again². The contemporary context is different, given that the majority of those leaving school now go on to further study, that for many the modern economy lacks the long-term career trajectories of old, with significant issues also around indebtedness, globalisation, and an increased focus on competitiveness. There has also been a sense amongst many in the academic community that new funding models, government

¹ E.g. [Trinity College Dublin](#); [Dublin City University](#); [Maynooth University](#); [University of Glasgow](#); [University of Edinburgh](#); [University of Manchester](#); [University of Melbourne](#);

² E.g. [Barrie, S.C., 2007. A conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of generic graduate attributes. *Studies in higher education*, 32\(4\), pp.439-458](#)

policy, and management structures have led to training for employment and the needs of employers and the economy to be prioritised over other values and domains.

However, if we focus on the underlying questions of what is a 'graduate' and what makes a higher education distinctive, then we may begin to develop a useful framework that not only helps students articulate their achievements and capabilities, but which allows us to reflect on and revisit (if necessary) the design of our programmes and courses; in particular the extent to which our teaching and assessment methods really do promote learner engagement, development, and responsibility.

How can we make graduate attribute statements meaningful?

Rather than simply listing a set of specific skills, or general statements about capability, as is common in a number of institutions, it is worth considering how to develop a set of espoused attributes which can be operationalised and used to reinforce good academic practice³. Identifying existing institutional strengths and supports (e.g. personal tutor schemes, learning support services, careers development, student societies, awards schemes) with a view to developing an integrated model that straddles the directly academic and the extra-/co-curricular opportunities is more likely to yield both a sustainable and meaningful framework. Faculties/Colleges, Schools/Departments, and Subjects/Disciplines, of course may also require to articulate their own set of specific attributes appropriate to their local requirements.



What are the practical benefits of such a set of attribute statements?

Programme teams, Heads of Department/School, and others overseeing the design of programmes of study, can use the statements to interrogate existing courses to ascertain the extent to which students taking these courses are likely to acquire, develop, and be able to demonstrate such attributes. For example, do the learning and teaching methods, or the assessment approaches used, provide scope for students to build their own confidence and skills in these areas? Or, are particular attributes better developed in the context of extra or co-curricular experiences (e.g. through student support services, volunteering, work-placements, service learning, societies, etc.)? Are there existing schemes for recognising distinctive achievement in any of these areas? If not, is there an opportunity to do so?

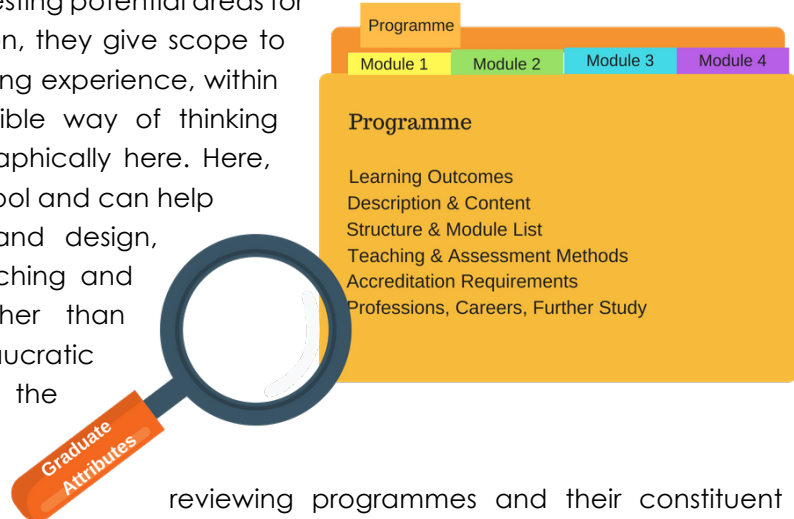
For students, the statements can help to promote the idea of personal development, both as a learner and a future professional. Reflecting on their potential strengths, areas for enhancement, and scope for future achievement, are all valuable aspects of a metacognitive approach to learning – one which is known to be characteristic of successful students. By taking an holistic approach which combines academic skills, personal development and confidence, experience, and employability, graduate attributes schemes can be of real value to students and those who design courses, teach, and support student learning.

³ Many of the statements are also the characteristics of an engaged student, who may go on to further study or a research career as well as employment.

Graduate Attributes Toolkit

Programmes, courses, and the student experience

Each degree programme in a University normally should have a set of 'Programme Level Learning Outcomes' or similar high-level description. Graduate Attributes can augment such statements (where they exist) and may be used to facilitate reflection and review, highlighting existing strengths as well as suggesting potential areas for further enhancement. In addition, they give scope to look at the overall student learning experience, within modules and years. One possible way of thinking about attributes is captured graphically here. Here, Graduate Attributes serve as a tool and can help feed in to curricular review and design, enhancing approaches to teaching and assessment, for example, rather than simply being another set of bureaucratic labels or statements added to the course description!



In practice, this means reviewing programmes and their constituent modules by considering whether: (a) the graduate attributes are addressed in learning outcomes or course content, (b) whether the teaching methods and the learning tasks provide scope for developing such attributes, or (c) if the assessments reflect or allow demonstration of the achievement of the attributes (see Figure 2).

In each case, an assessment should be made of the extent (or depth) to which the attributes are being addressed. Examples of this determination would include,

- whether the attributes are documented but not pursued any further,
- whether they are enacted in practice,
- if there is scope for the students to develop and improve upon their attainment/achievement of the attributes⁴, and
- if there is an assessment made of the students' level of attainment (and whether this is based on a threshold skill level, meeting a set standard, or on outstanding performance).

In many cases this exercise will surface, and give more explicit recognition of, a range of existing good practice examples that are already embedded within programmes and modules.

The wider student experience and opportunities for attribute development

Of course, it would not be expected that every degree programme will address each of a university's stated attributes. There should, however, certainly be scope to consider the three primary domains in which students develop during their time in university – 'knowing, acting,

⁴ E.g. through formative feedback, opportunities to re-attempt, or with encouragement to seek to improve from stage to stage in the programme/course.

and being⁵ - in any degree programme, but the mix of specific components and the extent of these will necessarily vary with the discipline.

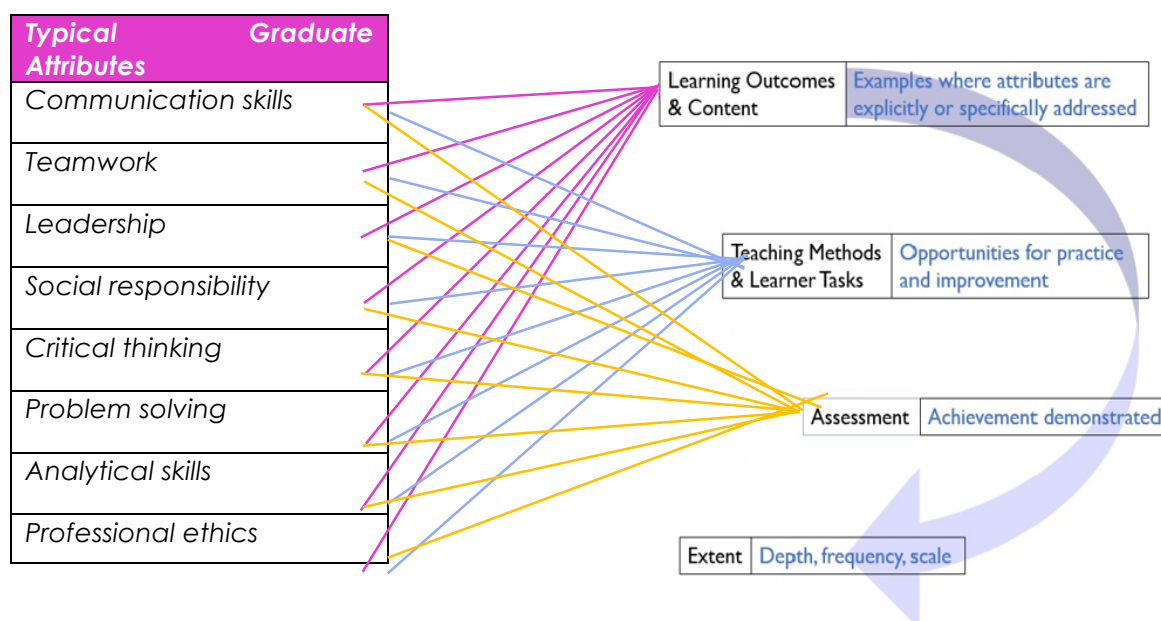


Figure 2: Using Graduate Attributes to interrogate courses and programmes

The totality of the 'student experience' of course also incorporates a range of other activities and opportunities, some of which are augmented to programmes such as placements, work experience, and service learning, others which are completely separate such as volunteering, engagement in clubs and societies, part-time work, hobbies, sports and pastimes, caring responsibilities, etc. The formation of a graduate does not take place purely in the classroom or library, of course, and each of these personal choices, circumstances and interests can also contribute to personal and professional development. Graduate Attribute statements in this context can provide a framework for reflecting on experience, identifying opportunities and support needs, begin planning for the future and helping with employability and lifelong learning.

Universities generally host a wide range of extra-curricular activities, which, in some cases, provide their own certification⁶. Graduate Attribute statements should also provide a means to bring a little more coherence (or at least awareness) and develop a connectedness between the intellectual, academic, social, civic, and personal domains. There are many examples of emerging practice across Irish institutions which include scope for students to demonstrate and articulate high levels of skill, knowledge, and expertise and be recognised for such attainment (this can include trialling a range of digital micro-credentials, developing brief personal portfolios, etc).

⁵ As used in Barnett & Coate's approach to understanding curriculum in higher education. BARNETT, R. & COATE, K., 'Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education', 2004, Open University Press/Society for Research into Higher Education.

⁶ For example, NUI Galway's [ALIVE](#) volunteering scheme, DCU's [Uaneen Module](#), and UL's [CoOp](#) (Co-operative Education) programme.