Can Higher Education Institutions Really Guarantee the Development of Graduate Attributes?

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Abstract

This article explores the claim made by many higher education institutions that their graduates are leaving with certain generic attributes acquired during their time at university. An Aristotelian lens is used to examine such claims in the context of the increasing marketisation of the higher education sector in the UK. The very possibility of claiming generic attributes for students, given the wide variation in the different activities and courses involved is questioned. How is it possible to claim such attributes without some explicit pedagogical effort? Furthermore, should students have a choice in the values they develop through their studies?

Introduction

Over the last three decades, higher education institutions have responded to government calls to attend to graduate employability. Responses include changes in pedagogical approach, curriculum design and organisation, and assessment regimes (Williams, 2013). One of these changes, specifically in the field of assessment, is the introduction and increased focus on graduate attributes.

What I want to consider is whether attributes such as these can be sincerely stated as a guarantee that comes with completing a degree, and whether universities themselves are focusing on actively encouraging students to develop these skills. Throughout my three years at university, for example, my institution's graduate attributes were never explicitly taught, or even mentioned in a way to promote their development or make students aware of what these qualities are. With this being the case, the acquisition of graduate attributes would appear to be based on luck; failure, being so closely associated with the lack of luck, is never too far away. What I am

going to be looking at is whether this is the case. I discuss the possibility for such attributes to be obtained without specific pedagogical effort and attention and thus, whether it is right to claim that all students leave university possessing graduate attributes. In this paper I consider how the increased focus on graduate attributes itself reflects a potential change in the nature of higher education, one that goes hand in hand with an evolving economic focus.

Context

Graduate attributes are defined by Bowden et al. (2000: 3) as: “the qualities, skills and understanding a university community agrees its students will develop during their time with the institution”. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that should prepare graduates to thrive socially in their future endeavours. Institutions claim that they serve as a guarantee; that all graduates will leave possessing certain chosen qualities, which usually include traits such as cultural awareness and empathy, sustainability and professional integrity.

Universities have always endeavoured to develop desirable qualities in their graduates. However, for many students this has been an implicit rather than explicit consequence of their university experience (Hughes & Barrie, 2010). This suggests that there is in fact no need to explicitly focus on developing skills, such as graduate attributes, since these kinds of qualities have always been developed by default within university graduates; the only change is that these are now being stated as a type of learning outcome as opposed to something that simply happened or did not. Carroll (2004) supports this idea further, arguing that this is because the development of graduate attributes has traditionally been considered so fundamentally inherent to all teaching and learning that it warrants no further special attention. Again, this suggests that these skills and qualities are naturally developed as a result of undertaking university studies and so they do not require specific focus and attention.

The concept of graduate attributes is a prime example of the growing marketisation of higher education. Brown (2014) defines marketisation as the attempt to put the provision of higher education on a market basis, where the demand and supply of student education, academic research and other university activities are balanced through the price mechanism. What this means, in essence, is that academic freedom

based on lecturer experience, knowledge of their students, or even the demands of their discipline is being curtailed by administrative and economic demand. Burrows (2012) points out that as academic value becomes monetised, academic values are becoming transformed. That is that the values of academia are now becoming the values of marketisation. By doing this, in my opinion, we are essentially turning higher education into an economic good, which is harmful to its very purpose and nature, which should be, and always has been, about the intellectual development of the individual.

Competitions and competitive schemes within higher education have dramatically developed in the last decades, starting in the eighties with the aim to attract international students to have them pay tuition (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2002), and disseminating internationally in the 2000s with international rankings (Musselin, 2018). The current competition that has developed within higher education is a competition of quality. An institution's status is a signal that students and families use to make their decisions about whether or not to apply to that specific location. Programmes such as graduate attributes are therefore used to develop a university's status and improve its appeal to potential students. What Podolny (1993) highlights, however, is that the quality of higher education is often difficult to assess until it is experienced, and therefore time should not be spent trying to rank universities against one another since it is what an individual experiences first hand that should matter the most. This calls into question whether graduate attributes are indeed worthy of the emphasis they are being given or whether they only serve higher education institutions' strategies to be the 'best' institution for graduate success and employability.

It is no secret that employers greatly value graduate attributes and often seek information on these achievements from applicants as a way to build a better picture of their character and employability (Knight & Page, 2007). This feeds into the marketisation and competition within higher education, with the majority of universities now displaying statistics about the percentage of their graduates entering full-time work within six months of their graduation. This is used as a marketing strategy to lure in the top students, as well as a way of governments influencing what high education institutions do. Frankham (2017) details the ways in which universities' preoccupation with metrics on student employability is distorting the ways in which teaching and the curriculum itself is being organised. She highlights how the Green and White Papers

on the Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2015, 2016) make clear that employability will continue to drive the need for universities to evolve, since employers want highly skilled graduates who are ready to enter the workforce, and the country needs people with the knowledge and expertise to help us compete at a global level. Collini (2016) notes that the Green Paper uses the phrase: 'what employers want' thirty five times, which further emphasises Frankham's point that graduate attributes are simply a mechanism for the government to drive students straight into the workforce in shortage areas.

Linking back to the previous point that graduate attributes are difficult to measure in terms of their success, it has been argued that employability can also not be quantified. Each workplace has its own political structure and culture based on the people employed, the managerial approach, and the current business climate. Cranmer (2006) concludes that this alone can cast doubts on the assumption that skills, such as graduate attributes, can be effectively developed within classrooms despite the best intention of the academics. This is because there is a mismatch between the skills acquired at university and the skills that are required in employment. It is also near impossible to simulate the exact working environment in order to ensure that students are fully 'work ready' due to the fact that every workplace is going to have its differences.

Attributes as Aristotelean virtues

To look at this from a philosophical perspective, graduate attributes can be likened to Aristotelian virtues. These are defined as the disposition to exercise the correct capacities in the correct contexts and to the correct extent (Aristotle NE: 1109a 20-23). This is to have the ability to understand when certain qualities should be displayed and to what extent, based on the given situation that an individual is in. Aristotle emphasises that the way agents change is through their actions; more specifically that it is the habitual practising of these powers to carry out virtuous acts that builds virtues. Graduate attributes, I suggest, need then to be actively practised and consciously thought about in order to be acquired. Furthermore, Aristotle (NE: 1105a 28 – 1105b) also states that the development of these attributes must be undertaken as a matter of choice by a person who knows what they are about. If graduate attributes are seen as the natural consequence of completing a degree, this undermines their very nature

since they are often ignored; not proactively looked at developing and seen as a benefit for graduates to increase their appeal to employers.

Boud and Solomon (2006) suggest that graduate attributes will only work if those to whom they are exposed are willing players in the process and are in a position to appreciate the qualities developed. This highlights the need for graduate attributes to be openly and consciously discussed – first so that students can understand specifically what their university wants them to develop, but also so that they can make a rational choice as to their level of participation. As Sharar (2018) claims, it does not follow that simply engaging in a practice such as teaching will automatically develop virtues. If this were to be the case then each individual in society would develop a similar sense of character, since the same virtues would have been developed in each of them throughout their time in education.

Educating students about what graduate attributes are and how they can be obtained, however, still does not solve the choice problem entirely. Regardless of whether students consciously choose to engage with the graduate attributes programme, the skills themselves have been chosen for them by their institution, based upon what they believe will appeal most to employers. One could argue that this in itself is enough to stop such attributes from being freely chosen, and therefore undermines both their credence as a set of virtues, and any possibility that students will be successful in developing them.

Another factor that Aristotle states has to be present in order for virtues to be developed is that they have to be chosen for their own sake (NE: 1105a 31-32). By this he means that certain skills or qualities cannot be developed as a means to an end, as a way of furthering something else or to reach a certain goal. Therefore, through an Aristotelian lens, graduate attributes will only be meaningful if each individual student chooses to engage in their development, and if this decision has been made purely because they want to gain the skills, not for any external reason, such as increasing employability. In a similar way to the choice problem, even if with some students this is the case, the universities themselves often choose the qualities that become their graduate attributes because of the appeal they have to employers. With this being the underlying motive, it remains that they will never be developed purely for their own sake. This all calls into question whether graduate attributes can

be confidently claimed to be a guaranteed learning outcome when completing a degree. It also undermines the notion that graduate attributes might be a set of virtues to be developed.

Graduate attributes have been renowned as being difficult to measure, and therefore their level of success is illusive. The Australian Government Department for Teaching recognised the assessment of graduate attributes as a complex and challenging undertaking and one that is often met with limited success, especially when considered on an institutional level (DEST, 2002). This is because the acquisition of skills and qualities cannot be measured in individuals in the same way that knowledge, for example, can be quantified through standardised testing.

It is an interesting question: are things only valuable if they can be measured? Is the whole concept diminishing the purpose of university education? In order for institutions to confidently claim that all of their graduates will leave possessing a specific set of skills and qualities, their application needs to be consistent across different disciplines and across all members of staff. Clarke and Burdett (2007) emphasise the difficulty of this, arguing that it is hardly surprising that with the difficulty of their assessment, academics have sometimes found the exclusion of graduate attributes from their assessment plans the most rational response. This highlights the issue that many academics have chosen to abandon graduate attributes in their teaching because they feel that they are neither necessary nor relevant to their discipline, or that they are simply more problematic than they are meaningful.

This is something that universities have tried to overcome in Australia by particular courses having their own set of graduate attributes in addition or as an alternative to the university's generic graduate attributes. However, there is the concern here that it then just becomes confusing and counterproductive to have this generic skills set in the first place (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014). In addition to this, Bhaskar, Danermark and Price (2017) state that there is little evidence that programmes which incentivise narrow, tick-box behaviour are beneficial, and this would of course be counter intuitive to the Aristotelian logic of virtue ethics that graduate attributes align with. If this is the case, then, it would seem that the most rational response would be to abandon the notion of graduate attributes altogether, since spending time developing something

that has been shown to have little benefit would appear to be a waste of valuable time. This is a stance many academics have already taken.

Since universities state graduate attributes as a guaranteed outcome at the completion of a degree, it is important to consider whether this is possible in practice. It would seem near impossible to agree a generic set of skills and have every individual studying every discipline leave university possessing that exact skillset. There is a great deal of variation in the ways in which academics not only interpret or define graduate attributes, but also in how committed they are to particular approaches to developing graduate attributes, or indeed to whether they think they should be taught at all (Barrie, 2004). With this being the case there are already inconsistencies present with graduate attributes, which you could argue, leaves their acquisition completely down to luck. If some academics are deciding not to even consider graduate attributes in their teaching, and yet a number of their students still leave university possessing these skills, it could be said that these individuals would have developed these specific skills regardless of their environment, and that it is more a result of their past experiences, characteristics or nature than any external factor.

At times, there are high or perhaps unrealistic expectations of universities to guarantee that their students possess the desirable skills identified in the graduate attributes adopted by institutions. The government, for example, expects evidence of graduate attribute achievement because of the links made with the knowledge economy, innovation, and national wellbeing (Knight & Page, 2007).

Nagarajan and Edwards (2014) suggest a more reasonable approach to this issue. They argue that it makes more sense to state that graduates will be provided with as many opportunities as possible to acquire and develop these skills during the course of their studies, rather than assuming they can be guaranteed. By doing this, the institutions are not setting unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved, and are allowing for individual discrepancies, but are still showing graduate attributes to be of value. This approach also makes the individual student responsible for the development of these skills, which is more valuable when looking at them in terms of employability and strength of character. The issue that arises here, however, is that university courses all differ in length and coverage of content, just to name a few things, and this complicates the task of creating an overall approach to the

development of these skills. Something that could be considered, especially with looking at graduate attributes as a type of virtue-building programme, is whether they are a disguised form of moral education. Hand (2017), for example, would argue that we should educate students *about* morality rather than *in* it. What he means here is that we should make them aware of a broad range of moral codes and justificatory arguments, encourage them to subject these to critical scrutiny, and then invite them to subscribe to whichever code they take to believe in the strongest. This follows the prior argument that, if graduate attributes are to exist, academics should be taking the time to educate their students on the different qualities first and then giving them the choice as to whether or not they are going to engage with the programme, or indeed just parts of it.

Conclusion

Overall, I have argued that graduate attributes fail as a guaranteed outcome of a student successfully leaving their university education. As previously discussed, from an Aristotelian perspective, there are issues regarding choice, awareness and practice. Here, I questioned whether universities are actually providing students with opportunities to learn about what their graduate attributes are and how they might develop them. I also argued that these skills are only going to be meaningfully acquired if students are actively choosing to partake in their development and if they are doing this simply to gain these specific skills. Without explicit pedagogical effort, and input from individual students about their own development, the skills lose value.

I have also shown that a significant selling point of graduate attributes is that universities are seen to be promoting graduate employability. However, this undermines the concept of graduate attributes as virtues, since they need to be developed for their own sake, and not treated as a means to an end.

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