



Education and training

Development of graduate attributes for the discipline of psychology

Graduate attributes are used by universities to highlight the characteristics that a graduate can be expected to have attained during their study, and often represent the culture and relative strengths of the university. Recent changes in government higher education policy and a tight labour force have led to an increased emphasis on university graduate attributes, student learning outcomes, and their assessment. In view of this, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education recently funded a discipline-based project, led by Associate Professor Jacquelyn Cranney, to investigate whether a set of national psychology graduate attributes would provide a more useful framework for what is becoming a relatively specialised undergraduate program in the discipline of psychology (Lipp et al., 2006). One of the key questions to be addressed was 'What knowledge, skills and values could a graduate of a 3- or 4-year sequence in psychology attain in order to further prepare them for postgraduate training, or for entry into the workforce?'

The process of determining graduate attributes

The Carrick project examined graduate attributes published by international groups, such as the American Psychological Association (APA, 2006), and developed a set of Australian graduate attributes through an extensive process of consultations with key groups, including university lecturing staff teaching psychology, the Heads of Schools and Departments of Psychology Association (HODSPA), and the APS Program Development and Accreditation Committee (PDAC). Through this process of consultation, the initial ten identified psychology graduate attributes were narrowed down to six. In defining the attributes, it was found that the generic skills of any university graduate were enhanced and complemented by the specific skills acquired through a major in psychology, and that these attributes aid in asserting the discipline's own identity within an increasingly complex university learning environment (Barnett, 2000).

The six psychology graduate attributes

The identified psychology graduate attributes provide a comprehensive list of the capacities that undergraduate students of psychology can develop during their three or four years at university, and are presented in abbreviated form in the accompanying table. The attributes comprise the knowledge, skills and values which are consistent with the science and application of psychology, and reflect the principles of the scientist-practitioner model for training in psychology. However, the graduate attributes also support the large proportion of undergraduate psychology students who go on to vocational pathways other than professional psychology, and are designed to be integrated with and enhance other elements of the student learning experience, rather than be mutually exclusive of them.

Each of the six attributes is accompanied by a list of suggested student learning outcomes. These provide students with an idea of what they can expect to achieve during their undergraduate degree, and provide academics with support for the measurement of student performance.

How the graduate attributes can be used

The graduate attributes developed by the Carrick Institute project were designed to complement the APAC *Rules for Accreditation & Accreditation Standards for Psychology Courses* (APAC, 2008), but have now been partially incorporated into this document in recognition of their potential to facilitate the provision of a strong educational foundation irrespective of vocational choice.

The graduate attributes can be used by Schools and Departments of Psychology when designing curricula and assessments, and, beyond the minimum requirements set down in the APAC Accreditation Standards, may assist in designing courses to develop the particular strengths which an academic unit offers.

The project has specified what is important about undergraduate education from an outcomes perspective, potentially serving as an information source about psychology for the general public, governments and university planners. The integration of some of the student learning outcomes into the APAC Accreditation Standards reinforces their usefulness in the teaching of undergraduate psychology students to prepare them for both future professional training and also for entering the workforce.

There are still a number of questions which need to be addressed, including how the graduate attributes could be developed across the year levels of undergraduate training to further promote abilities valuable to the discipline. Furthermore, there is scope to create resources to assist with the integration and mapping of attributes and learning outcomes, as well as the development of teaching strategies to facilitate learning in some areas where academics may not have traditionally ventured. In addition, the graduate attributes can form a foundation for assessment strategies, guidelines for professional progression, and the explicit structuring of programs that combine majors in psychology with other disciplines or professions to create desirable and transparent inter-professional career pathways. ■

Acknowledgment of authorship

The following people significantly contributed to the development of the graduate attributes: Associate Professor Jacquelyn Cranney MAPS, Dr Craig Turnbull, Dr Fiona White MAPS, Dr Stephen Provost MAPS, Dr Frances Martin MAPS, Professor Mary Katsikitis MAPS, Dr Nicholas Voudouris MAPS, Dr Iain Montgomery FAPS, Associate Professor Lynne Cohen MAPS, Professor Patrick Heaven MAPS, Dr Sue Morris and Kandice Varcin.

Graduate attributes of the Australian undergraduate psychology program

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 1: KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PSYCHOLOGY

A demonstrated understanding of the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in the core topics of psychology, as outlined by the national accreditation body (currently the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council)

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of core topics
- Delineate psychology as a scientific discipline
- Explain the major themes in psychology
- Explain the major perspectives of psychology using discipline concepts, language, and major theories

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 2: RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

The ability to understand, apply and evaluate basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis and interpretation, and the appropriate use of technologies

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Describe the basic characteristics of the science of psychology
- Describe, apply and evaluate the different research methods
- Demonstrate practical skills in laboratory-based and other psychological research
- Describe and evaluate questionnaire and test construction, implementation and interpretation
- Describe the principles for designing, implementing and evaluating programs of behaviour change
- Undertake statistical analysis appropriately
- Design and conduct basic studies to address psychological questions

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 3: CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Respect and use critical and creative thinking, sceptical inquiry, and the scientific approach to solve problems related to behaviour and mental processes

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Apply knowledge of the scientific method in thinking about problems related to behaviour and mental processes
- Question claims that arise from myth, stereotype, pseudo-science or untested assumptions
- Demonstrate an attitude of critical thinking
- Evaluate the quality of information
- Use reasoning, problem solving and evidence to recognise, develop, defend, and criticise arguments

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 4: VALUES IN PSYCHOLOGY

Value empirical evidence; tolerate ambiguity during the search for greater understanding of behaviour and knowledge structures; act ethically and professionally; understand the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity; and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology as a discipline

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Recognise and respect social, cultural, linguistic, spiritual and gender diversity
- Explain how the science and practice of psychology is influenced by social, historical, professional, and cultural contexts
- Recognise how privilege, power, and oppression may affect prejudice, discrimination, and inequity
- Recognise the limitations of one's psychological knowledge and skills, and value life-long learning
- Evaluate psychologists' behaviour in psychological research and other professional contexts in relation to the APS Code of Ethics, as well as the Australian National Practice Standards for the Mental Health Workforce

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 5: COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Communicate effectively in a variety of formats and contexts

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Write a standard research report using American Psychological Association (APA) formatting conventions
- Write effectively in a variety of formats and for a variety of purposes
- Demonstrate effective oral communication skills
- Collaborate effectively, demonstrating an ability to: work with groups to complete projects within reasonable timeframes; manage conflicts appropriately and ethically

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE 6: LEARNING AND THE APPLICATION OF PSYCHOLOGY

Understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social and organisational issues

Suggested learning outcomes:

- Describe major areas of applied psychology
- Apply knowledge of legislative frameworks
- Apply knowledge of consumer and carer participation in psychological care
- Apply knowledge of psychology, society and the workplace
- Demonstrate a capacity for independent learning to sustain personal and professional development

A full version of the graduate attributes document, *Graduate attributes for the four-year Australian undergraduate psychology program*, is available from www.apac.psychology.org.au.

References

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