

**The acquisition, development and use of generic
attributes: perceptions of new university graduates**

Ina Te Wiata

Doctor of Philosophy

2009

Certificate of Authorship and Originality

I certify that the work in 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.

Production Note:
Signature removed prior to publication.

Ina Te Wiata

Acknowledgements

This project has been many years in the making, and completing it while living a nomadic lifestyle and working for the majority of the time would not have been possible without the support of many people. First I must express my undying gratitude to my son, Jack who has shared my wandering life and all the ups and downs that go with both it and a research project such as this. At eleven years old he has not had as much of my time as he might have had, but has never complained; instead he has been supportive and encouraging of my “bonnet” work, and the need to complete it. Next I would like to thank other members of my family and friends on both sides of the Tasman, in particular my sister Joy and my critical friend Phil Ker, both of whom provided me with the courage and energy to continue this journey over the many years it has taken. Thanks are also due to the two members of my research support group, Marianne Tremaine, and Hine Waitere. These two people, along with my colleague Debra Wilson helped keep me keep the finish line in sight. Anne Austen assisted with the proof reading and I am grateful for her help. I would also like to thank Josephine Regan for her assistance with the layout of this document. She provided me with crucial support at a time when stress levels are invariably high. My colleague Anna Weatherstone also deserves a mention as it was she who provided the support in my workplace that enabled me to make the final adjustments to this thesis in what was a fairly tight timeline.

Thanks too to my colleagues in the University of New South Wales, Univesity of Canberra, University of Wollongong, Central Queensland University and Massey University, who gave their time and support. I am of course

immensely grateful to my participants. Without them there would be no stories, no research. They gave their time generously and provided me with many wonderful insights. On another level, my thanks to my supervisor Paul Hager for his faith in me, and his patience, wise counsel, insightful feedback and guidance over the many years this project has taken to come to fruition.

Contents

Certificate of Authorship and Originality	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Contents	iv
Abstract	vii
1. Introduction	1
2. Background	6
2.1 Worldwide influences	6
2.1.1 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	8
2.2 Australian influences	18
2.2.1 Early initiatives	21
2.2.2 Industry initiated reports	26
2.2.3 Education sector initiatives	31
2.3 The University influences	36
3. Perplexities and ambiguities	41
3.1 Generic attributes	41
3.1.1 Misunderstandings and uncertainties	41
3.1.2 Consequences of confusion	51
3.1.3 Working through the confusion	53
3.2 Transfer	55
3.2.1 Misapprehensions and doubts	55
3.2.2 Establishing the character and incidence	61
3.2.3 Seeking a degree of clarity	62
3.3 Communities of practice	64
3.3.1 Original thinking	64
3.3.2 Rethinking the meaning	66
3.3.3 A meaning for this study	68
4. The Study	71
4.1 Terms used	71
4.2 Selection of generic attributes	72
4.3 Outline of participants	74

4.4	Position	76
5.	The Design	78
5.1	Introduction	78
5.2	Research approaches - including both the position of this study and the method chosen	81
5.3	Considerations of this study, including, circumstances, conduct, ethical issues and termination	90
5.4	Sampling	96
5.5	Data collection methods	101
5.6	Validity, reliability, credibility, triangulation, and crystallization	118
5.7	Data analysis and processing, including the emergence of relationships and themes	126
6.	The Stories	130
6.1	Overview	131
6.1.1	Overview of participants and findings	131
6.1.2	Similarities	135
6.1.3	Differences	136
6.1.4	Other generic attributes and qualities	137
6.2	Participants' stories	139
6.3	Summary	187
7.	Meanings	189
7.1	Introduction	190
7.2	Acquisition and development of generic attributes	192
7.2.1	Where were generic attributes acquired and developed?	192
7.2.2	What was learnt in the classroom?	195
7.2.3	Why was not the acquisition and development of generic attributes in the "classroom" as successful as it might have been?	196
7.3	Use of generic attributes in the workplace	202
7.4	Importance of generic attributes in the workplace	208
8.	Reconsiderations	214
8.1	Introduction	215
8.2	Moving forward	220
8.2.1	Reconsidering theoretical or conceptual aspects ...	220
8.2.2	Reconsidering aspects related to ethos or culture..	222
8.2.3	Reconsidering empirical or practical aspects	223
8.3	Final comment	226
9.	References	227

10. Appendices		
Interview Protocols - Phase 1		266
- Phase 2		268

List of figures and tables

Table I	Key initiatives in generic skill development in Australia...	20
Table II	Taxonomy for far transfer	63
Table III	Participants' profiles	75
Table IV	Participants' characteristics	100
Table V	Participants available for initial interview only	132
Table VI	Participants available for both initial and follow-up interviews and discussion	133
Figure 1	Differences in experiences	134
Table VII	Comparison of coached reflection vs reflection-in-action	187
Table VIII	Generic attributes in the workplace	203

Abstract

This study explores the perceptions new graduates hold of the acquisition, development and use of a specified set of generic attributes (critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understandings and communication).

The belief most often espoused in Australian universities, through their policies and practices, is that generic attributes that are useful in the workplace are able to be identified, labelled, taught, and developed over the course of an undergraduate programme. The plethora of literature related to generic attributes has generally supported this view but, for the most part has omitted the student or graduate voice. It has been the views of university staff, employer groups, and government agencies that have created the environment in which students are considered able to leave university with a specified bundle of generic attributes that they can use in the workplace.

The approach to this enquiry is essentially a case study. It studies a collection of individual cases - recent university graduates. This research project relies heavily for its data on the technique of interviewing, which includes, an initial interview, and a reflective interview focusing on a critical incident. Follow up communication (via phone and email) continued for up to two years with some of the participants.

A number of participants' stories are detailed, and the data suggests that generic attributes can be viewed in three different ways including, a naïve view, a sophisticated view, and an antigeneric view. A number of themes are also

developed and used to help consider some of the meanings generic attributes had for participants.

The findings of this study suggest that the university classroom may not be the environment in which students develop the generic attributes that are useful in the workplace. Furthermore, there is a strong indication that new graduates place a high value on the development and deployment of generic attributes in the workplace - the level at which participants are able to utilise their generic attributes plays an important role in job satisfaction and motivation.

The implications for both universities and workplaces as a result of the findings of this study are discussed in the final chapter. Certainly closer relationships between universities and employers would be beneficial in ensuring not only that the voices of students/new graduates are heard but that action is taken so that the most effective and efficient processes are implemented for all parties concerned.