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Developing generic skills and attributes of international students: the (ir)relevance of the Australian university experience

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The mandatory inclusion of generic skills and attributes in policy documents of Australian universities has attracted considerable debate and controversy. One aspect neglected in the discussion is whether generic skills and attributes defined by Western society are relevant for all students, including international students returning to their home country after graduation. Using an interpretive research framework of narrative inquiry and iterative content analysis supported by participant observation, the findings from this study suggest that the Australian university experience is a minor contributor to the development of generic skills and attributes among international students and that the relevance of these generic skills and attributes to the professional careers of international students is dependent on the social and political context, culture, opportunity and individual status within the community.

Keywords: graduate attributes; higher education; international students; narrative analysis

Introduction

An emphasis on public accountability in higher education in Australia has led to a requirement for universities to provide evidence that higher education is producing employable ‘global’ graduates. To achieve this, and perhaps unaware of the gap between aim and outcome, Australian universities have been mandated to produce graduates with core generic skills and attributes (described as ‘generic skills’ hereafter) relevant to employers and the Australian community and are committed to lifelong learning (De La Harpe & Radloff, 2008; De La Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Woodhouse, 1999; Woodhouse & Stella, 2008).

Such evidence is difficult to produce. While it is possible to identify the cognitive and affective skills and attributes that are the outcome of higher education by using pre- and post-course psychometric tests (Boesel & Friedland, 1998; Boylan, 2002; Flowers, Osterlind, Pascarella, & Pierson, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), it is often simply assumed that specific teaching and/or assessment strategies (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000; Hoddinot & Young, 2001), or the characteristics of a particular institution (Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001), or social interactions with peers (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1999; Milem, 1998; Newcomb & Wilson, 1966) have a positive effect on the development of core generic skills and attributes.

It is also difficult to demonstrate that generic skills are acquired solely as a result of university education (Boylan, 2002; Wolf, 1991), that they are transferable to the workplace.
A. Campbell

(Campbell, 2009; Wang, Ayres, & Huyton, 2009), or that they satisfy employer requirements (Assiter, 1995; Hager, Holland, & Beckett, 2002; Nunan, 1999).

There is also controversy about the extent to which universities can (or should) be held accountable for development of the generic skills of their graduates (Barnett, 1998; Clanchy & Ballard, 1995; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Tribe, 1996); what generic skills are, or should be (Barnett, 1990; Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999); whether generic skills should be taught independently, or as part of an integrated curriculum (Bennett et al., 1999; Gibbs, Rust, Jenkins, & Jacques, 1994; Moore & Hough, 2007); what university lecturers understand by generic skills (Barrie, 2006); and whether, when and how generic skills should be taught (Bolton & Hyland, 2003; Barrie & Jones, 1999; Hager et al., 2002; Jenkins, 2000).

Determining which aspect of the university experience best contributes to generic skills development is also problematical (Clarke & Burdett, 2007). Some claim this is a particular course within a university (Al-Mahmood & Gruba, 2007), others a particular subject within a discipline (de Lange, Jackling, & Gut, 2006), others a specifically re-designed curriculum (Treleaven & Voola, 2008), and others a specific teaching approach (Alcock & Alcock, 2006), or a particular teacher (Holmes, 2000).

Where the assessment of generic skills has been attempted, this has generally been based on data from students in Western countries (Drummond, Nixon, & Wiltshire, 1998; Gauntlett, 2006; Leung & Chan, 2003; Thakur & Hourigan, 2007). Although international students make up almost 20 per cent of total student enrolments at Australian universities there has been little consideration of the possibility that generic skills that are valued by Australian employers and society will also be valued in cultural contexts with different values (Campbell, 2009).

In view of the lack of analysis of this aspect of the mandatory inclusion of generic skills development in Australian university policies, the key research questions posed in this study are:

- What is the impact of the formal Australian higher education context in the development of international students’ ‘core’ attributes?
- How relevant are these core attributes to the international students when they return home?

Research methodology

The research was located within an interpretive research framework of narrative inquiry as interpretive research can be sensitive to individual meanings and explore a diversity of meanings, while ‘massive surveys with pre-coded slots to be ticked and computer analysed will not tap into this information’ (Wearing, 1998, p. 188). A narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995) explores individuals’ understandings of their experience in the context of their everyday lives by identifying common themes across narratives, while simultaneously looking to the wider social and cultural resources on which people draw to help them make sense of their lives. This approach is ideally suited to research where the aims are the understanding of complex, multi-dimensional experiences.

As Barrie (2006) has observed, there is a great deal of similarity in the core generic attributes across Australian universities. The core attributes on which this study focuses are described on one university’s website as:

1. Valuing and respecting different views
2. Being confident in yourself and your own skill and knowledge
3. Showing a commitment to ongoing self development
4. Being an independent thinker and agent for change
5. Having the confidence to challenge existing ideas

Like most Australian universities, this university attracts many international students (approximately 20 per cent of enrolments) and actively markets its courses in the global marketplace. Modes of delivery include on-campus study in Australia, and in offshore intensive and fully online programs. It is mandatory for academic staff to list in the anticipated outcomes for each subject the core generic skills and attributes that will be developed. It is also mandatory to indicate the specific skills and attributes that will (hopefully) be the outcome of completing each assessment task in the subject.

The exploratory nature of this study and the focus on individual experience suggested that convenience sampling was an appropriate method of obtaining data (Minchienello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). The initial approach was made by contacting international alumni who had remained in contact with the university. To determine whether or not the university experience alone could account for the development of generic attributes, the final selection of 11 participants was made to cover a range of elapsed time since graduation (1–21 years); an approximate gender balance (six female and five male students); approximate undergraduate/postgraduate balance (five undergraduate; six postgraduate) from a range of social, cultural and political contexts. The small size of the sample, the sampling procedure itself and the selected methodology do not permit generalisation beyond the confines of this study, although findings from the study may well suggest areas for further research.

Data for the study was obtained over a period of six months. To obtain a greater sense of the participants’ current professional contexts, the researcher spent up to a week with each person, participating as far as possible in their everyday activities, before conducting semi-structured, open-ended conversations that lasted between two and four hours. This included accompanying them in professional and leisure activities, sharing their meals, meeting their families, listening to their concerns, and living in local accommodation. In two cases it also meant living in the family home and interacting with the extended family. This sustained participation in their daily lives provided a context for the narratives and the basis for shaping the conversations, which were conducted toward the end of the observation period.

The conversations were transcribed verbatim, returned to the participant for editing and then returned to the researcher. Participation in the study was voluntary, all participants provided informed consent and the study complied with the university’s code of ethics. Each final narrative was analysed using iterative content analysis procedures (Entwhistle & Marton, 1994, p. 166). Significant phrases and key words were identified, clustered and categorised as themes, supported by direct reference to comments made in transcripts. Commonalities and differences in themes across the conversations were identified and assessed for congruence with the five core attributes identified in the policy documents of the university and/or the social context in which this attribute appeared to have been developed.

Although the narratives were considered ‘factual’ in the view of the participants, it should be noted that self-perception plays a major role in recollected narratives that are shaped by the author (Hazan & Raz, 1997), but as Alasuutari points out:

When we look at cultural distinctions in qualitative material, we are not concerned with the truthfulness of the information gained from, for example, a participant. . . . When analysing
cultural distinctions and their interrelations, we study what classifications and distinctions a text contains, and how it this constructs reality. (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 63)

The analysis of transcripts in this study is therefore the analysis of a (re)construction of perceived experience, shaped by the identity of the participant, their relationship with the researcher, the selectivity of their memories and the researcher’s own values and beliefs.

Findings
The impact of the formal Australian university experience in the development of the generic attributes of the participants in this study was minimal. Of the five attributes that are the focus of this study:

- **1 – valuing and respecting different views** within his or her own society – was developed by the experience of living and studying in a foreign country, although not necessarily by the formal university experience;
- **2 – being confident in yourself and your own skill and knowledge** – was somewhat enhanced by the formal university experience, but only among those who had at first lacked confidence in an unfamiliar cultural and academic environment;
- **3 – showing a commitment to ongoing learning** – was developed by all participants largely as a result of parental influence and expectations, and well before becoming an international student;
- **5 and 4 – the extent to which the individual had invested in having the confidence to challenge existing ideas and being an independent thinker and agent for change** – was related more closely to the cultural, socio-economic and/or political status of the individual within their own society than the university experience.

The relevance of these attributes to the workplace practices of the individual depended on:

- the status of the participant within their own society;
- the extent to which the home culture had values similar to those underlying the attributes of the Australian university;
- the extent to which individual had invested in acquiring Western cultural capital.

**Valuing and respecting different views**
The findings from this study confirm that studying and interacting socially with students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds makes the greatest contribution to the development of this generic skill (Pascarella et al. 2001; Chang, 1999; Milem, 1998; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001). Most participants commented that interaction with students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds was a major benefit of studying in a foreign country, not only in terms of broadening intellectual horizons, but also in challenging existing beliefs and attitudes and accepting that students from other cultural backgrounds had skills, knowledge, values and beliefs that were different from their own.

While it is possible that time has filtered out negative experiences, the participants in this study generally described the experience of studying in Australia as positive. This is not always the case, as Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Liu (1998) point out. Studying in an unfamiliar country is challenging, and there is a wealth of literature describing the difficulties
encountered by international students studying in Western countries (Campbell, 1995; Chuong, 1999; Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Ee Lin, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Leung & Chan, 2003; Novera, 2004; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003; Thakur & Hourigan, 2007). These difficulties were also encountered by the participants in this study; difficulties such as encountering a language that is not as familiar as you expected it to be, or classes where your own skills and knowledge are not valued.

There was a general consensus that adjusting to an unfamiliar environment was more difficult than anticipated, and that doing so took time, even though on reflection the experience was regarded as positive. Although the negative experiences were recalled, the participants claimed to have learned from them, using them to adjust more easily to new situations and realising that the ability to do this has given them new confidence and was therefore a positive outcome.

**Being confident in yourself and your own skill and knowledge**

Although the individual early experiences of the participants were vastly different, there was a strong theme in each of the narratives related to the impact of adult models on the development of personal values, skills and attributes during childhood. Parents and teachers were key influences in the early development of this generic skill for all of the participants in the study. Both the socio-economic level of the parents relative to the rest of the local community and the educational level of the parents appeared to relate directly to the early development of this attribute, but equally important was the fact that the significant adults surrounding each child believed in the value of education, often making sacrifices so that their sons or daughters could do well at school.

For the participants from non-Western countries, the Australian university experience, particularly sharing student residences with students from many cultural and ethnic backgrounds, was beneficial in developing confidence in their own skills and knowledge. For some, the student experience in Australia was also a crucial factor in the development of their professional self-confidence. This was particularly relevant for students who initially lacked confidence in their own skills and knowledge, and whose increasing confidence was the result of positive interactions with members of staff, especially their supervisors. Although confident in their home environment, displacement to a foreign context undermined this self-confidence and created a high level of dependency on the support of Australian academic staff.

For example, when speaking of her earlier experiences, one participant described herself as an excellent student in one of the top schools in her country, proud of being head girl in her boarding school, and confident enough to approach the Prime Minister directly to intervene with the bank on her behalf, so that she could obtain a loan to finance her studies in Australia. This confidence evaporated when she was in an unfamiliar academic and cultural environment, faced with ways of learning that required a high degree of student autonomy and well developed information literacy skills. She commented that the process of rebuilding her confidence was slow, and that both the academic staff at the university and her part-time work as a respected and popular teacher assisted in the process.

This example demonstrates that being confident in yourself and your own skill and knowledge is strongly context-related. It was noticeable that all participants demonstrated extreme confidence (almost bossiness) when in their own cultural context, particularly when arranging what they considered appropriate experiences for the visiting researcher.
This was true even among those who described themselves as lacking in self-confidence while studying in Australia.

For those already confident in their own skills and knowledge before studying in Australia, the experience simply enhanced an existing generic skill. Those who were multilingual and appreciated living and working in different countries for the benefits it could bring in terms of learning, networking and providing entrepreneurial opportunities were ‘efficient intercultural learners’ (Leask, 2008, p. 125). They regarded changing cultural contexts as a learning opportunity, and realised that to successfully adapt to each culturally different environment, it is necessary to accept that different cultures value different attributes.

While the university experience may have helped the participants to become more confident in their own skills and knowledge, the analysis of their narratives indicated that these attributes were developed well before commencing their university studies in Australia, and while in Australia were largely a by-product of the informal aspects of the university experience. What is more significant is the ease with which this self-confidence can be undermined when a student transfers to a different cultural, academic and linguistic context. As the narratives demonstrated, having confidence in your own skills and knowledge is dependent on being in a professional, domestic, political and cultural context that values these skills and this knowledge. Realising this, and being able to develop different skills and acquire different knowledge relevant to an unfamiliar context, are perhaps more valuable generic skills and attributes (GS&A) than simply having confidence in your own skills and knowledge.

**Showing a commitment to ongoing self development**

That successful completion of a higher education course is likely to be related to a greater interest in further post-graduate or professional education is supported by the findings of this study, as all participants had continued their professional education after graduating. As Boylan (2002) points out, higher education students represent a sector of the population with relatively high intellectual ability and stronger than average motivation, two attributes also evident among the participants in this study. There is some evidence that the process of peer interaction with students who have similar attributes supports an already strong proclivity for lifelong learning among higher education students, one that continues well beyond graduation (Kezar, 2000).

From the analysis of these narratives it seemed that a commitment to continuing self-development was highly dependent on individual motivation, and that this motivation falls into two main categories: motivation for personal professional advantage and motivation for community benefit, although these are not mutually exclusive. To assume that the university experience alone generates the desire for further self-development among its alumni is problematic. From the narratives in this study, a background of successful schooling and parental support is a major advantage. The most significant contribution that the university experience made to a pre-existing commitment to ongoing self-development was to give the participants confidence in their ability to learn. Parents and teachers may have provided the initial motivation, but ultimately it was the individual who accepted the responsibility for their ongoing self-development.

**Being an independent thinker and agent for change**

This generic skill was closely correlated to the status of the individual in their own professional and cultural context, their academic status within the local community, the size of the community over which influence is extended, the nature of governance in that community...
and the cultural values of the community. For example, the person currently in a high-status Government position in his own country undoubtedly had the most influence as an agent for change and was extremely confident about challenging existing ideas. His early career demonstrated that he was an independent thinker long before studying in Australia and also long before being an independent thinker was safe in his own country. He has, however, had 21 years in which to achieve a position of influence and possessed internationally recognised academic qualifications at a time when few of his peers were aware of the benefit of this, and even fewer had the opportunity of acquiring them. Although he would probably not have achieved his current position of influence without his personal vision, intellect, ambition, entrepreneurial skills and strategic expertise, the extent to which these skills were developed by studying at an Australian university is open to question. As his personal narrative indicated, he possessed most of these generic skills well before leaving his home country.

In contrast, being an agent of change when you are not in a position of power and/or when the political system of your country discourages bottom-up change is very difficult, a point made by several participants working in countries where challenging the ideas of the country’s leaders is not advisable. While the extent to which the participants were willing to openly act as agents varied greatly depending on the specific social and political environment in their home country, there was evidence in the narratives that most were independent thinkers, even if some were reluctant to express their thoughts in public. The major difference in their roles as agents of change was the sphere of influence over which they have control.

It is possible that the university experience in Australia influenced the development of this graduate skill, but there is little evidence in the narratives to support this. Like most attributes, thinking independently and being an agent for change were attributes that were developed over time, in contexts where these attributes were valued, and with input from many different sources, including, but not limited to, Australian university education.

Having the confidence to challenge existing ideas

Of all generic skills this was the most culturally located. As several participants pointed out in their narratives, challenging existing ideas in their countries is not something you do unless you are a very senior member of the government and have strong support from your colleagues, or are prepared to risk your career. Ideas and policies in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries are formulated and disseminated by those in power and acted upon by those lower in the hierarchy. To challenge existing ideas may be done in private, among close friends that can be trusted, or among foreigners who insist that this is normal practice, but doing so in public is not advisable.

Western higher education places a great emphasis on encouraging students to challenge existing ideas. This is not the case in many other countries, and only two of the participants were in positions where they felt relatively safe in challenging existing ideas. Both participants hold high-status positions in their home country, and both were cautious in how much and how often they challenged existing ideas, particularly in public.

For example, one participant from a communist country described an occasion when he challenged the Government’s existing policy of having Russian as the key foreign language and suggested that to benefit the country, English should be the key foreign language. This may seem like both a visionary and courageous challenge of existing ideas, but it was made from within the Communist Party, and at a time when at least some Party
members were beginning to realise that the future economic development of the country was dependent on re-establishing trade relations with the Western world.

Without a specific context to trigger change, being an independent thinker and agent for change is more challenging. Another participant challenged the traditional subservient role of women in the economic development and decision-making in villages in her country, but explained that she takes great care to encourage change from within the existing social structures. As such, she is an agent of change, but is not so much a challenger of existing ideas as a subtle modeller of alternative strategies and practices that would benefit the village as a whole. She also regards her role of university lecturer as a way providing a role model for female students, acting as an agent for change not by confrontation, or challenge, but by example.

For the other participants, being independent thinkers – which from their narratives, most of them were – was separated from the necessity and desirability of being an agent for change. Most considered that they had limited opportunities of acting as agents for change outside their immediate professional environment. The main options available to them were to find employment that correlated with their beliefs, to wait until they reached a more influential position, or to change as much as they could within their limited sphere of influence. The extent to which the participants were independent thinkers and agents of change was so closely related to context, culture, individual status within the community and opportunity, that the impact of university education on the development and continuity of this GS&A is very debatable.

Conclusions
The small size of the sample, the sampling procedure itself and the selected methodology do not permit generalisation beyond the confines of this study. However, the findings confirm earlier research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Terenzini et al., (2001) that it is the experience of studying with students from diverse backgrounds in an environment that models the generic skills that the university aims to develop, rather than the university policy, that makes the difference in developing generic skills.

This study also confirms previous research indicating that peers have a greater influence on the development of student generic skills than any other aspect of the higher education experience. (Astin, 1993; Pascarell & Terenzini, 1991; Milem, 1998). However, most generic skills are developed within the context of the home country environment, where parents, significant adult role-models and the values of the local community have a major role in shaping the specific generic skills and attributes that are valued in the specific socio-cultural context.

As some of the participants realised, perhaps the most important generic skill in an increasingly globalised society is the ability to develop different skills and acquire different knowledge relevant to unfamiliar contexts. This facilitates the successful transfer of existing self-confidence to unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts. Whether or not the generic skills described in the policy statements of Australian universities are relevant to the workplace practices in the home countries of international alumni is debatable. It is understandable that Western countries have developed lists of generic skills relevant to Western societies, but developing generic skills is a process influenced by the cultural, ideological, economic and political context in which it occurs. Acquiring generic skills is a complex process lasting a lifetime. This acquisition process neither begins with the university experience, nor ends at graduation. Perhaps some degree of caution is required before assuming that Western generic skills are globally relevant.
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