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Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Graduate attributes

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CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Graduate Attributes



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Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Focus on graduate attributes

The 10 other case studies in the series are on the themes of:

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Indigenous employment and supports
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

The project took place between January and November 2014. The study was designed to investigate, disseminate and enhance graduate employability. Knight and Yorke (2004) are the world-renowned authorities on graduate employability. They define employability as, “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p. 9). In a large part, the role and function of these case studies is to make the implicit strategies and supports for employability explicit for heightened sustainable impact.

Throughout the project, four stakeholder groups have been fully consulted:

- Graduates
- Students
- Employers
- Educators/Career Development Centre professionals

The project data was collected through surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups.

- 1500 surveys were distributed. 821 surveys were submitted for a 55 per cent response rate. 705 surveys were fully completed.
- 86 in-depth interviews/focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed and analysed.

This case study on the role/context of graduate attributes is based on interviews and focus groups with 18 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students and educators from four universities. This particular case study attempts to capture and share the insights of leading higher education thinkers/change agents. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.

Australia is internationally recognised as leading the worldwide higher education paradigm shift to enact graduate attributes. Some of the seminal authors in this area are: James Arvanitakis, Simon Barrie, Denise Chalmers, Mark Freeman, Beverley Oliver and Geoffrey Scott, all of whom were interviewed to inform this case study. Mantz Yorke is the UK-based author of multiple publications converging the concepts of graduate employability and graduate attributes, and he also was interviewed to ground this case study.



INTRODUCTION

Graduate attributes are an important way for universities to explain the outcomes of the education programs they offer. Although uses and definitions vary, one widely quoted definition is that:

Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future. (Bowden et al., 2000)

Most Australian universities now include a list of graduate attributes in their mission statements and strategic plans. Examples of university-listed graduate attributes include: knowledge and critical thinking; leadership, initiative and teamwork; communication skills; and responsibility. In Australian higher education, graduate attributes were articulated as a solution to a pervasive employability challenge. There was growing evidence that through their university education, students were not developing the transferable (or in other words) *soft* skills that they would need to succeed as graduates. In part, higher education institutions defined their distinctive difference through articulating particular sets of graduate attributes. As a whole, there was widespread recognition that the defined attributes applied to *all* graduates despite their generalist or professional disciplines of study.

Graduate attributes have been the focus of much research and debate over a prolonged period (see Oliver, 2011). This work on generic attributes is reinforced by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), compliance with which is not compulsory. The AQF includes award level descriptors appropriate for each level of qualifications expressed as what graduates are expected to know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning. More recently, complementary work funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), has extended this to define Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for a range of disciplines which provide reference points for expectations within those disciplines.

Beyond defining the graduate attributes, higher education institutions created and enacted strategy plans and processes to support, develop and assure their impact. Many of these institutions developed stand-alone subjects, each of which was based around one or more of the graduate attributes. Others published lists of electives, of which a certain number were mandatory. Most Australian institutions have now been working in the space of graduate attributes for a decade or more. Strategies and initiatives are now well developed. Higher education has largely moved beyond a project approach to embedded, cohesive enactment. Evaluations have been conducted, formative and summative feedback applied and innovations documented.

This case study is of particular significance now that the higher education experience has evolved from initial implementation of graduate attributes to embedded contextualisation within *graduate employability*. It is compelling to return to

INTRODUCTION

the leaders of graduate attribute thinking and action leadership to hear their updated and emerging ideas, plans and successes. *Graduate employability* has been defined by Knight and Yorke (2004) as “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p.9). Professor Mantz Yorke expanded upon this definition in an interview conducted as part of this research project. Yorke stated that, “employability is actually not only about jobs. It’s about life as well. So the thing about being a good citizen would fit into our view of what employability would be.” Yorke noted the polarity of opinions concerning employability. “I think it’s what our perception of employability is. It’s such a variable feast. There isn’t a perceived wisdom, but if you ask different people, you’ll get different types of interpretation.”

Widespread change within the economy and marketplace, catalysed by factors such as technological innovation, has affected graduate outcomes. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, graduates should be “able to not only tolerate change, but to thrive on change.” For example, an educator stated that graduates should have the ability “to apply their skills to different contexts, draw on different expertise, so they are not stumped by something that’s slightly different, or out of routine.”

Higher education institutions have evolved in response to these economic, technological, cultural and labour force changes. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, “every article a student reads is in direct competition with Wikipedia. It’s a changing environment; universities in reality

are merely one provider of an education service.” Another educator stated that higher education has responsibility for supporting emergence of the “character of the people that we think employers are looking for.” An example was highlighted by an academic in a leadership position. “We want graduates to be ethical citizens. We want them to be global citizens, and we want them to be culturally aware.” Another educator explained that these qualities contribute to an “excellent, well-developed, well-rounded person.”

Case Study aims & objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of developing graduate attributes and engaging with higher education support.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees to further enhance their graduate attributes.

Keywords

- Graduate attributes
- Embedded within curriculum
- Plus factor
- Cultural fit, understanding and competence
- Emotional intelligence
- Ethical citizen
- Adaptability, resilience and agility
- Reflection
- Critical thinking
- Networking

A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Excerpts from, *Diary of a French girl*

The following is a true story as told by Marie-Claire Patron (2009) in her book, *Diary of a French Girl: Surviving Intercultural Encounters*. The excerpts are verbatim passages from the book, used with the permission of the author.

Natalie was born and raised in a privileged middle-class suburb of Lyon in France and is part of a close-knit family circle. Her father and older brother are graphic designers and her mother a secretary in a Junior High School. She has had a wonderful upbringing comprising an excellent education and exciting opportunities that have advanced her career. Dabbling in the arts, Natalie discovered her passion for comedy and drama. From her experiences in theatre there emerged a talented comic in spite of her shyness. Her family supported her endeavours even when she decided that one needed to be more passionate about the theatre to turn it into a career. Turning down offers from elitist schools, Natalie chose instead to study in a business school that is part of a university in Strasbourg, primarily for the program that included a compulsory year abroad and also had a friendly ambience.

Natalie was twenty-two years of age when she embarked on her international student exchange at a university in Sydney, Australia. Her year abroad was carefully orchestrated to allow for study, work and travel in the host country before resuming her studies in France. 'Life begins for me' is a highly charged statement for Natalie who attempts to fathom the changes that immersion in a foreign culture signified for her, particularly as she was so far from home. The experience would test her mettle and her future path would be determined by the way she approached the experience.

Although Natalie was becoming quite proficient in English, the new course tutorials in 'Australian Cultural Studies' provoked anguish when it came to class discussions. French students rarely participate in class discussions in France, but in Australia their grades depend on their adherence to the rules; the focus on participation is consequently stressful. Classroom practices of the French and the Australians are highly contrastive. French students rarely raise their hand to participate in class, for it is simply not part of their academic culture, whereas Australian students are encouraged to be more interactive, as it is usually part of their assessment. In France, the lecturers are seen as tantamount to Gods. They stand on their pedestal imparting their wisdom and knowledge and promptly leave the lecture theatre afterwards with no interjection from students and rarely know their names.

A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Upon returning home, she espoused the role of a proactive individual and she succeeded in prolonging the growth experience acquired abroad in order to maximise the learning curve. This involves adaptation by the sojourner and the society to the changes that have transpired during the exchange.

Natalie had accepted the offer of a position as software editor for an export and marketing company in the capital because, although this position was not entirely in her chosen field, her pragmatic approach to life saw her prioritise her needs, repayment of her educational grant on top of her agenda. Her English was invaluable in this position, especially as her Curriculum Vitae showed a lack of technical background. It was gratifying to know that her experience in Australia had been the primary reason for obtaining this position. Intercultural competence is invaluable as this represents an added bonus for the company that recognises that their cognitive skills have been honed through second language acquisition. They are able to find creative ways of solving complex problems, their reasoning skills are enhanced and they are able to conceptualise new ideas.

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97757	1.2010	.01242	1.5306		.96850	1.0141	.78284	.13013	.16566	.14563
13867	.78462	.00811		.65333	.63275	.66253	.51145	.08234	.16044	.14104
8.718	96.706		123.25	80.524	77.987	81.658	63.037	10.149	.10482	.09215
31399		.01034	1.2745	.83266	.80643	.84439	.65185	.10494	.13359	.11744
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WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

“The world will not be run by geniuses, but rather people you can count on” (Fullan & Scott, 2014, p. 6).

The key theme, emerging from the interviews and focus groups, concerned recommendations that the reflective capacity of students be enhanced. As highlighted by an academic, “students should be asked to reflect on what they’ve learned and how it might help them in their potential careers, rather than labelling it ‘now here’s a bit of employability folks, don’t forget it,’ because that won’t work well.” The majority of interviewees emphasised that reflective practice should be embedded and expected, hence “plac[ing] the onus back on students. The *program* is about getting the student to become a rounded person who can function well in the world, academically, socially and collectively.” A key recommendation, emerging from interviews, was to provide opportunities for students to reflect upon the employability skills and personal attributes that are developed throughout their studies. This may include asking students such questions as, “to what extent have you fulfilled these expectations?”

Another theme, emerging from interviews, was the importance of encouraging students to learn from failure. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, “We need to talk about failure. We only talk about the successes. We never say, ‘We started off down this path. I was totally wrong, but I learned this lesson.’ We never teach the journey, we only teach from point A to point B.” The importance of learning from failure was articulated by another academic in a leadership position. “Learning from your mistakes teaches resilience. It teaches emotional intelligence and it is how the world operates.”

Approach to achieve aims & objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of developing graduate attributes and engaging with higher education support.**

It was recommended in the majority of interviews that students participate in employability opportunities as early into their degrees as possible and that they are open to reflection throughout every subject and co-curricular pursuit. As stated by an educator, employability prospects should not become “a conversation in the last few weeks of a student’s time.”

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

The importance of breadth as well as discipline-specific technical knowledge and skills was emphasised. As stated by an educator, “talk to big businesses and they want broad capability. They don’t care that you don’t know this particular software or how to run this particular spreadsheet, they are looking for people who are bright, who are able to communicate and able to work in a team.” An educator elaborated, “I think the most effective strategies are providing them thinking and problem-solving skills; those really broad skills and communication.”

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees to further enhance their graduate attributes.**

An academic in a leadership position recommended that employers in small and medium businesses include a development program at the beginning of a graduate’s

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

employment, and to provide opportunities for graduates to successfully transition to the workforce.

Challenges

A key challenge emerging across interviews concerned the difficulty of integrating academic disciplinary-based knowledge and employability skills in a cohesive manner. An academic stated that “part of the argument has been two-fold; one is making a case for employability, that it’s not un-amicable to academic values but actually complementary to it. And secondly, finding ways of teaching students; getting them to learn, [so] that the academic and the employability related aspects, although separated, are brought together rather than seeing them as being in separate camps.”

Another challenge identified by an academic concerned “the problem that careers centres are relatively small and universities are relatively large.” It was questioned, “how do you spread their expertise across a large university?” It was recommended in interviews that careers centres should be “engaged in curricula at appropriate points” and “not just provide the menu of what they do, but actually respond to the needs of what the institution wants.” A number of interviewees shared their strategic vision that the primary roles of university-based career centres evolve to: spreading the word about graduate attributes and employability; coaching academics to embed employability and accompanying reflection throughout curriculum and the whole of the student experience; workshopping strategies with students, graduates, educators

and employers; and building bridges and networking opportunities between stakeholder groups.

Successes

- Interviewed students recommended the importance of Faculty Placement Managers as a source for industry contacts, and commended them for providing valuable advice on work-experience opportunities. As one student articulated, “the Faculty Placement Manager is a great asset. She has all those contacts - you can go and see her and she can help you.” Another student stated, “It’s good that we have people like that who will help. We can just ask and say ‘I want to do an Internship’ and they will help us find one. So that’s really important.”
- Research participants emphasised that implementation of work-integrated learning within the curriculum promotes reflection and supports overall student development. A strong emerging theme was the impact of an employability framework on learning outcomes and character enrichment. An academic in a leadership position stated, “We are not assuming that every single one of our students is doing our degree because they want to get a job, there may be some who [want] to become better citizens or become volunteers for example.” Another educator suggested exposing students to integrative capstone experiences early. “Why shouldn’t students be running a start-up business over a semester and getting angel investors or crowd sourcing to fund it? It takes universities to take some risks.”

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

- A success strategy highlighted by an academic in a leadership position related to enhancing the alumni network as a source of industry engagement. “The alumni comes back and engages with the students. They let the students know some of the practical experiences and expectations of industry. Particularly when they transition from university into the workforce.”

What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Highly intuitive and creative graduates
- Strong connections with industry
- Reflective learners
- Improved first-round employment rates
- Adaptable employees
- Leaders
- Citizens in a global world
- Graduates who partake in the ethics of life

How has the approach developed employability?

The success strategies shared through interviews emphasised the importance of developing and maintaining connections between the higher education sector and industry. Strengthened relationships between higher education and industry were perceived to heighten opportunities for students to obtain relevant work experience and thereby further develop graduate attributes.

Specific personal attributes that were highlighted as important for graduate employability, overwhelmingly included *emotional intelligence* and *self-awareness*. In the article *The Key to Employability: Developing a Practical Model of Graduate Employability*, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) held that emotional intelligence “deserves a much higher profile” in terms of enhancing graduate employability and a graduate’s future contribution to society (p. 283). While research participants had varying views on whether emotional intelligence is inherent within the individual or can be developed as sets of learned behaviours, there was widespread agreement across research participants that educators must be aware of the value of emotional intelligence in a graduate’s disposition.



ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Be aware that breadth is as important as discipline-specific skills.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“It varies a little from field to field, but there are these broader citizenry, communication and critical thinking skills that apply regardless of what field you are in. So having students being more aware of the big picture instead of just focussed on their own cocoon.”

Networking is vital.

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“It’s connecting students in social and business contexts. I think this is quite critical and that it’s done in lots of ways. Students will do a project for a company in Engineering or Business, they’ll identify a particular issue or aspect and these students will work in teams and come up with solutions. They are already connected; they’re already working with [industry]. Industry want them because they’re bright and they’re doing really good stuff and they see them naturally within their company, so I think building that network and relationships is really critical.”

Be aware of the required practical outcomes from the outset of the course.

FROM STUDENTS:

“Because [employability skills] are not on that same level as actually being educated, I think people [can] push it to the side.”

“I think universities expect us to approach it in a mature way, to realise that this is really

going to benefit us, but I think students [seem to] feel like they can’t spend time on that right now because they actually need a HD in this subject and if they spend four hours on employability skills that’s not actually going to show anywhere.”

Undertake work experience and placements.

FROM EDUCATORS:

“It would allow the students who don’t know what they want to do, to [gain] a bit of an interest. The more students can experience authentic tasks where theory, education and systematic approaches are brought to bear, the more well-rounded they are going to [become].”

“The internships are very helpful for students because [universities] are just the first step in the door and we cannot show them everything that they are going to learn in the workplace. It’s up to the employers to do that next step, so we may be able to help them to become employable, but the employer cannot shirk their duty in looking after the new employee, and they are shirking it ethically when new employees are not brought in properly.”

Engage in the community by volunteering.

FROM A STUDENT:

“The odds are that for most degrees, it is quite difficult to get a job after you graduate. But that would come down to how much networking you’ve done and how much volunteering.”

ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

Be able to discern the current market and sell yourself successfully.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“Don’t just see [your Curriculum Vitae] as some sort of blanket statement that could be for any or all employers, because it needs to be tailored to fit what the employer is looking for.”

Recognise the importance of empathy, emotional knowledge and self-awareness.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“Somebody who’s managing might somehow be faced with someone who’s having a real paddy about something, really angry. So you’ve got to find ways of dealing with it. You’ve got to have the skills to do it. Or if you’re in a social work situation and you have very upset people, then you’ve got to deal with them. So then you have issues there that require something that is said to be sensitivity.”

FROM AN EDUCATOR IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:

“Students have to have the capacity to think, capacity to learn, systematic analysis [skills] so that they analyse and then make judgements, and be human focused. They are not machines, they need to have interpersonal [skills], empathy and so on. They should be nice people and people would want to work with them. It’s the capacity to do hard work.”

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Review, evaluate and quality-assure core programs so that they can be renewed and redesigned as necessary.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“We arranged informal focus groups, just conversations with students to possibly pre-empt the results from the [student evaluations]. We’ve then implemented some changes, just small ones, to run in the next semester - for ongoing quality control.”

Ongoing commitment from universities to provide sufficient resources in order to keep systems running efficiently.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“Whether this works or not will depend on how well it’s resourced. It’s very easy to set up a system that looks great on paper but having people available to actually make internships work -that’s the key to resourcing it properly. It is the key to its success.”

Effective communication between universities and industry.

FROM AN ACADEMIC IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:

“[Educators] have had industry working with them right through the course and the employers were involved in the development of the course. They weren’t just an external reference group but involved in the development. It really stood out compared to what’s happening [elsewhere] in Australia and [to] what other countries are doing in relation to graduate employability. Those students all [obtained] jobs because they knew the system, they were working with their employers right through [their course].”

Feedback from employers is important.

FROM AN EDUCATOR IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:

“There has got to be some communication going on between the employers who are taking on today’s graduates.”

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Provide more information on career options to students and include career centre support within the curriculum at appropriate points.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

“I think the problem is that [career centres] are relatively small and universities are relatively large. So how do you spread their expertise across a large university? They need to go beyond just doing the routine things. There are ways in which they can perhaps be engaged in curricula at appropriate points, do whatever it is that needs to be done at that particular time and not essentially just provide a menu of what they do, but actually respond to the needs of what that part of the institution wants. So they need to be properly briefed to [develop strategic outcomes].”

Teach students how to present well on paper and at interviews.

FROM EDUCATORS:

“There are two kinds of strategies; there’s the up-skilling for what you will do in your job and there’s the up-skilling to get that job. Employability is about both.”

“Through the portfolio and workshops they are running on résumés and interview skills, they’ve seen students who have done all these wonderful things but are not conveying or presenting it in a way that’s grabbing the attention of employers as it should, given their experiences.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished through dedicating more financial and human resources to internships, placements and work experiences. In the survey research, the literature was systematically reviewed to derive strategies for which there was empirical evidence for positive impact on employability.

Twelve strategies emerged (listed here in alphabetical order):

- capstone/final semester project
- careers advice and employment skill development
- extra-curricular activities
- graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement
- international exchange
- mentoring
- networking or industry information events
- part-time employment
- professional association membership/engagement
- social media/networks
- volunteering/community engagement
- work experience/internships/placements

The survey questions were articulated as follows on the four stakeholder versions of the surveys.

- Students – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- Graduates – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?
- Higher Education Personnel – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?
- Employers – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?

One of the strategies that strongly emerged in this particular case study was:

Careers advice and employment skill development

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

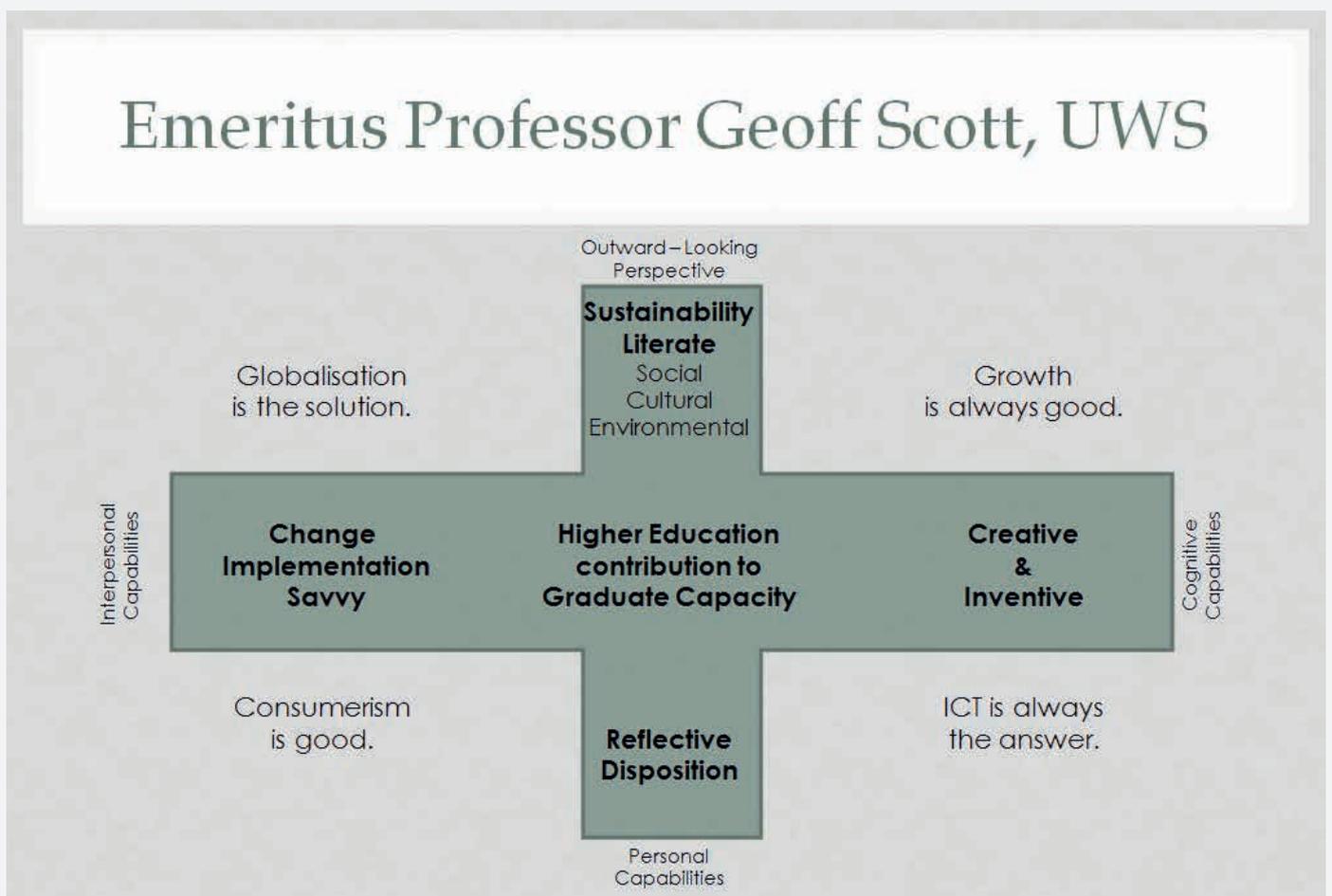
The majority of research participants described higher education and industry as increasingly *ethics-based*, meaning that graduates need to be able to connect on a deeper level and on a wider scale. According to Fullan and Scott (2014) students are “building a sustainable future and safeguarding the evolution of the planet” (p. 3). They need to be able to stimulate a positive impact in a difficult and challenging environment. The benefits of these personal and cognitive capabilities and graduate attributes are long-term and wide-reaching. They touch not only the workplace, but communities, societies and cultures within the global context. Graduates are not just students who have attended higher education and thereby learned a range of practical graduate competencies; they are global citizens who are intrinsically involved in and responsible for promoting societal values.

In order for this type of graduate to be sustained and developed, this project used Fullan and Scott’s (2014) propositions as an analytic framework to organise emerging themes. The resounding result was the proposition that reflection is imperative for students to develop as ethical citizens. The result of that analysis is depicted in Figure 1.

A theme emerging from the interviews was how best to implement this framework of employment skills development within higher education. An academic in a leadership position stated, “Now everyone can have input into the quality, content and development of the employability. A key to [being successful] is that everybody has to have joint ownership of it and buy into it.”

A number of research participants suggested developing a reward system for students, or making employability programs compulsory. A student said, “If you know you’re going to be penalised for not handing something in, you hand it in. If you know that you’re going to be penalised for not doing it properly, you do it properly. Whereas with the [employability] skills program - it’s not compulsory – I’m just floating around, just looking at it, [but] not really having to do it so there’s not that kind of risk-reward system going on.” Students also emphasised the importance of tailoring employability skills in the context of particular degrees/disciplines/industries. A student explained, “We would feel so much more obliged and also enthusiastic to partake in it.” Students identified themselves as diverse and asked that consideration be given to building programs to accommodate all types of students. An educator shared, “The other resource sensitive issue is to have the flexibility to accommodate people with very different backgrounds, ambitions, and stages of development. The person who has come into the university already from industry has very different needs from a person straight out of high school, and we need a program that accommodates both. I don’t think you can do that without resourcing the [program] very strongly because you need different things for different people.”

Figure 1: The project's interpretation of Fullan and Scott's Education Plus Framework



READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading and Resources

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For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Should graduate attributes be taught as stand-alone subjects, embedded within curriculum, or some combination of both?
- How can graduate attributes be embedded within curriculum?
- What are the disciplinary differences in the context of graduate attributes? Should higher education offer different types of support for students in generalist versus professional disciplines?
- In what manner can career centres become more actively involved within faculties and be embraced as stakeholders in overall university strategy?
- Can interpersonal skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence be learned?
- In what ways can employers be involved in the student experience? What are the benefits of supporting industry engagement?



