

# 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).



Academic Excellence	Critical Thinking & Effective Communication
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 In-depth and extensive knowledge, understanding and skills at internationally-recognised levels in their chosen discipline(s);</li> <li>2 A breadth of knowledge, understanding and skills beyond their chosen discipline(s);</li> <li>3 An ability to participate in the creation of new knowledge and understanding through research and inquiry;</li> <li>4 A contextual understanding of past and present knowledge and ideas;</li> <li>5 An intellectual curiosity and a willingness to question accepted wisdom and to be open to new ideas</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6 A capacity for independent, conceptual and creative thinking;</li> <li>7 A capacity for problem identification, the collection of evidence, synthesis and dispassionate analysis;</li> <li>8 A capacity for attentive exchange, informed argument and reasoning;</li> <li>9 An ability to communicate effectively for different purposes and in different contexts;</li> <li>10 An ability to work independently and as part of a team;</li> <li>11 A diverse set of transferable and generic skills</li> </ol>
Learning & Personal Development	Active Citizenship
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 An openness to, and an interest in, life-long learning through directed and self-directed study;</li> <li>13 An awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses;</li> <li>14 A capacity for self-reflection, self-discovery and personal development</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15 An awareness and appreciation of ethical and moral issues;</li> <li>16 An awareness and appreciation of social and cultural diversity;</li> <li>17 An understanding of social and civic responsibilities, and of the rights of individuals and groups;</li> <li>18 An appreciation of the concepts of enterprise and leadership in all aspects of life;</li> <li>19 A readiness for citizenship in an inclusive society</li> </ol>

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 transferable skills (including objective setting and 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 transferable skills and [Graduate Attributes](#) in the **Reflective Commentary**.

**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 *PU5521 Work Based Placements with Health and Development Sector Organisation* students 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 development (see Figure 2). All fifteen (100%) submitted Reflective Commentaries. Six (40%) students reflected explicitly on the development of Graduate Attributes (see Figure 3).

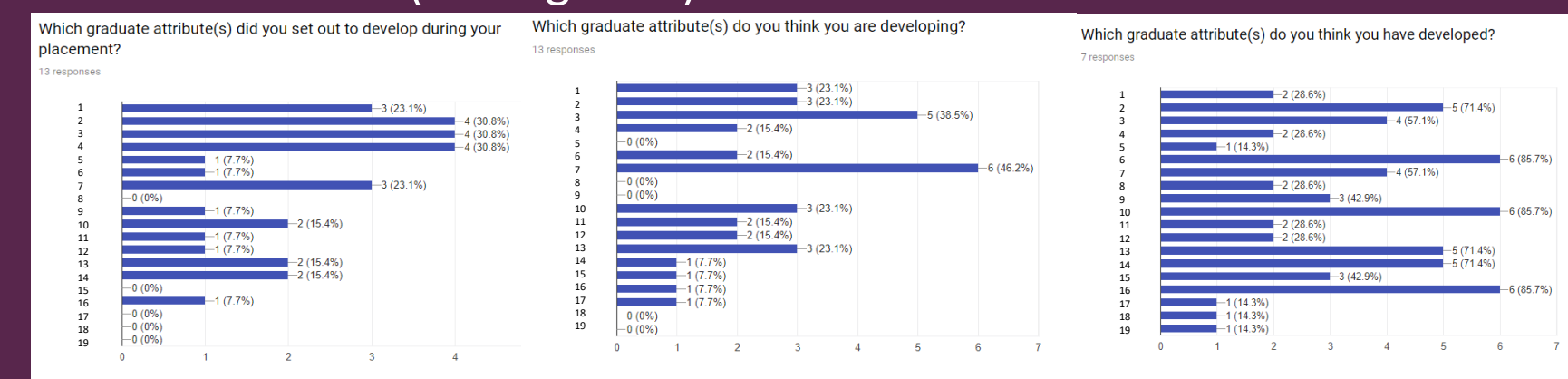


Figure 2: Survey results

**GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES**  
The experience has helped me to achieve the following graduate attributes:

**CRITICAL THINKING & EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**  
1) A capacity for independent, conceptual and creative thinking.  
Comprehensiveness and transparent feedback from supervisors has helped me to challenge myself through the project. It has been motivating to hear different points of views and it has developed my creative thinking. Both supervisor shared their intelligence and experiences which helped me to gain my knowledge.

**LEARNING & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**  
3) A capacity for self-reflection, self-discovery and personal development  
The placement was challenging and growth experience. It developed my professional working skills as a post-graduate student.

The achievements of the project have been very few, however, the one I am most proud of, is the patience and remaining calm as I was being disregarded as an employee and my competencies were depreciated. This contributed to the **graduate attribute** of Learning and Personal Development. It definitely mapped out new strengths and weaknesses I possess, such as an ability to disown anger and humiliation and focus on improving what I am in control of.

**Academic excellence** By working with NHS I gained skills at internationally-recognised levels and the review to be published will enable me to participate in the creation of new knowledge through research.  
**Critical thinking and effective communication** The literature review helped me learn on problem identification, evidence collection, synthesising and analysing results. I also gained ability to work independently and as part of a team with the supervisors.  
**Personal development** I have identified my personal strengths in working with minimal supervision and meeting deadlines.  
**Active citizenship** By working with a team I have been able to appreciate different moral issues and social diversity.

Figure 3: Excerpts from Reflective Commentaries

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 (1-5). 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=6;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=6;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).



Figure 4: Word cloud from all Reflective Commentaries (n=15)

**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.

**Reference:** (1) Higher Education Academy Graduate Attributes Framework <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/graduate-attributes-framework/> (accessed 20 April 2018)

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