Understanding academic staff beliefs about graduate attributes

Aims
• to better understand the beliefs academics hold about graduate attributes and how these impact institutional efforts to integrate and assess graduate attributes across disciplines
• to use this knowledge to inform institutional change strategies for the enhanced integration of graduate attributes
• to share insights and experiences from across the sector to improve academic staff engagement with graduate attribute strategies

Key Outcomes
• online survey instrument to measure academic staff beliefs that can be adapted across disciplines and institutions
• global snapshot from 16 participating universities as well as contextualised information for each institution about academic staff’s beliefs and attitudes toward graduate attributes
• support for participating universities to reflect upon and enhance graduate attribute initiatives through workshop participation and a ‘self-treatment’ approach
• reports, resources and publications to inform and support the integration and assessment of graduate attributes

Progress
• 1064 academic staff across 16 universities completed an online survey measuring their beliefs about graduate attributes
• 4 statewide seminars held in June to explore preliminary global and institutional findings and to share practice, experiences and insights
• Preliminary global and institutional reports distributed to participating universities

Summary of workshop outcomes to be published on project website http://www.rmit.edu.au/bfactor

The project team also plans to meet with DVCs from participating universities to discuss responses to the preliminary findings and to explore the implications for institutional initiatives.

Timeframe
October 2007 – October 2009

Preliminary Findings
The preliminary findings indicate that although the majority of academics (73%) do believe that graduate attributes are important and should be a focus for their universities, there is a consistent discrepancy between their belief in an attribute’s importance, and their confidence and willingness to then teach and assess them.

Another finding shows that the key influence for 48% of academic staff to teach and assess graduate attributes is their own personal belief system and expectations. Only 28% indicated that their university’s expectations were a major influence and only 19% indicated students’ expectations were key. Also of interest was that academics rated critical thinking, written communication and problem solving as the most essential graduate attributes as shown in the graph below.

Implications
• Institutional strategies for integrating graduate attributes need to acknowledge the importance of academics’ belief systems
• A lack of confidence to teach and assess certain graduate attributes may be a key obstacle in institutional initiatives to successfully integrate attributes across the disciplines. Understanding this issue should inform strategies for professional development and organisational change
• The privileging by academics of graduate attributes such as critical thinking, written communication and problem solving over attributes such as teamwork and ICT literacy has implications for the skills graduates take with them into employment and the broader community
• Influencing academic staff beliefs is critical to the successful integration of graduate attributes across disciplines

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