

Conceptions of Generic Graduate Attributes

A phenomenographic investigation of academics' understandings of generic graduate attributes in the context of contemporary university courses and teaching

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP / ORIGINALITY

I certify that this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract:

In recent years Universities have attempted to articulate the generic outcomes of the educational experiences they provide, beyond the content knowledge that is taught. In Australia these outcomes have come to be known as generic skills or generic graduate attributes, although they are also referred to by a range of other terms. Much like aspects of a mission statement, universities have claimed that these are the core outcomes of higher education at the particular institution and that every graduate of every degree will possess these. However there is considerable variability in what is claimed by different institutions, both in terms of which outcomes are included and the nature of these outcomes, ranging as they do from low level technical skills to complex personal attributes and values. As outcomes, this variability is magnified in the inconsistency with which such attributes are addressed in the curriculum and, where they are addressed, in the variety of pedagogical approaches employed. The observation of such variability was the starting point of this study.

This research is broadly situated within the phenomenographic perspective on teaching and learning (Marton & Booth 1997). In the investigation described in this thesis, phenomenographic analysis is used to identify and describe the qualitatively different ways in which a group of academics, from different disciplines, understand the teaching and learning of graduate attributes in the context of their own courses and teaching.

Four qualitatively distinct conceptions of the nature of graduate attributes and their place amongst the outcomes of a university education are identified. These are related to six distinct understandings of the way in which students develop such attributes at university. The relationships between these two hierarchical aspects of academics' understandings of graduate attributes, (conceptions of what it is that is taught/learnt and conceptions of how it is taught/learnt) constitute seven logical and internally consistent understandings of the phenomenon. These seven understandings represent three broad approaches to the teaching and learning of graduate attributes.

The conceptions identified in this analysis provide a way of making sense of the variety of policy statements and the range of curricula approaches reported in the literature. Moreover, these conceptions of graduate attributes provide a tool to support current attempts to implement systematic curriculum reform across a university.

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