

Generic skills: A student perspective

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Introduction

My name is Elisa Arcioni and I am the student representative on the Wollongong University Generic Skills Working Group and I am currently in my second year of Arts and Law degrees.

As the student spokesperson, I wish to begin by acknowledging that there is a diversity among the student population which is comparable to that which exists among the academic and support staff of any university. Therefore, I do not presume to represent every student's individual concerns or perspective but rather, to express concerns that are relevant to all students generally. I believe I am capable of doing so due to my experience on the University Student Representative Council, discussions with other students and general experience throughout the last two years.

Generic skills defined

I believe the definition given to generic skills by the Working Group is a valuable one, that of 'the achievable and worthwhile skills relevant to all students irrespective of their specific course of study'. The aims of generic skills, as I perceive them, is to move away from the 'traditional' style of education (that of textbook rote-learning), by increasing the content of a degree. This means ensuring that the graduate is not only equipped with extensive knowledge of a discipline but also the skills to update that knowledge and put the theory into practice, along with the skills required for continued development of expertise with critical analysis and maturity.

Generic skills in context

When discussing generic skills required of a Wollongong graduate with students on campus, there was only an awareness of computer and library skills. This is arguably the case because they are the only compulsory skills at this university, appearing on every student's academic transcript at the end of each semester. However, as defined above, generic skills encompass much more than these two examples and perhaps students would recognise the range of skills only when they are placed in the contexts that determine all aspects of a university experience; these two contexts being tertiary education and employment.

The first context: Tertiary education generally

Due to budget cuts made to higher education by the current federal government, students now have to pay more for their degree/s. This increases their expectations as education is commodified and commercial standards are placed upon it, making students critical consumers considering whether they are getting what they pay for. Universities are also in competition with technical colleges and increasing numbers of private providers. This has led to prospective students engaging in comparisons of all the education providers before deciding whether to gain a tertiary education and if so, at which institution. This heightens the need for education providers to have distinctive characteristics in order to attract students. Generic skills fit into this context as they can be a valuable marketing tool in that they offer an 'edge' to a degree, increasing the degree's value by including a practical component so it is more than merely a body of theory. It also means that a degree becomes vocational to a greater extent than in the past and decreases the need for a bridging process between study and employment.

The second context: The workplace

Unemployment is a major issue for students who see that a university degree is no longer a guarantee of a job (if ever it was). There is a trend towards the need for ever-increasing qualifications for the jobs that are available and applicants for positions need to find new ways to distinguish themselves from others. There have also been great advances in technology, especially computers and other information technologies. The use and application of these technologies is prevalent in all occupations, making it essential for any applicant to have a basic knowledge of them.

Team work is another area of change. The dominant image in the workforce has moved from a solitary figure behind a desk to that of a group of specialists working on a task together. Job-sharing and consulting increase

the importance of this skill. Further, there is a tendency for people to change careers during their working life rather than keep to one area. This trend thereby requires graduates to have the ability to manage change and the flexibility to adapt knowledge and skills to new situations. Generic skills as outlined by the Working Group address the above issues by ensuring a degree is practical and will serve more than a specialised occupation but be preparation for a life of employment in varied areas, with Wollongong graduates gaining abilities that are sought by employers and therefore the competitive edge.

Generic skills within a degree

The skills taught need to be both vocational and intrinsically valuable. Some students complete degrees with employment the only focus, but a university qualification is also an opportunity to develop intellectually and socially. There is also the need to balance the substantive content of a degree with the integration of the skills. Generic skills need to be yet another aspect of a degree, not to detract from the existing attributes. This requires explicit integration so students are made very aware of the skills being incorporated and their practical uses and relevance. This is especially important as the generic skills should emphasise the nature of education as an on-going process with the skills a means of continued development and a basis for independent work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of generic skills has to be recognised as a challenge for all involved as it means a change in attitude and in the way subjects are taught. However, in this process, there also needs to be recognition of the work already done in this integration process though perhaps not done under the explicit banner of 'generic skills'. This process of integration and change should be embraced as a positive opportunity in this time of re-adjustment to budgetary constraints and competition, where universities can

improve the quality and value of their degrees. This integration and change should not be seen as an attack on existing values at the university, rather, the incorporation of these skills should be recognised as being beneficial to everyone.

Students do respect the difficulties faced by academics and support staff in this process and do not wish to be yet another source of conflict and stress. Further, it is important to acknowledge clearly and forthrightly the responsibilities of students in the process of integration as education is only ever effective if the students take

an active part, are willing to participate and adopt a mature approach to their studies. However, in order to do so, students have to be aware of what is going on and understand the motivation for the changes. The way forward then, in a campus-wide incorporation of generic skills, is to maintain communication and consultation between all those affected by the process, that is, support staff, students and academics, which will do a great deal to provide for a smooth transition and ensure that all perspective's are taken into account. Thank you.

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