



THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH

## Graduate Attributes

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Governments, employers, prospective students, and their parents and supporters, are asking searching questions about the value of university education and of individual disciplines. This, alongside competitor activity, an economic environment that is particularly harsh for recent graduates, and complex, cross-cutting challenges in areas such as health, climate, and society, presents strong drivers for work developing our students' graduate attributes.

This paper summarises what they are, their potential value, how they can be developed, and how they can support a transformative experience for our students.

### What are graduate attributes?

Graduate attributes should encapsulate the skills, qualities, and attitudes that are intentionally developed through the transformative experience of university education.

High-quality education can be a transformative experience, shaping our ways of knowing, doing, and being. Each student joins the University from different educational backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. While studying we want students to deepen their knowledge and understanding, to ask questions, and to learn how to learn. Through this experience, we want students to broaden their horizons and ways of thinking, and to develop their current skills and abilities and learn new ones, helping them in their studies, future careers, and their role in society. When institutionally identified, articulated, and embedded, these skills, abilities, and ways of thinking are 'graduate attributes'. <sup>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</sup>

There are four different ways in which staff typically conceptualise graduate attributes, falling into two general categories. Understanding these can help us identify individually, and agree collectively, what we mean by 'graduate attributes'. <sup>6, 7, 8, 9</sup>

- **Additive** – graduate attributes are viewed as discrete from other university learning.
  - **Irrelevant** – basic skills that are irrelevant as they are a prerequisite for university.
  - **Unrelated** – useful skills that complement university learning, that have little or no relation to disciplinary learning, and can be 'taught' in a separate supplementary curriculum.

- **Transformative** – graduate attributes are viewed as interacting with other university learning.
  - **Abilities of application** – abilities that let students translate, make use of, or apply disciplinary knowledge in new contexts.
  - **Integral** – abilities that infuse and enable university learning and knowledge.

How we choose to view graduate attributes influences their impact on the education experience, and the extent to which they can be used to surface disciplinary distinctiveness.

## Why are graduate attributes valuable?

Graduate attributes can be used to help us equip our students for the future, support ED&I, create an integrated university experience, and respond to external debate about the value and purpose of HE.

Realising  
University  
strategy,  
vision, and  
values

The focus on developing students' skills and talent and equipping them for the future is evident across Strategy 2030, in particular *'The undergraduate curriculum will support breadth and choice, preparing students, graduates and alumni to make a difference in whatever they do, wherever they do it'*<sup>2</sup>. The aims of graduate attributes are also reflected in our values: *'We are a place of transformation and of self-improvement, driven to achieve benefit for individuals, communities, societies and our world'*<sup>1</sup>. Graduate attributes can support a range of agendas, such as scholarship, citizenship, and employability through their application in different contexts – in education, society and community, work and career.<sup>10</sup>

Articulating the  
value of the  
Edinburgh  
experience

Clear articulation of the value and purpose of the Edinburgh experience is important for our prospective students, their parents and supporters, and their potential future employers. Identifying and harnessing a shared identity and language through a graduate attributes framework can help show the wealth of opportunity that studying at the University offers.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup>

Creating an  
integrated and  
coherent  
university  
experience

It can be easy for the constituent parts of the University experience to be seen in isolation, but students' growth and transformation come from the fullness of their life while at University. Given their cross-cutting nature, graduate attributes can offer a shared framework to increase individuals' understanding of what is common, as well as appreciating important disciplinary distinctiveness. They can help schools work together, support individuals to make connections between the different parts of students' curricular, co-

curricular, and extra-curricular lives\*, and increase students' aspirations and motivations around lifelong learning and development. <sup>14, 15</sup>

Equality,  
diversity, and  
inclusion

It is well known that inequalities exist in entry to, engagement with, and capacity to benefit from, the diverse range of opportunities available to students while at university. Embedding the development and awareness of graduate attributes through academic curricula can help to ensure **all** students can build these qualities as part of their university experience, not only those with the interest or capacity to engage in opportunities beyond the academic curriculum. <sup>13, 15, 16</sup>

Equipping our  
students for an  
uncertain  
future – in  
work and  
society

The global environment is one where the rate of change is intensifying and the need for graduates who can help tackle the challenges faced by society and the world is evident. Equipping students with graduate attributes and supporting them to articulate these with confidence are core parts of empowering students for future success and of *'recognising the complexities of a world in which specific knowledge quickly becomes redundant, but a wider skillset combined with the ability to continue to learn sets graduates apart'* <sup>17</sup>. For a fuller exploration, see the Curriculum Transformation briefing paper *'Skills for the Future of Work'*. <sup>18, 19, 20, 21</sup>

External policy  
drivers and  
debates

Debates about the purpose and value of university education continue, including questions about the relative value of different disciplines. Recent reports show how graduate attributes support engagement with these questions, at a sector level, for individual institutions, and importantly for disciplines, where graduate attributes offer an opportunity to highlight their distinctive strengths. <sup>22, 23, 24</sup>

### How can graduate attributes be developed and supported?

Graduate attributes are developed through a combination of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences. However, the curriculum is central to ensuring all students have opportunity to develop their graduate attributes via meaningful experiences, awareness raising, and reflection.

The impact of graduate attributes comes from embedding and supporting them, helping our students transform and grow.

\* Definitions vary across the sector; here we use the following to distinguish and highlight the importance of each:

- curricular experiences – students' experiences on their academic courses
- co-curricular experiences – other activities that are either facilitated by or part of the wider University experience, for example optional workshops, student representation, and peer support activities
- extra-curricular experiences – the experiences students have outside of their university life.

Students' development of their graduate attributes requires:

- engaging in meaningful and diverse **experiences** that build and use a range of attributes
- increasing **awareness** of the attributes needed and used
- **reflecting** on their use in different contexts to deepen the mastery and build flexibility for future application.

Curricular experiences and intentional design

Students' curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular experiences are all critical in developing the strongest and most flexible set of attributes, and students derive greatest benefits from harnessing all three.<sup>25</sup> However, curricular experiences enable *all* students to benefit, including those who do not have equal access to, or interest in, co- and extra-curricular opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

In the curriculum, every choice we make about how we teach, support, and assess learning requires a range of attributes in our students. All learning and teaching activities already influence the graduate attributes our students are developing, shaping disciplinary ways of thinking and practising, and the diversity of our pedagogical approaches informs the range of the attributes developed. However, the impact is more substantial when this is intentional rather than a by-product.<sup>10, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30</sup>

The value of intentional curriculum design in supporting graduate attributes prompted the creation of a curriculum toolkit covering 10 curriculum design elements that foster student development and includes extensive examples linked to Teaching Matters. [www.ed.ac.uk/employability/curriculum-toolkit](http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/curriculum-toolkit)

Awareness

Many staff recognise the attributes used during a course, programme, or co-curricular experience, but do our students? How transparent is it to students which attributes they are developing, how, and why? Ensuring a consistent and repeated message throughout the student experience raises their awareness and builds their confidence. Equally, awareness of what is not being developed or what opportunities are inaccessible to some, will help all involved consider ways these gaps can be addressed.<sup>13, 31, 32, 33</sup>

Reflection

Without reflection, students may be aware of the graduate attributes used during an experience but the growth achieved and the impact seen beyond the experience can be limited. In many areas within and beyond the curriculum, reflection is being used to successfully diversify the learning, teaching, and assessment practices and to expand students' development. Where reflective practice is embedded, we generally see positive impacts in students building and strengthening attributes that can then be flexibly and purposefully adapted to new problems and contexts, drawing out and deepening the learning, and stimulating an approach of ongoing learning and development.<sup>34, 35, 36</sup>

## Considerations

Graduate attributes are sometimes criticised for being statements that carry little meaning or value and that is true if they are not integrated, embedded, and supported. Having and enabling an institutional framework of graduate attributes that is contextualised by disciplines can help universities define and deliver the transformative value they see in their educational experiences.

The University has had an agreed framework of graduate attributes for several years.<sup>37</sup> Its efficacy has been limited by the extent and variability to which these attributes have been meaningfully and fully embedded. Curriculum Transformation presents an opportunity to revisit the University's graduate attributes, identify those that reflect our current and future identity and vision, and explore how best to embed and support them. If we choose to do this, some questions and prompts to consider include:

- How do we work towards a shared understanding of how graduate attributes should relate to university learning – are they separate but complementary, or are they integrated?
- How can curriculum design (including assessment) and our quality assurance and enhancement processes support the intentional and effective development of graduate attributes?
- How would we successfully engage the University community and its partners in developing an institutional approach to defining and embedding graduate attributes in the University experience and drawing out disciplinary distinctiveness?
- What barriers may individuals encounter in making graduate attributes part of the University experience and how could we tackle them?
- How would we ensure leadership and coordination that supports effective alignment with institutional priorities and agendas to maximise impact?

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