BOOSTING EMPLOYABILITY AT EDGE HILL UNIVERSITY:

Embedding Graduate Attributes across the University using PebblePad

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SUMMARY

As part of our employability strategy 2020-2025, 20 graduate attributes were identified that all Edge Hill students would have the opportunity to develop during their studies (see Image 1 below). These graduate attributes were developed in consultation with employers, students and staff, and a glossary of terms was produced to ensure consistency across the University as to what these graduate attributes meant (2022).

An ePortfolio system (PebblePad) was introduced to enhance the roll out of the graduate attributes process and to provide a coherent framework for reflection. An existing skills and personal reflective tool, SaPRA, was repurposed to provide a structure for the graduate attributes process. Employers, students, graduates, academic and support staff and the Student Union have all contributed to the processes that have been implemented. Even at this early stage, we have seen a positive impact on employer feedback, Graduate Outcomes and improving individual students' stage of Career Readiness (Career Readiness is a process of identifying what stage a student is in their career planning. At enrolment and re-enrolment each year, the Careers team ask all students a series of questions to establish their stage of Career Readiness.).

CONTEXT

Supporting students to articulate their skills and evidence them effectively during the recruitment and selection process remains of key importance to HEIs. The requirement from the Office for Students (OfS) to ensure programmes meet a minimum threshold of 60% progression into highly skilled employment through the B3 metrics (Condition B3 from the OfS requires all providers to deliver successful outcomes for all of its students. One of these measures focuses on progression i.e. have students from a course progressed into a positive graduate outcome: highly skilled employment, further study or a number of other positive outcomes. More information) places an ever-increasing pressure on Careers Services to support staff and students to meet these expectations.

Since 2014, a skills and personal reflective activity (SaPRA3) has been used at Edge Hill University. The tool was created by the case study author in 2006 with the aim to provide students with a framework for reflection and to support them to generate effective statements of evidence of their skills.

CONTEXT

SaPRA is broken into three distinct stages:

1. Reflection and confidence ranking on a series of different skills and attributes.
2. Creation of an action plan for the further development of skills and attributes where an individual reported that they lacked confidence (ie. self-assessed as 1-3 out of 5)
3. Generation of statements of evidence where an individual has reported themselves as being confident in particular skill or attribute (ie. self-assessed as 3-5).

Various platforms have been used to share the SaPRA tool with students, starting with paper in 2014, then transitioning through a career management tool (CareerHub4)[2015-2018], to a series of excel worksheets [2018-2021] and finally onto our institutional ePortfolio, PebblePad, which we transitioned to in 2022. Each has its own merits, however, with the wholescale institutional adoption of SaPRA taken recently by Edge Hill, PebblePad has proved to be the most reliable and flexible platform. Graduates can retain access to PebblePad after their studies are complete, meaning support remains ongoing. External stakeholders - e.g. employers or volunteering organisations - are also able to access and sign off on student engagement with particular work-based learning activities without needing an account to be verified.

Since its introduction in 2014, SaPRA was embedded across the University, and made bespoke to each programme of study. Academics, students and employers were all involved in the process of identifying which skills should be included in the student reflections. Content was updated every academic year and different versions were produced for Levels 4, 5, 6 and 75. However, as part of our approach to rolling out our new graduate attributes framework institution-wide, the decision was made to move away from offering bespoke SaPRA activities for different programmes and instead to focus on the set list of 20 graduate attributes.

METHODOLOGY & IMPLEMENTATION

Defining the graduate attributes:

Our graduate attributes were developed in partnership with employers, the Student Union, students, academic staff and staff from professional and student services. Our starting point was a series of graduate attributes identified by the Institute of Student Employers (2000). We discussed these attributes with our employer networks to identify what they felt made an Edge Hill graduate unique. Their ideas shaped our approach and also the specifics focus and composition of each graduate attribute. Students were engaged in the process via consultation at faculty boards and through the Student Union representative system. Staff were also asked to reflect on the specific skills students developed as a result of their academic studies. All of these responses were then collated, agreed and became our institutional graduate attributes.

Our revised graduate attributes were launched across the whole University in Sept 2022. They are broken down into four areas, each with a number of different related skills and attributes:

Core Skills

1. Digital Literacy
2. Numeracy and Data Analysis
3. Literacy

Conceptualising Skills

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Planning and Organisation
4. Creative and Innovative Thinking

Reflective Skills

1. People related skills
2. Teamworking

3. Communication
4. Influencing and Negotiating
5. Networking
6. Leadership

Personal Attributes

1. Resilience
2. Adaptability and Flexibility
3. Self-Motivation
4. Self-Belief
5. Professionalism
6. Empathy
7. Inclusivity

A glossary of terms (Image 1) was produced to ensure consistency over the definition of each graduate attribute. This ensures that staff and students have the same understanding when any one of the graduate attributes is referred to:

Image 1: Edge Hill University's 20 Graduate Attributes

In order to achieve institutional roll out of the graduate attributes, a single graduate attributes workbook was created using PebblePad. All students and staff at the institution have access to this workbook. The whole University was expected to engage with the process during 2022/23. This was achieved both by embedding the graduate attributes into the curriculum, and developing extra-curricular activities, such as our Extra Edge award that uses the graduate attributes framework. Support was available to staff to help them to update their module handbooks and assessment briefs to ensure that the graduate attributes were explicitly identified.

As part of the graduate attribute's glossary, examples of evidence for each graduate attribute have been provided. Feedback from students and employers showed us that we needed to be clear and explicit about what we were expecting to see as evidence to help students engage with the reflective elements of our approach.

Image 2 shows a screenshot from the PebblePad workbook, showing one of the graduate attributes (Critical Thinking) and how a student is expected to reflect on their level of confidence:

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Each graduate attribute has its definition which is then followed by some examples of what this graduate attribute might look like in practice. This approach was developed by our Head of Allied Health Professions who allowed us to use his definitions for the graduate attributes workbook.

Students are asked to reflect on their levels of confidence on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being "I lack confidence in this" and 5 being "I could teach someone this". If a student scores themselves 1, 2 or 3 they are asked to develop an action plan to help them improve their levels of confidence. If they score 3, 4 or 5 they are asked to generate some evidence of their confidence and competence in this skill. This can be added to their workbook in whatever format they desire: text, video, photos and so on. The ultimate aim of this process is for students to curate a portfolio of suitable evidence that can be included in future job applications or used as evidence at an interview.

As the student owns the content in the workbook, they can choose who to share it with for feedback. In Careers, we use the content to help students write effective applications for the next stage in their life journey. On some of our academic programmes, the workbook has been embedded as part of the assessment for a module. In other departments, personal tutors use the workbook to structure conversations with their tutees and help them focus on where they need to develop their skills.

The graduate attributes have been embedded into:

- Module handbooks
- Assessment briefings and guidance
- Assessment marking criteria
- Student feedback and action points

Our approach to personal tutoring

Critical Thinking Skills

DEFINITION

Critical thinking is the ability to conceptualise, apply, analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information.

EXAMPLES OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS MIGHT INCLUDE

- Observe and identify a situation/problem
- Gather information
- Break down and analyse the situation
- Sort and organise information
- Accurately apply established techniques of analysis and enquiry to address a problem
- To identify the implications and consequences of actions
- To make a judgement about the quality of the evidence provided, recognising limitations and ambiguities

How confident do you feel about your critical thinking skills?

Low Confidence | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | High Confidence
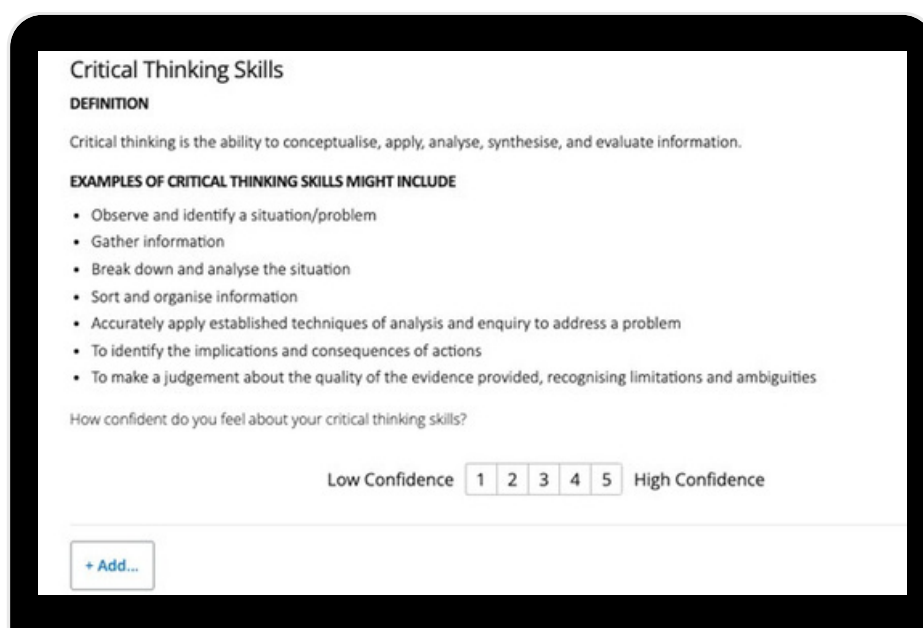
+ Add...

Image 2: Screenshot from PebblePad Graduate Attributes workbook

Whilst the embedding of graduate attributes is mandatory across the institution, exactly how different departments go about embedding the graduate attributes has been left up to them. This allows for different approaches to be implemented depending on the nuances of their cohorts and pedagogical approaches. Some have chosen a whole departmental approach, as evidenced by our department of Sport and Physical Activity. They have embedded the graduate attributes and our stages of Career Readiness into their curricular provision, including assessment, at all levels of study. This is reinforced by their personal tutors who have check lists of topics to discuss at their regular meetings with tutees. The department have also embedded the process into their extra-curricular provision. The department has a large number of active sports clubs and societies, and they are keen to ensure their students are aware of the skills they are developing outside the curriculum, as well as within the curriculum. All of their programmes are professionally accredited, and the graduate attributes process helps with these professional endorsements too. The professional bodies require evidence of professional skills being developed and assessed as part of the curriculum. Our graduate attributes meet these criteria and our approach to embedding them into the curriculum has satisfied their requirements.

Image 3: Example of how the Graduate Attributes are identified in a module handbook at Edge Hill University

CORE SKILLS		CONCEPTUALISING SKILLS	
GA1 Digital Literacy	☒	GA4 Critical Thinking	☒
GA2 Numeracy & Data Analysis	☒	GA5 Complex Problem Solving	☒
GA3 Literacy	☒	GA6 Planning & Organisation	☒
		GA7 Creative & Innovative Thinking	☒
		GA8 Reflective Skills	☒
PEOPLE RELATED SKILLS		PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES	
GA9 Communication	☒	GA14 Adaptability & Flexibility	☒
GA10 Teamworking	☒	GA15 Resilience	☒
GA11 Influencing & Negotiating	☒	GA16 Self-Motivation	☒
GA12 Networking	☐	GA17 Self-Belief	☒
GA13 Leadership	☐	GA18 Professionalism	☒
		GA19 Empathy	☒
		GA20 Inclusivity	☒

In contrast, our Film, Media and Television programme have taken an entirely different approach and embedded the graduate attributes into a single module which is taken by final year students. Their approach has been to group the graduate attributes together into a series of participative seminars. These seminars are focused on making the graduate attributes authentic and linking to real world experiences. They are tutor led, but peer supported. Examples of the seminar topics are:

- Challenges: Self-Confidence and Resilience
- Budgets and Grant Bids
- Assertiveness and Leadership
- Critical Thinking After University

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Our institution-wide project has been large scale and not without its challenges. For example, we weren't able to launch the graduate attributes workbook as intended in October due to technical issues with integrating PebblePad and BlackBoard. However, once the workbook was launched, students and staff were quickly and easily able to engage with the process. There was some concern about staff development needs in leading this process for their students, but the way the graduate attributes workbook has been built in PebblePad means that students are able to follow the process easily themselves. All of the content and guidance for the students is contained within the workbook itself. Staff merely have to act as a guide and facilitator.

Staff have been fully supported with the process with regular workshops being delivered to help staff become familiar with the PebblePad platform. A series of summer roadshows were delivered at staff learning and teaching away days to help staff become confident with the approach. In addition to this, regular drop ins have been held by our learning technology team to support staff further as required. The approach has been discussed at regular internal meetings ie. Faculty board and departmental learning and teaching meetings, allowing staff to give feedback on the processes before they were implemented. The whole process has been positive with good levels of staff engagement.
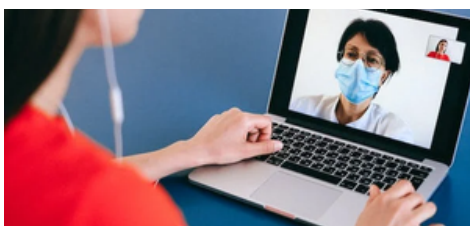
Feedback from employers and external stakeholders is obtained on a regular basis as part of the Careers evaluation process. We hold two feedback weeks each academic year and also obtain feedback from our stakeholders after we deliver events. All feedback received so far has been very positive. We are currently working with a number of organisations6 to help them develop a similar approach for their pupils and/or staff. Employer feedback received during this academic year has also indicated to us how much more prepared our students and graduates are when applying for roles or undertaking placements:

- TVS Supply Chain Solutions:
"Well organised, prepared students, good communicators, better than other Universities"
- Lancashire Police:
"Your careers team are a credit to Edge Hill for the amount of support and inputs available to students - this offer is far superior to other HE establishments we work with. Sadly I doubt your students realise this however I hope they take full advantage of the support available to help them move from full time education towards a career of their choice."
- Young Person's Advisory Service
"We experienced a very high level of student engagement"

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Student feedback shows how the process has helped them to develop confidence and take control of their lives:

"I feel that I can realistically talk about myself in a positive light and don't feel second to other people, even when I should be proud of what I've achieved." [Student 1]

"I have gained a broader perspective of my achievements as an individual and academic. The experiences I have gained over the last two years have broadened my horizons, provided insight into my abilities, and strengthened my confidence." [Student 2]

"This has not only built up my confidence when asking for help but has also equipped me with the knowledge when going for interviews and what's the best things to add into job applications are." [Student 3]

"I have learnt that I should have more confidence in myself and that I should continue to go outside of my comfort zone. Some of the activities I have completed have helped me to be ready to apply to jobs in the future." [Student 4]

STAFF FEEDBACK

Staff feedback indicates the value of our institutional approach:

"The questionnaires, which I adapted for 3 levels in Media, have been a useful tool to enable students to gauge their skills level and needs." [Academic]

"The Graduate Attributes are reviewed regularly by all Personal Tutors as part of a revised Departmental approach introduced in academic year 2022/23, and this has increased students' engagement substantially in careers related activity. This is accompanied by a Department-wide roll-out of PebblePad and Linkedin Learning which is now used by students across all levels of study (4-8). Previously students did not engage with these." [Associate Head of Department]

REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Overall the process of embedding our graduate attributes has been successful. We are still in the early stages of roll out and hope to develop a richer body of evidence over the next few years, including improved Graduate Outcomes. We have a systematic approach to evaluation, review and planning within the Careers team. Feedback from all stakeholders enables us to continually enhance and improve our offer. Engaging with employers from the outset has enabled us to develop a framework that is authentic and links to real world experiences. We hold a twice yearly Graduate Recruiter Forum where we meet with representatives from all employer sectors and discuss with them what their needs are. Their feedback is directly fed back into our approaches. Based on our experiences so far, our biggest piece of advice is to make the process structurally unavoidable, so that staff and students are unable to navigate around or avoid the process. The process has also been truly team based, with staff and students from across the institution being involved in the process from the Student Union to our Learning Technologists, Heads of Departments and staff in Careers.

REFERENCES AND HYPERLINKS

Graduate Outcomes survey https://www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk/about-survey

The Career Readiness process at Edge Hill https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/departments/support/careers/how-can-we-help/career-readiness/

Office for Students (OfS) https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/

Condition B3 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/490d884f-03aa-49cf-907d-011149309983/condition_b3_baselines.pdf

SaPRA (Skills and Personal Reflective Activity) https://epip.pbworks.com/w/page/40663193/Exemplar%20of%20use%204%20-%20Bradford

CareerHub https://careerhub.co.uk/

PebblePad https://www.pebblepad.co.uk/

National Qualification Framework https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels

Institute of Student Employers (ISE) 2000 The IES Annual Graduate review 2000 https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/367.pdf

Edge Hill's Extra Edge Award https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/departments/support/careers/developing-skills-experience/employability-awards/