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Future proofing assessment: Using a design thinking approach to embed graduate qualities in a time of change

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Abstract

Many universities say they embed employability skills, or “graduate qualities”, in their curricula but the University of Sydney has committed to *assessing* students’ development of nine graduate qualities to guarantee their achievement and students’ job-readiness. Within the School of Health Sciences at the University, we have taken a design thinking approach to support staff in embedding these graduate qualities in their teaching and learning. A key step in our approach has been to establish a blog with student partners in which they share their interpretations of the value of the graduate qualities for their future careers. From our analysis of key ideas in students’ posts we suggest new types of assessment that will help develop and measure their graduate qualities.

1 Introduction

While embedding graduate qualities in course curricula is not a first for Australian universities, assessing the development of such qualities is a new and ambitious objective for the University of Sydney. Figure 1 lists the nine qualities, with brief definitions. Our goal in the School of Health Sciences has been to engage with multiple stakeholders through a *design thinking approach* (Brown, 2008; Willness & Bruni-Bossio, 2017), which involves empathising with and understanding what it is staff and students need, and taking innovative steps in designing assessments to meet these needs and achieve the university’s objective. A key initiative we have taken is to establish a “students-as-partners” (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014) blog⁵ to capture students’ perceptions of the graduate qualities and raise awareness of these qualities among all students and staff.

In this short article, we focus on how our students interpret the value of the university’s graduate qualities. Based on students’ interpretations, we conclude with brief suggestions for types of assessment that we believe will develop these qualities in relation to students’ chosen careers.

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⁵ A link to the blog can be provided upon request.

Depth of disciplinary expertise	the ability to integrate and rigorously apply knowledge and skills of a discipline
Critical thinking and problem solving	the questioning of ideas, evidence and assumptions to propose a solution to a problem
Communication (oral & written)	the clear exchange of meaning in a manner that is appropriate to an audience
Information and digital literacy	the ability to locate, interpret, evaluate and manage information
Inventiveness	the ability to generate novel ideas and solutions
Cultural competence	the ability to ethically and respectfully engage across cultures including celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures
Interdisciplinary effectiveness	the integration of multiple viewpoints and practices, and working effectively across disciplines
Integrated professional, ethical, and personal identity	understanding the interaction between one's personal and professional self
Influence	engaging others in a process or idea

Source: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/graduate-qualities.html>

Figure 1: University of Sydney graduate qualities, with brief definitions

2 Health professional students' blog

2.1 Context of students' posts

During 2018 students in the School of Health Sciences were invited to choose *two* of the nine graduate qualities and contribute posts to a blog about the value of these qualities for their future professional careers. To help students reflect on their chosen qualities, they were also prompted to informally interview a practitioner in their discipline about the practitioner's views of the same qualities. The resulting posts combined students' personal views with what they learned from their informal interviews. At the time of writing, a total of 15 students from across five courses (Health Sciences and Nursing, Medical Imaging Science, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Speech Pathology) have made at least two posts and uploaded one short video explaining their interpretations. The combined length of all posts totals around 15,000 words. Three of us (LA, KG and GH) independently analysed all posts to identify and summarise key ideas.

2.2 Summary of key ideas in students' posts

The first key idea is that students believe it is important to build rapport and trust with patients, so that patients *feel motivated and willing to collaborate and participate in their healthcare*. Students thought that developing Communication, Cultural Competence, an Integrated Professional, Ethical and Personal Identity, and Influence all related to this goal. By developing Communication and Influence students could explain patients' healthcare to them without using jargon, for patients to "take better control" of their health outcomes. Students also thought that developing Cultural Competence was necessary to communicate well with and influence their patients and build trust. Students believed that by becoming aware of their own attitudes, values and beliefs they could develop respect for and be able to adapt to a patient's unique attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to healthcare. This ability to build trust also related to students' development of an Integrated Professional, Ethical and Personal Identity, which they perceived as enabling them to apply values and standards of their profession, and behave ethically, while also expressing their own empathic personal style.

The second key idea is that students believe it is important to take a *respectful, holistic team approach* to patient care. This goal is also related to Communication and Influence, and also

to Interdisciplinary Effectiveness. By developing Communication and Influence, students could convey information accurately to engage with, and tactfully advise, other health professionals about both goals for treatment and patients' unique values and preferences. Students also thought it important to respect other health professionals' expertise, and recognise how it complements student's own knowledge and skills in a holistic way, in order for patients to receive the best possible care from the whole team.

A third key idea is that students believe in *the importance of patients' uniqueness*. This meant that students thought developing the graduate qualities of Inventiveness, and Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, were important for them to be able to create personalised plans to cater to individual patient preferences, interests and situations. By developing their problem-solving, students could use their depth of disciplinary expertise to adapt in flexible ways to individual patients' needs. Students firmly believed that personalising treatment motivates patients to engage with their healthcare plans. Students also thought that being inventive meant being able to anticipate future problems and take a holistic approach to patient care.

Finally, students thought that Information and Digital Literacy related to taking a team approach to patient care, and is about using technology in beneficial ways, e.g., by accessing research databases to find the latest clinical evidence and digital record systems to efficiently manage patient information. Being information and digitally literate also meant being able to use technology in innovative ways to cater to patients' uniqueness, e.g., by using a video to educate a patient about their condition. Students were less forthcoming about depth of disciplinary expertise (only one student has so far made a post about this), and may have taken this quality for granted.

3 Conclusions

In this brief article we have summarised how health professional students have interpreted the value of the university's graduate qualities for their future careers. A key finding is that students perceive *integrated combinations of graduate qualities* as being valuable in relation to three key goals in healthcare. These goals are to build patients' trust and collaboration in their healthcare, and for health professionals to take a holistic approach that caters to patients' uniqueness.

We believe the integrated combinations of qualities perceived by students should be reflected in the design of assessment tasks that will help students develop the qualities, and so make them more employable. These tasks could be undertaken in the university setting and help prepare students for learning through experience in work-integrated placements. For example, to develop Communication, Cultural Competence, an Integrated Professional, Ethical and Personal Identity, and Influence, students could *create a short video* to educate patients from a particular cultural background about their healthcare for a condition of the students' choice. To develop Communication, Cultural Competence, and Influence students could *design scenarios and questions for written or performance exams*, about attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to healthcare, for peers to tackle and respond to. To develop their Integrated Professional, Ethical and Personal Identity, as well as their skills in Communication and Influence, students could *make an oral presentation* to peers about how they would apply ethical values and standards and express empathy in response to a real-world ethical dilemma. To develop their Communication, Influence, and Interdisciplinary Effectiveness, students could *create a video or website* for their peers or a lay audience about their own and other health professionals' goals for patient treatment in relation to a particular patient or client scenario. Finally, to develop their Inventiveness, and Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, students could *create a healthcare plan*, e.g., a home modifications plan in Occupational Therapy or an exercise programme in Physiotherapy, to cater to a client's preferences and/or situation. Peers and practitioners could also rate these plans for their potential to motivate and engage real patients.

In conclusion, our “students-as-partners” blog has captured students’ views and interpretations of the value of the university’s graduate qualities for their future careers. These perceptions and interpretations have enabled us to begin designing course assessments that will help students achieve their graduate qualities in valid ways to enhance their employability.

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