

Tailoring graduate attributes to meet the needs of international students in a pathway program

Donna M Velliaris
Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT)
Adelaide, Australia
Email: dveliari@eynesbury.sa.edu.au

Paul B Breen
Greenwich School of Management (GSM) London
Meridian House, Royal Hill, Greenwich
London SE10 8RD
Email: paulbbreen@hotmail.com

Abstract

Today's Higher Education (HE) graduates are expected to leave their places of study with an increased awareness of the attributes they have acquired over the course of their educational journey. The set of accumulated skills, knowledge and abilities of students has come to be known as Graduate Attributes (GAs), which this paper sets out to define, and then reshape around the needs of international students on pathway or pre-degree programs. This article presents an instance of how the formulation of attributes has been tailored to meet the needs of international students. To take into account a shorter timeframe of study, the focus was on the acquisition of 'Core Learning Values' (CLVs) rather than GAs. To capture a sense of how this worked in practice, this paper is focused on the case of Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT), which serves as the setting for a study that explored the way 'values' can be added to the study experience of those in Australian 'first year + pathway' institutions.

Keywords: Core Learning Values (CLVs), Graduate Attributes (GAs), pathway institution

Introduction

The Higher Education (HE) landscape is changing with the emergence of pathway colleges. The pathway model—pioneered in Australia by Navitas—now includes five large private, for-profit, and publicly-listed companies recognised as independent institutions or as annexure institutions to universities themselves. In alphabetical order, they include: (1) Cambridge Education Group; (2) INTO University Partnerships; (3) Kaplan International College; (4) Navitas; and (5) Study Group. Pathway colleges articulate students into universities on the basis of them receiving significant units of credit transfer upon successful completion and oftentimes equivalent of one full year (Bode, 2013; Fiocco, 2006).

According to Bode (2013, p. 4), pathway students face their genuine 'first year experience' as second year students. While universities offer orientation/transition programs for direct entry first year students, there is an expectation that second year students have already adapted to university life. For pathway students, however, second year is the 'first' time they may have encountered: large lecture environments; how to enrol in a tutorial session; how to submit a new assignment; or how to defer an exam etcetera. As a consequence, those students who have had a more traditional first year experience appear to be at a considerable advantage over pathway students, not only in terms of academic literacy, but also in the acquisition of Graduate Attributes (GAs).

A review of the relevant literature suggests that there is considerable work in the areas of acquiring academic literacy and autonomy, highlighted as key requirements for international students in BALEAP (2008), but scant discussion exists on how GAs apply to pathways. In fact, the *National Graduate Attributes Project* (GAP), a key paper exploring the issues of GAs, refers 'exclusively' to universities. The role of the pathway provider is to prepare students *not* for transitioning to employment, but *for* transitioning to mainstream HE. Indeed, pathway providers have an implicit obligation to begin the development of GAs consistent with those of the university to which students will transfer. In addition to scholastic results, therefore, pathway student outcomes should focus on 'broader values' that will see them in a stronger position to achieve ongoing academic success.

As more non-traditional students with greater diversity in backgrounds and preparedness are purposefully recruited via multiple pathways into Australian HE institutions, it is important to explore new and improved strategies to support increasingly heterogeneous cohorts (Nelson, Clarke, Kift, & Creagh, 2011). This article presents a pilot study into how universities and their partners can set about integrating this into practice. As such, it draws on secondary research from the outset, and practice-based action research surrounding one instance of exploring a situation where Core Learning Values (CLVs) have been introduced to, and then further developed by, international students.

Graduate Attributes

The concept of universities articulating GAs to be developed by students during their time with the institution, came to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, although they have been part of university thinking since the 1860s (Barrie, 2005). Today, Australian universities are required—as part of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and now the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) audit process—to show how they are embedding GAs in the delivery of undergraduate degrees (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009, p. 7).

The key driver behind the (re-emergence) of the GAs was the need for universities to develop a set of ‘non-discipline’ based attributes by which an employer could assess graduates and to understand that the degree (award) from a particular institution provided them with essential skills for employment. To a certain extent, universities began to see GAs in a ‘marketing’ context (Nunan, 1999). As the push for universities to develop GAs gained momentum, so too did their position in the context of ‘teaching and learning’. When government funding for universities was linked to—and became to a large extent dependant on teaching and learning outcomes—GAs were seen as an explicit indicator of ‘performance’. They began to take on an importance that stretched beyond the original concept of an indicator of a graduate’s preparedness for employment.

Although scholars have invariably called GAs by different names such as those listed in Table 1 (e.g., Baker, 2014; Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000; Oliver, 2011; Spronken-Smith et al., 2013), Hager and Holland (2006, p. 2) asserted that within a HE context, GAs is the *most* appropriate term and defined it as:

...thinking skills, such as logical and analytical reasoning, problem-solving and, intellectual curiosity; effective communication skills, teamwork skills, and capacities to identify, access and manage knowledge and information; personal attributes such as imagination, creativity and intellectual rigour; and values such as ethical practice, persistence, integrity and tolerance.

The Australian Technology Network (ATN), comprising five universities around Australia (i.e., Curtin University, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT, and the University of South Australia), described GAs as the ‘qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution and consequently shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and society’ (Bowden, et al., 2000). Barrie (2004, p. 262) defined GAs as being the ‘skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts’.

Table 1. An array of terms that may be used interchangeably with ‘Graduate Attributes’

Core Competencies	Graduate Outcomes
Core Generic Graduate Attributes	Graduate Skills
Core Graduate Attributes	Graduate Values
Core Skills	Key Competencies
Demonstrable Graduate Outcomes	Key Learning Outcomes
Employability Skills	Key Skills
Generic Competencies	Learning Outcomes
Generic Employability Skills	Professional Competencies
Generic Graduate Attributes	Professional Skills
Generic Skills	Student Core Competencies
Graduate Capabilities	Student Outcomes
Graduate Employability Indicators	Transferable Skills
Graduate Employability Skills	Work Readiness
Graduate Learning Outcomes	

Nationally, the GAs developed by different universities varies, not only in terms of which attributes are included, but also with respect to the nature and level described. GAs go beyond the disciplinary expertise that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses and range from ‘simple’ technical skills to ‘complex’ intellectual abilities and ethical values. Independent universities inculcate in their graduates a set of *personal* attributes (e.g., appropriate presentation and grooming, interpersonal communication skills, and punctuality) and *intellectual* attributes (e.g., ability to manage large volumes of information from various sources, and analytical and problem-solving abilities needed to work effectively) that are consistent with its ‘philosophy’ of education. Although, ‘academics hold qualitatively different conceptions of the phenomenon of GAs’ (Barrie, 2004, p. 261), so too ‘in different working situations, the combinations of knowledge, skills and dispositions which employers anticipate from graduates [also] vary’ (Su & Feng, 2008, p. 2).

Characteristically, GAs should not be: (a) *too* general as to be unintelligible; (b) *too* detailed as to lose all sense of focus; nor (c) *too* idealistic as to be unattainable. Pitman and Broomhall’s (2009) study identified the five most cited attributes as: communication skills = 98%; interpersonal skills = 82%; problem-solving skills + mastery of disciplinary knowledge + awareness and respect for others = 71% each. Oliver’s (2011, p. 2) study listed the most common generic attributes (i.e., apart from knowledge outcomes) as appearing to be clustered *among* seven broad areas:

- (1) critical and analytical, and sometimes creative and reflective thinking;
- (2) ethical and inclusive engagement with communities, cultures and nations;
- (3) information literacy, often associated with technology;
- (4) learning and working collaboratively;
- (5) learning and working independently;
- (6) problem-solving, including generating ideas and innovative solutions; and
- (7) written and oral communication.

Importantly, the linking and weighing of GAs against assessment tasks as prescribed by universities and other accrediting bodies, does not ensure that they are being *explicitly taught*, and neither does it ensure that they are being *effectively measured*.

EIBT & Core Learning Values

Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) is the pre-university pathway provider through which this study investigated a process of tailoring GAs to meet the needs of its international students. Founded in 1989, EIBT is part of the Navitas Group that has more than 50 colleges and campuses worldwide and 32 university programs across Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Navitas, 2014).

The main objective of pathway providers is to attract international students early in their education lifecycle and secure their tertiary destination prior to them meeting entrance requirements (Fiocco, 2006; Kaktins, 2013; Velliari & Willis, 2014). EIBT is one of a growing number of educational providers partnering with universities to establish programs that create opportunities to promote Australian HE globally. EIBT presents the same courses that constitute the first year of a Bachelor of (1) Business, (2) Information Technology, or (3) Engineering at the destination university, either *The University of Adelaide* or the *University of South Australia*. These two universities moderate EIBT diploma delivery and grant advanced standing for courses if students achieve an overall minimum entry-level result upon graduation.

EIBT offers an extended period of academic preparation for entrance into HE, with specific focus on students who are ‘lower-level’ in terms of their: (a) language proficiency; and/or (b) previous academic results (Velliari & Willis, 2014). Students represent [in alphabetical order]: Bangladesh; China [mainland, Hong Kong and Macau]; Egypt; Fiji; India; Indonesia; Iran; Kenya; Lebanon; Malaysia; Nepal; Nigeria; Oman; Pakistan; Saudi Arabia; Singapore; South Korea; Sri Lanka; Turkey; Vietnam; and Zimbabwe. In many ways, pathway programs represent an extension of what university-based intensive English language colleges have done for a long time in offering ‘bridging’ classes where students receive literacy support while undertaking academic courses. Pathways also serve to increase student participation more broadly and in this sense they are ‘ideally positioned as second chance institutions’ (Bode, 2013, p. 3).

EIBT has moved away from the term ‘attributes’ and introduced a set of ‘values’ believed to be more representative of the ongoing development and desired outcomes of its students. EIBT has chosen four CLVs, namely: (1) *Respect*; (2) *Excellence*; (3) *Curiosity*; and (4) *Passion*. Each value is/should not be viewed as a ‘standalone’, but rather as a collective whole working together for the social and educational advancement of students in preparation for mainstream [Australian] HE studies. EIBT academic staff and students are expected to engage in and demonstrate the CLVs within the teaching and learning environment. While the CLVs are instilled in, and assessed in part through traditional assessment of various curricula, there is promotion through a wide range of experiences both inside and outside of the classroom—including ‘Orientation Week’.

The CLVs below are believed to more accurately reflect the features required by pathway students while broadly encompassing the GAs mandated by the universities. These CLVs are complimentary to those of EIBT’s partners and ensure that EIBT students are not disadvantaged when they ultimately graduate with their diploma. The four values are expressed below coupled with the behaviours that help articulate it.

Respect — *respect yourself and others will respect you*

Refers to showing courtesy in everything one does. At EIBT, we treat others with dignity and honour the rules of our society. We show respect by:

- acting in an ethical and sustainable manner;
- adhering to rules of academic integrity;
- developing cultural awareness and a global perspective;
- identifying and honouring the needs of others; and
- working collaboratively and building positive relationships.

Excellence — *excellence is the key to success*

Refers to doing one’s best. At EIBT, we work with diligence and enthusiasm to achieve. We show excellence by:

- being an effective communicator across a wide range of literacies;
- gaining a mastery of a body of knowledge;
- preparing, planning and committing 100% to everything;
- taking responsibility and increased ownership for personal learning; and
- using the wisdom of others as a foundation of knowledge.

Curiosity — *curiosity is the cure for boredom*

Refers to having the desire to know or learn. At EIBT, we work to enhance our understanding and learning through exploration, investigation, and critical enquiry. We show curiosity by:

- actively exploring, investigating and analysing possibilities;
- asking questions to deepen understanding;
- embracing the principles of research and investigation;
- engaging in a broad range of learning activities; and
- making informed judgments about validity and reliability of opinions.

Passion — *without passion there is only work*

Refers to showing commitment and motivation to achieve one’s chosen path. At EIBT, we work with purpose and enthusiasm, and take joy from our achievements. We show passion by:

- being an active member of the classroom and community;
- having a positive attitude;
- remaining committed to a lifetime of learning;
- showing the courage to follow convictions; and
- striving to solve problems and generate ideas.

Applying Core Learning Values In Practice

Having conducted extensive secondary research on GAs and identified an absence of literature on how they relate to the international student ‘pathway’ experience, there was a need to test out the application and adaptation of CLVs in practice. EIBT was chosen as the site for this study, which was designed to serve as a small-scale instance of action research that could feed into further, and future, explorations. The setting or context within EIBT, in which the study would take place, was over the course of an orientation week, with the rationale being that (as with GAs) CLVs should be part of the *student learning experience* from the outset.

EIBT’s ‘Orientation Program’ aims to assimilate students to life in Adelaide and more specifically, Eynesbury, and to provide the foundation for developing the four CLVs listed above. Held one week before courses officially commence, orientation is a crucial transition period for predominantly newly arrived international students to be presented with information to help them to survive and thrive in their new educational setting. EIBT acknowledges that international relocation can involve large-scale social, academic, and environmental changes and aims to facilitate a positive and successful transition for all commencing students to their chosen discipline. Orientation processes provide social, academic, administrative and geographic familiarisation, as well as the opportunity for students to embrace the diversity of their previous experiences.

The three day orientation is highly structured and includes an activity centred on the CLVs. Students organise themselves into small groups (dependent on the total number of students) involving a mix of age, gender, ethnicity, mother-tongue and diploma programs. Students are introduced to the CLVs through a PowerPoint presentation and asked to discuss each value and how it can be demonstrated in the context of EIBT. Thereafter, groups are advised to collaboratively decide upon a ‘fifth’ value—expressed in a single word—to present to the entire body.

The aim of this activity was to steer groups through a self-reflective process to help them identify the CLVs that may be important to them during their EIBT journey. The learning objectives included: (a) to *engage* new students in group discussion about their hopes, aspirations and guiding ‘value’ that they can reflect upon over the duration of their ensuing studies within EIBT; (b) to *encourage* brain-storming and consensus among group members in the presentation of one agreeable value/attribute; and (c) to *increase* individual confidence in working collaboratively with fellow students and then advocating one CLV as a representative of the group.

Once this task had been completed, a nominated student presented their ‘skill, knowledge and/or ability’ to everyone, coupled with an explanation and/or examples to support their choice. Guiding questions included:

- *What CLVs did your group consider?*
- *What were your Top 3 CLVs?*
- *Which CLV had the highest level of agreement in your group and why?*
- *What does your CLV mean to the group?*
- *Can both EIBT staff and students relate to this CLV?*
- *How can staff and students demonstrate this quality in the EIBT context?*
- *Create sentences that capture the ideals of your CLV...*
- *How does your CLV relate to EIBT’s other four CLVs?*
- *How many CLVs does EIBT need and why?*

As discovered, properly facilitated, discussions like these develop critical thinking skills, provide a group bonding experience, and engage students in meaningful reflection about the kinds of people they are and want to be. Amongst a community of learners, individuals will bring with them a range of experiences, understandings, and worldviews from which to draw from. As evidenced by the CLVs listed below, this journey of self-discovery involved deep(er) reflection and understanding of the EIBT teaching and learning community as seen through the eyes of its students. New diploma students in Trimester 1, 2014 (n=128 students) and the most recent Trimester 2, 2014 (n=80 students) formulated the CLVs presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2. Core Learning Values devised by new EIBT students in Trimester 1, 2014

Ambition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students who set themselves ambitious goals tend to be more satisfied than those with lower expectations. In other words, it is important to stretch yourself and aim high.
Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •At the core of an effective study-life balance are two key everyday concepts, namely achievement and enjoyment.
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It is important to work cooperatively with academic and professional staff, as well as other students to accomplish tasks.
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •This involves the ability to take responsibility for and demonstrate commitment to one's own learning, motivated by curiosity and an appreciation of the value of learning.
Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The price of success is hard work and dedication, and whether one wins or loses, their determination to give their best is key.
Dreams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Individuals should have a dream if they want to make a dream come true. Students can create a vision for their future, and the clearer the vision, the faster one can move closer toward it.
Effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expenditure of effort in terms of time, energy, and commitment is necessary to accomplish goals.
Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Education has been widely documented as tied most directly to improved health and longevity. That is, when students are intensely engaged in doing and learning new things, their well-being and happiness can blossom.
Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students should consider and act upon the ethical, social and global responsibilities of their actions.
Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The feeling of accomplishment and competence is meaningful and motivating to students as they begin to complete tasks with minimal prompting or guidance.
Patience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Individual patience is important for development, as those who are willing to take their time to accomplish a goal can invest more for the future.
Perserverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students should persist through academic assignments that are mandated, but may not be intrinsically interesting to them, as well as manage competing demands across coursework from multiple courses.
Positivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students should endeavour to demonstrate enthusiasm, leadership and the ability to positively influence others within a school environment.
Punctuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students need to manage their time to meet expectations and demonstrate drive, determination and accountability.
Rationality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •When accepting the judgment of another, students should use their own critical thinking skills to help determine the accuracy of that judgment.

Table 3. Core Learning Values devised by new EIBT students in Trimester 2, 2014

Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students need to develop the ability to manage their emotions and remain calm under pressure, which is linked to performance success.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The effectiveness of communication with faculty and peers can directly affect the success of students. It is an essential vehicle by which students convey their thinking to others and process information.
Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Transitioning to a new learning environment can be daunting, so it is beneficial to commence the term with self-confidence and to seek help when and where necessary.
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Motivation is the energy that drives a student to accomplish their goals and pushes you one more time, even in the face of adversity.
Grateful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Feeling grateful for the opportunity to study abroad can keep you positive and optimistic, and this quality will bring increased positive people, events and opportunities into one's life.
Joyful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ideals like freedom, diversity, innovation, and the pursuit of excellence are at the heart of joyful learning.
Optimistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •These students are more pleasant to be around, and such an attribute enables one to better cope with difficult teaching and learning experiences.
Organised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A student with good organisational skills can walk into a situation and see what could be done to improve a situation, a setting, or a project.
Persistent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Continued effort and striving in the face of difficulty, opposition or failure is a key characteristic of successful students in achieving their academic goals.
Punctual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students must recognise that good attendance and punctuality will maximise achievement and enhance not only their learning experience but develop their employability skills.
Self-Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It is the ability to make positive choices; to think before acting. Without self-control, students may say and do things impulsively, which often leads to trouble. It is important to pause and think of the consequences that may result from certain behaviours.
Supportive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Transitioning to another country and school comes with challenges which, if inadequately addressed, may negatively affect academic performance and psychological well-being. A supportive network of family, friends, and teachers is essential.

Implications

Through the responses and actions of new EIBT students over the course of orientation week, it was evident that the development of CLVs could help compensate for those students who may not gain the traditional first year university experience, and thus fall behind in the acquisition of GAs. At the very least, it is beneficial to guide students towards a sense of what forms of skills and knowledge are necessary to assist and improve their overall learning experience. There were four key areas that this orientation experience enhanced and all of these can be further developed over the full duration of students' diploma studies; an expected feature of GA acquisition. They include in no particular order:

- ***to give students a sense of continuation and a broader picture of their studies*** – that they are on a learning continuum and there is a logical and coherent connection between different parts and years of their studies. These values, which they bring with them through their pathway year, are a transferable part of that learning continuum and are open to constant recycling and adaptation.
- ***to foster in students a stronger sense of autonomy*** – that right from orientation week they are partners in the learning process and their teachers are there to act as guides and facilitators on the road to that autonomy. This is particularly salient to the international student context, as evidenced in the work of BALEAP (2008, p. 5) who stress the need for students to be scaffolded towards greater autonomy over time, in the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP).
- ***to tailor courses to meet the specific needs of students*** – a recurring theme in BALEAP (2008). Allowing students to have the opportunity of input into the CLVs they seek to acquire is an innovative form of such tailoring, and is likely to have a knock-on effect on both content and pedagogy in the classroom.
- ***to enable new students to have greater participation*** – this type of activity system provides a holistic learning experience for students, so as not to reduce the possible disadvantage of having a less authentic 'first year' experience in pathway programs.

By way of these listed advantages then, this small-scale study provided the foundation for further investigation into how CLVs can serve as an introduction and a stimulus for the subsequent development of GAs. In this case, the stimulus has been partly 'artificial' or what Wenger and Snyder (2000) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 6) referred to as a 'cultivated' stimulus. This is because the acquisition of CLVs has been partly natural, and partly cultivated by those who are managing the enterprise. This fits in well with BALEAP's (2008) recommendation that students should be guided towards autonomy.

There is great opportunity for added research and development in related areas, such as in tracing/tracking the subsequent progress of students from pathways to degree programs, and from CLVs to GAs. There is also scope for comparison into the long-term effectiveness of the process of introducing the concept of CLVs to students, and the possibility that over time, it may even reverse the situation of pathway students being disadvantaged in the acquisition of GAs through missing out on key aspects of a traditional first year program.

Conclusion

EIBT is committed to gathering and assessing its strengths and weaknesses in effectively acculturating its international students. It is important to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds and experiences are supported in a plethora of ways throughout their HE studies, so that they may develop academic proficiency within the context of their program of study. Using a data source such as international students' own 'values' will help facilitate outcomes with several compelling advantages. These include demonstrating an institutional commitment to: (a) learning and engagement; and (b) university partners in a common educative endeavour that is likely to enhance cooperation. EIBT will continue, therefore, to encourage both staff and students to undertake periods of serious self-examination and reflection in order to discover and rediscover the implications for their future.

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