Work based placements: fostering the development of Graduate Attributes at Masters level?

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Background: It is increasingly an expectation – of students, academics and potential employers – that University education will encourage and support the development of Graduate Attributes. Graduate Attributes are designed to enhance preparedness for further study, future employment and citizenship post-graduation (1). While they are becoming recognised internationally, Graduate Attributes vary between institutions. At the University of Aberdeen, we have nineteen grouped across four domains (see Figure 1).

Aim: To explore the role of work based placements in the development of Graduate Attributes at Masters level.

Methods: Three multiple choice surveys were conducted at two time points with our 2017-18 cohort of PUSS21 Work Based Placements with Health and Development Sector Organisations to ascertain their expectations and experiences of developing our nineteen Graduate Attributes through their placements (presented: Academic Excellence 1-5; Critical Thinking & Effective Communication 6-11; Learning & Personal Development 12-14; Active Citizenship 15-19). Responses could be submitted anonymously. Reflective Commentary submissions (30% of assessment) were reviewed unblinded. Descriptive statistics were applied to survey responses and grounded theory analysis was applied to Reflective Commentary submissions.

Results: Seventeen students took part in the course in 2017-18. Fifteen completed the course by the assessment deadline of 30 March 2018. Two have yet to complete due to host organisational issues affecting start dates. From the fifteen who completed, thirteen (87%) responded to surveys about their Graduate Attributes development intentions and perceived progress. Seven (47%) completed the survey to provide a final assessment of their experiences of developing our Graduate Attributes development intentions and perceived progress. Six (40%) students reflected explicitly on the development of Graduate Attributes.

The survey results show that respondents set out to develop at least one Graduate Attribute, with most of the focus being on Academic Excellence attributes (4-5). The most ‘popular’ attribute that students perceived they were developing, however, was 6. A capacity for problem identification, the collection of evidence, synthesis and dispassionate analysis (n=60;40%). After completing placements, the same number of respondents reported that they had developed this attribute. In addition, 10. An ability to work independently and as part of a team and 16. An awareness and appreciation of social and cultural diversity, were considered to have been developed by an equal number of respondents (n=60;40%). No respondents set out to or perceived that they were developing 8. A capacity for attentive exchange, informed argument and reasoning. 18. An appreciation of concepts of enterprise and leadership in all aspects of life or 19. A readiness for citizenship in an inclusive society. However, at the end of the placements, at least one respondent reported developing each of these attributes.

In their Reflective Commentaries, some students specified examples that contributed to their development of one or more. Others were not explicit. Students generally reflected positively about their placements, using words like ‘helped’, ‘valuable’, different’, ‘interesting’. Challenges were welcomed as learning experiences. A word cloud summarising all feedback is presented to the right (see Figure 4).

Discussion and Conclusions: Our 2017-18 Masters students reported the development of all nineteen University of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes through work based placements when surveyed, but did not always explicitly identify them when reflecting. Research and communication skills were highlighted and student learning experiences appear to be improved through work based placements, indicating potential evidence for enhancement. Work based placements may offer increased and accelerated development of Graduate Attributes, although this is not clear. More work is needed to map and measure the development of Graduate Attributes through intended learning outcomes within and across courses and programmes at the University of Aberdeen. Distinctions between Graduate Attributes development at Undergraduate and Masters levels should be further explored.


Acknowledgements: Thank you to the placement host organisations 2017-18, the three students who approved my use of their reflective writing to illustrate a range of examples for improving self-awareness, and the University of Aberdeen for funding the printing of this poster.

Figure 1: University of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes (n=19)

A common approach to fostering their development, and an improved student experience, is through work based placements. We introduced work based placements with health and development sector organisations as an elective for MSc Global Health and Management students at the University of Aberdeen in 2013. In 2017, I added an explicit focus on developing Graduate Attributes to the course aims and assessment:

Aim #4: To develop a range of transferrable skills (including objective setting, monitoring, communication and networking, independent research and self-evaluation, and interpersonal and team-working skills), as well as our Graduate Attributes.

Assessment #2: Detail the development of transferrable skills and Graduate Attributes in the Reflective Commentary.

Aim: By working with NHS I gained skills and experience that University education will encourage and support.

W: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/iahs/research/postgraduate-education/index.php