

# GENERIC ATTRIBUTES: AN AGENDA FOR REFORM OR CONTROL?

**Janet Jones**

University of Sydney

*[jjones@mail.usyd.edu.au](mailto:jjones@mail.usyd.edu.au)*

In the last decade, the concept of a set of generic skills, qualities and attributes that support lifelong learning has become firmly placed on the national and international higher education agenda. Higher education institutions in the UK, Canada, the USA, South Africa and Australia, in response to external pressures from the employment and government sectors, have been involved in major efforts to improve the quality of graduate outcomes. Whether this effort has been, or indeed should be, driven by educational, economic, political or social factors is a complex issue and one which continues to stimulate considerable debate across the higher education, employment and government sectors. Critics argue that the pursuit of the goal of graduates with desirable generic attributes and skills, equipped to participate effectively in society for life, is either unrealistic (Kemp and Seagraves 1995; Drummond, Nixon & Wiltshire 1997; Preston 1999) or a 'wasteful chimera-hunt'...which 'should now be abandoned' (Hyland and Johnson 1998, p.163). However, institutional policies and statements of generic attributes have led to changes in the curriculum and pedagogy of both academic departments and learning centres, as universities race to redefine their concept of 'graduateness' to

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stake out their market niche. This paper is intended as a background paper on key issues in the generic attributes agenda in Universities in Australia. The impact of this agenda on learning centres will form the basis for discussion at the conference presentation.

**Keywords:** *generic attributes, key skills, higher education*

## Introduction

A graduate of the University of South Australia is prepared for lifelong learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice.

Graduate Qualities pamphlet <http://unisanet.unisa.edu.au/gradquals/>  
[Accessed 18 May 2000].

In the last decade, the concept of a set of generic skills, qualities and attributes that support lifelong learning has become firmly placed on the national and international higher education agenda. Higher education institutions in the UK, Canada, the USA, South Africa and Australia, in response to external pressures from the employment and government sectors, have been involved in major efforts to improve the quality of graduate outcomes. Whether this effort has been, or indeed should be, driven by educational, economic, political or social factors is a complex issue and one which continues to stimulate considerable debate across the higher education, employment and government sectors. The exponential expansion of knowledge, changes to the nature of work and careers, the interface between education and employment, the marketisation of education, as well as the increasingly diverse nature and size of the student population, combined with shrinking government funding and increased accountability, are all factors which have exerted an influence on the development of generic attributes within the higher education sector. Critics argue that the pursuit of the goal of graduates with desirable generic attributes and skills, equipped to participate effectively in society for life, is either unrealistic (Kemp and Seagraves 1995; Adamson & Hunt 1996; Drummond, Nixon & Wiltshire 1997; Preston 1999) or

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a 'wasteful chimera-hunt'...which 'should now be abandoned' (Hyland and Johnson 1998, p.163).

It is worth noting that different terminology exists both within Australia and overseas to describe these attributes and skills (Barrie & Jones, 1999). Terms such as generic/core/key/transferable competencies, attributes or capabilities are used interchangeably. While the terms and their definitions vary considerably, the categories of skills and attributes typically relate to (1) the acquisition of a body of disciplinary knowledge, (2) the critical understanding which comes from the communication, application and evaluation of a body of knowledge, (3) the commitment to ethical action and social responsibility, and (4) a capacity for employment and lifelong learning (Gibbs et al 1994; Nunan 1999). In the remainder of this paper, the term 'generic attributes' will be used as a generic term to describe graduate learning outcomes.

Universities worldwide in their policies and statements of generic attributes frequently refer to lifelong learning as a desirable outcome of higher education. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the evolution and breadth of the concept of lifelong learning, except in so far as the concept relates to generic attributes. What I intend to do here is to highlight the key social, economic, political and educational factors which underpin the concept of generic attributes in higher education. This analysis will serve as a backdrop for the discussion at the conference of two major issues: the extent to which these key factors are competing or mutually reinforcing; and the extent to which the pursuit of the goal of generic attributes has become a dominating or a liberating agenda for institutional policy, curriculum reform and pedagogy in today's universities. By examining some of the assumptions about generic attributes which underlie statements and policies within universities and reports from the government and employment sectors, I will attempt to show how these assumptions have evolved over the last decade as a result of major social, economic and political change. Although this discussion will be largely confined to the Australian context, it will also draw on events in the global context, with particular reference to events in the UK.

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## **Generic attributes statements and policies in universities: the social dimension**

Statements of generic attributes developed within academic communities are similar in some ways to employer-developed lists of skills, yet the former tend to retain a distinct academic flavour. Indeed, in one sense it can be argued that universities have always been concerned with students' generic attributes, albeit implicitly, in so far as they aspired to produce socially responsible citizens with inquiring well-cultivated intellects. The following words, spoken by Rev Dr John Woolley at the inauguration of the University of Sydney, are not too far removed from the claims and aspirations found in statements of generic attributes in universities today.

Our undergraduates...will, we may reasonably hope, possess a well-cultivated and vigorous understanding; they will have formed the habit of thinking at once with modesty and independence; they will not be in danger of mistaking one branch of science for the whole circle of knowledge, nor of unduly exaggerating the importance of those studies which they select as their own. Above all, they will have attained the truest and most useful result of human knowledge, the consciousness and confession of their comparative ignorance (Woolley 1862, p 21 in Candy et al 1994, p. iv).

It should be acknowledged that, embedded within generic attributes policies and mission statements in English-speaking universities, is the rhetoric of university education as a social good, which, Coady and Miller (1993, p. 40) argue, partly stems from the liberal ideals of John Henry Newman's seminal work, *The Idea of a University* (1947). Today, the underlying social ideals of a university education can be found in statements of generic attributes across the world. Typical of such statements are the following:

A graduate of the University of Sydney 'should strive for tolerance and integrity and acknowledge their personal responsibility for...ethical behaviour towards others'.

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A graduate of the University of South Australia 'is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and a citizen'.

In the US, 'effective citizenship' is one of the eight specific 'abilities' of the graduate of Alverno College and in the UK, the graduate of the University of North London 'will be able to act appropriately in the context of social and cultural diversity'.

Despite the social idealism inherent in such claims about graduate outcomes at the institutional level, debate continues among academic staff as to whether it is possible or even desirable for any curriculum or pedagogy to achieve such goals. One can teach a student about ethics and social responsibility but there is no guarantee that the graduate of any university will emerge with these qualities and attributes.

### **Economic and political factors underlying generic attributes**

It is necessary to go beyond the social idealism embedded in the concept of generic attributes to examine more closely the political and economic factors of the last decade which have influenced its rapid rise. The 'employability' agenda remains high in the discussion of generic attributes found in reports from the government and employment sectors. While the rhetoric of 'social responsibility' is perhaps not so apparent in these reports, except under the guise of lifelong learning, what is apparent is the perception that universities have an overriding mandate to produce graduates who are well equipped to take their place as contributors to the workforce. The next section will explore the extent to which universities in Australia and the UK have been influenced by this agenda.

In Australia, key elements of the concept of generic skills in higher education can be found in government-commissioned reports such the Karmel Committee report, with the notion of 'general competencies' for primary and secondary education, (Karmel 1985) and the Finn report (1991), with the notion of 'employment-related key competencies', subsequently clarified in the Mayer Committee report (1992). Although these competencies were proposed for post-compulsory education and training, the higher education sector was at the same time under pressure from the government and business sectors to improve the quality of 'generic' skills in students

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in order to contribute to the student's employability and capacity for lifelong learning. Two major government reports are significant in this regard. First, in 1992 the Higher Education Council (HEC) report, *Achieving Quality* (1992) claimed that 'the views of employers, professional bodies, students and staff of universities all converge when it comes to describing the desirable characteristics of graduates' which are 'the skills, personal attributes and values which should be acquired by all graduates regardless of their discipline or field of study' (HEC 1992, p. 20). Second, a later HEC commissioned report, *Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education*, (Candy et al 1994) stressed the need for universities to be more accountable for the development in students of the generic skills and attributes which support lifelong learning. Both of these reports led to a large injection of government funds for universities from 1993-1997 to improve the quality of teaching and graduate outcomes. The Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) and later, the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) funded innovation in curriculum and pedagogy (For details see CAUT and CUTSD Project reports, 1994-1996; Alexander and McKenzie, 1998). CAUT and CUTSD and current AUTC project reports will be available shortly on line at [http://www.autc.gov.au/in/in\\_cu.htm](http://www.autc.gov.au/in/in_cu.htm) [2001]). Despite innovative and creative projects addressing the development of generic attributes within disciplines, a higher education policy which supported their development and the wholehearted adoption by universities of formal policies of generic attributes, Clanchy and Ballard concluded in 1995 that there remained considerable barriers to the adoption of generic attributes in the curriculum. To date, there appears to be no convincing evidence that there has been a significant change in the graduate outcomes or curriculum practices of university education in Australia (Barrie and Jones 1999).

Similarly, reports from the government and business sectors have highlighted deficiencies in graduate outcomes, pointing to the need for improvement (Sinclair 1995). This year, a DETYA funded report conducted by AC Nielson Research entitled *Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills* (DETYA, 2000) set out to establish the extent of employer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the skill performance of new graduates from the University and TAFE sectors entering the labour market. The quantitative part of the study conducted a survey of employers

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across a wide range of businesses, industries and services to 'identify employers' attitudes to graduates' perceived skill deficiencies, where they occur, with the intention of developing policies to address these deficiencies' (p.61). The report identifies 25 'skills and competencies', categorised into 3 groups (p.56):

- 1) basic competencies such as literacy, numeracy, time management and basic computer skills;
- 2) basic skills such as leadership qualities, oral business communication skills, teamwork
- 3) academic skills such as capacity for independent and critical thinking, problem solving skills, creativity and flair;

They also identified other attributes such as enthusiasm, motivation, flexibility and adaptability.

Employers were asked to rank the skills in order of importance as well as to rate new graduates on their performance in the skills. Among the report's key findings were that although 'overall, the performance of new graduates employed appears to be reasonable, neither particularly low or high' (p. vii), 'the greatest skill deficiencies among new graduates were perceived to be in the areas of creativity and flair; oral business communication skills; and problem-solving', (p. viii); and 'that across all skill areas the University sector produced higher rating graduates', (p. viii). 'The highest rating graduates overall either had arts/humanities/social sciences qualifications or business/administration/economics qualifications', (p. ix). Several points of interest emerge from this report. First, there appears to be a clear convergence of the government and employment agendas in the delineation, measurement and analysis of a set of generic attributes deemed essential for successful employment and a clear focus on 'skills deficiency' and 'measurement'. Second, there is no discussion of how the list of skills and competencies was defined or differentiated, except to say that the list 'goes into more detail' (p. 61) than an earlier list devised for the Employer Satisfaction with Vocational Education and Training survey in 1997. Moreover, in the qualitative part of the study, which was based on an analysis of focus group discussion and interviews, employers ranked skills differently to their ranking in the

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quantitative part, placing 'academic achievement in a suitable discipline' as an indicator of 'intellectual capability, capacity to learn and motivation to pursue and achieve high goals' (p. 8) at the top of the list. Finally, the report mentions the need for 'skills for the future' (p. 8) as 'the world of work is expected to change rapidly in response to changing social and environmental conditions and technological change'. To this end, the report claims, graduates will need to 'demonstrate adaptability and flexibility' and an awareness of 'the need for continuous learning and retraining throughout their careers', (p. 8). Many of these key words can be found in current university statements and policies of generic attributes. Therefore, there is an emerging agenda which appears dominant in all sectors – that of the marketplace. Graduates and their generic attributes are marketable commodities.

## **Performance indicators and generic attributes**

It is undeniable that government funding in higher education is becoming increasingly linked to performance indicators such as the level of employer satisfaction with graduate skills. Other measures such as the level of student satisfaction with their university courses are used by the government and higher education sectors as an indicator of performance. Since 1993, the level of graduates' satisfaction with their course in terms of the acquisition of generic skills has been measured each year by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) in the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). Results from the CEQ are now used as one of the three major data sources for the performance indicators for higher education institutions. Another key indicator is the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) which measures the proportion of graduates in full-time employment of those who are available for full-time employment. Yet, another version of the CEQ is currently being piloted for postgraduates. This will provide the opportunity 'to score universities, faculties and departments' ...on areas such as 'supervision, infrastructure, intellectual climate and generic skills development' (DETYA 1998, p. 2). Within Universities standardised surveys are being used as part of their internal Quality Assurance agenda. The University of Sydney now has an SCEQ (Student Course Experience Questionnaire) which gathers data on students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and student learning in their degree courses as well as their

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perceptions of the administration and student support services. A number of the questions on this survey relate to students' perceptions of how their course has helped to develop their generic skills. The stated purpose of the SCEQ is 'to provide the University community with a basis for strategic, faculty level academic development and curriculum review to further enhance the quality of teaching and student learning' , <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/SCEQ/> (1999). The underlying , albeit implicit, agenda here appears to be that generic attributes can be not only defined but measured.

## **The Key Skills agenda in the UK**

In the UK, the National Inquiry into the future of Higher Education (Dearing 1997) boosted interest in key skills. Earlier in 1992, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), developed a national framework for assessing and recording achievement in the following core skills:

- Application of Number
- Communication
- Information Technology
- Improving Own Learning and Performance (Learning how to Learn)
- Problem Solving.

While this framework was originally developed for use within post 16 training and vocational courses, one of the recommendations of the Dearing report was that institutions should 'develop for each programme they offer...the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of : knowledge and understanding..., key skills..., cognitive skills..., and subject-specific skills...'. Although there is general agreement that the development of key skills is 'a good thing', there have been criticisms of key skills projects and the assumptions underlying them (Barrie and Jones, 1999). There may not be any clear idea of what key skills are wanted for and the fundamental problem is the lack of transferability of skills (Whitston 1998). Despite the introduction of innovative practices in some areas, as a whole, the higher education

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sector has not effectively addressed the issue of transferable skills (Kemp & Seagraves 1995; Hyland and Johnson 1998). As in Australia, reports from the employment sector still point out graduates' deficiencies in skills (Harvey and Green 1993; .Harvey et al. 1997).

Nevertheless, over the last few years, there has been significant government support for universities in the UK to develop key skills through the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative and funding from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and the UK Higher Education Funding Councils. This has led to a number of projects in institutions across the country, which have sought to implement key skills frameworks and policies, develop curricula integrating key skills into subject content, assess students' key skills upon entry to university and incorporate the use of information and communication technologies to support the development of students' key skills ( for a report on key skills work in the UK see Jones, 1999).

Some universities, notably the Open University (OU) and the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside (ULH) incorporate the National (NCVQ) Key Skills Units in their degree programs while others have developed their own key skills frameworks and policies, using the national framework as a starting point. There are also systems in place in some universities to list skills as part of the degree transcript or to include them in a separate transcript and to implement a management information system to track students' skills achievement across courses.

## **Concluding comments**

It should not be forgotten that the Australian and British reports outlined above have been formulated amid a period of major economic and political change, to which I can only allude to here in passing. Educational policy making and educational reform in Australia, as elsewhere in the West, have evolved against a backdrop of restructuring of the public sector along corporate managerialist lines to bring about 'greater efficiency and effectiveness in policy and delivery' (Lingard and Rizvi in Welch 1996). Although it can be argued that there are commonalities in educational reforms and policies across the globe, as Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998) point out, these policies and reforms should not be analysed in a decontextualised way,

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without recognising their 'distinctive historical and cultural dimensions'. Clearly, generic attributes policies in Australia and the UK have their similarities, but these are mediated by contextual differences such as the nature and size of the workforce; reforms in the higher education and economic sectors; changing political ideologies; and the differing impact of globalisation on each country.

In conclusion, there is clearly a global agenda in higher education, which prioritises the identification of skills and competencies, and gives considerable attention to the measurement of outcomes and performance relating to these skills. It has resulted in institutional policies and statements of generic attributes, and has led to major changes in curriculum and pedagogy, which are largely geared towards the employability of graduates. Performance indicators linked to generic attributes will increasingly determine the level of government funding to universities in Australia and elsewhere. Australian universities are currently redefining their concept of 'graduateness' to stake out their 'market niche'. A report by the Australian Technology Network (ATN) cluster of Universities (RMIT, QUT, UTS, USA and Curtin), entitled, *Five Universities: One Vision -Generic Capabilities of ATN University Graduates* (2000) provides a blueprint for action in curriculum reform and staff development relating to generic attributes. On the one hand, this strategy may be seen as a cynical exercise in the race for students and funding while on the other, it may offer an opportunity for creative and inspired pedagogical reform, which will lead to better outcomes for all concerned. Indeed, it should be argued that educational policy and practice 'needs to be informed by a desire to go beyond the mere technical fit between graduates and the workplace, and allow itself to be inspired by new ideas, and new ways of seeing' (Soucek 1995, p.241).

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