



University of the
Highlands and Islands
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean

Equipping students for employment: the role of Graduate Attributes

Rosie Alexander & Ann Tilbury
University of the Highlands and Islands

Aims

- Introduce Graduate Attributes
- Outline the university's approach to Graduate Attributes
- Present the draft findings of an ongoing university consultation
- Gather your feedback and reflections



Attributes: Background

‘The skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts’ (Barrie, 2004 p262).



Graduates for the 21st Century:
Integrating the Enhancement Themes

Outcomes and achievements

Graduate Attributes within UHI

- 2010 – original attributes developed as part of Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme
- 2013 – research commissioned by the university identified lack of clarity and gaps in coverage of attributes.
- 2014 – Short Life Working Group convened to review attributes.
- Report written which proposed new revised attributes and recommended an extensive consultation process on these attributes.
- 2016 University establishes steering group to take the consultation forward



Revised Attributes

Understands ethical issues.
Engages with the wider student, local and global communities.
Understands different cultures: global, local, commercial, social.
Displays diplomacy and adjusts behaviour according to context.
Balances different roles (social / professional / community).
Understands the Highlands and Islands context.

Understands team roles and works well as part of a team.
Leadership skills and knowledge.
Works well with others in an online environment.
Develops collaborative relationships with others (including networking).
Displays strong social skills
Understands and applies skills appropriate to the setting.
Demonstrates good customer awareness and customer service skills.
Works to deadlines.

Strong verbal communication skills in a range of contexts (e.g. interviews, presentations, public speaking, dealing with the public).
Strong written communication skills in a range of contexts (e.g. reports, essays, emails).
Strong digital / virtual communication skills in a range of contexts (videoconference, email, discussion boards).
Understands new media and social media.
Tailors approaches to different groups and audiences.
Able to engage and persuade an audience.



Proactive, determined & motivated: sets and works towards personal, academic and career goals.
Reflective & responsive: reflects on achievements, consequences and identifies areas for growth.
Resilient & flexible: responds to challenges positively.
Creative & innovative: able to create, identify and exploit opportunities.
Displays strong time management skills.
Engages in lifelong learning.
Able to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty and failure.
Able to evaluate risks and make educated decisions.

Possesses high level technical and academic knowledge and skills.
Identifies practical application for academic skills and knowledge.
Takes evidence informed decisions.
Intellectually agile and able to solve problems confidently and effectively.
Thinks strategically and deals with complexity.
Able to learn and develop own knowledge
Open to feedback



Aims of consultation

To review the university's draft graduate attributes by gaining feedback from key stakeholders.

- To identify levels of agreement (of staff, students and employers) for the new attributes
- To collect insights from staff students and employers to refine the attributes framework



Methodology

- Convergent, parallel mixed-methods framework
- Three survey instruments for students, staff and employers
 - 10 open questions gathering qualitative data
 - 2 closed items which used involved the use of a five point, Likert scale.
 - Demographic information

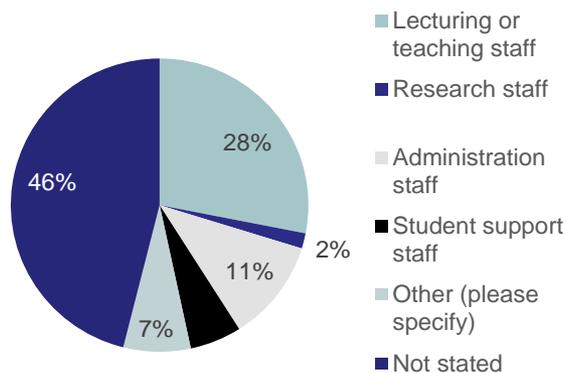


Respondent characteristics

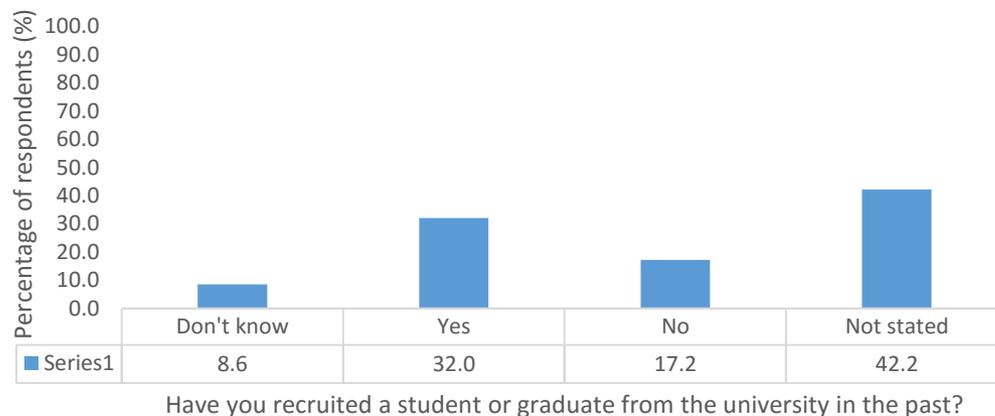
Number of respondents

Students	108
Staff	178
Employers	127
TOTAL	413

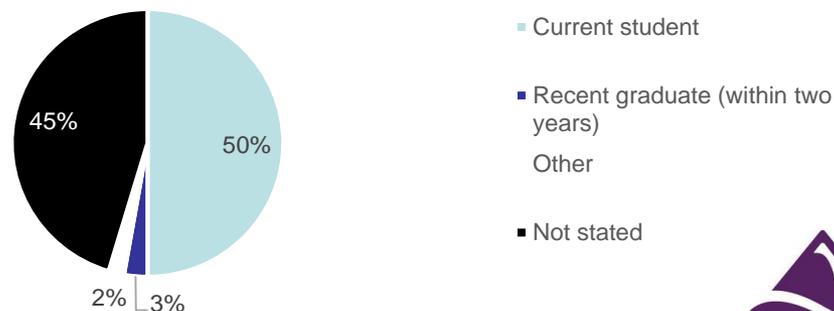
Main role of university staff respondents



Recruitment of university graduates by employer respondents

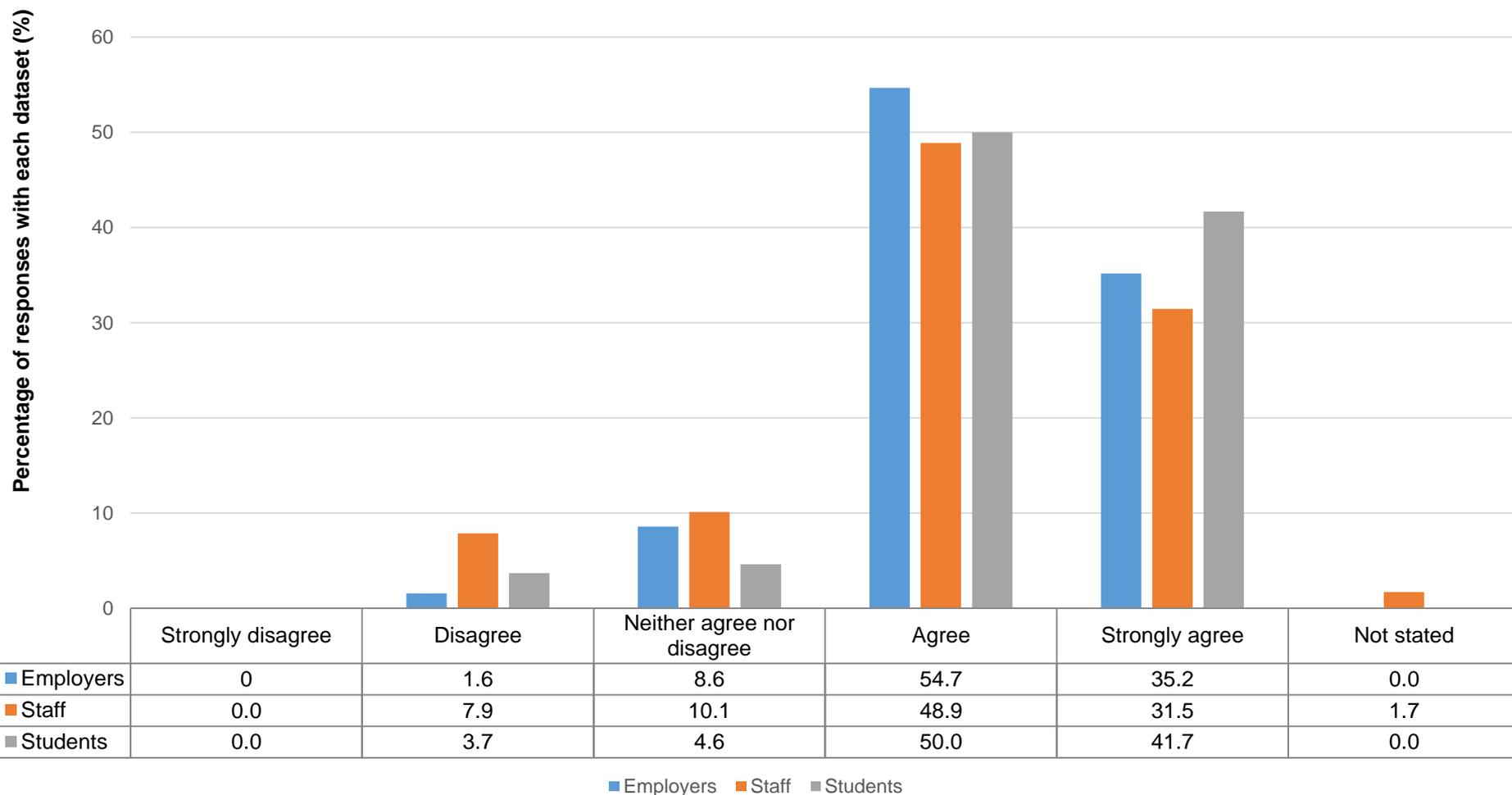


Status of university student respondents



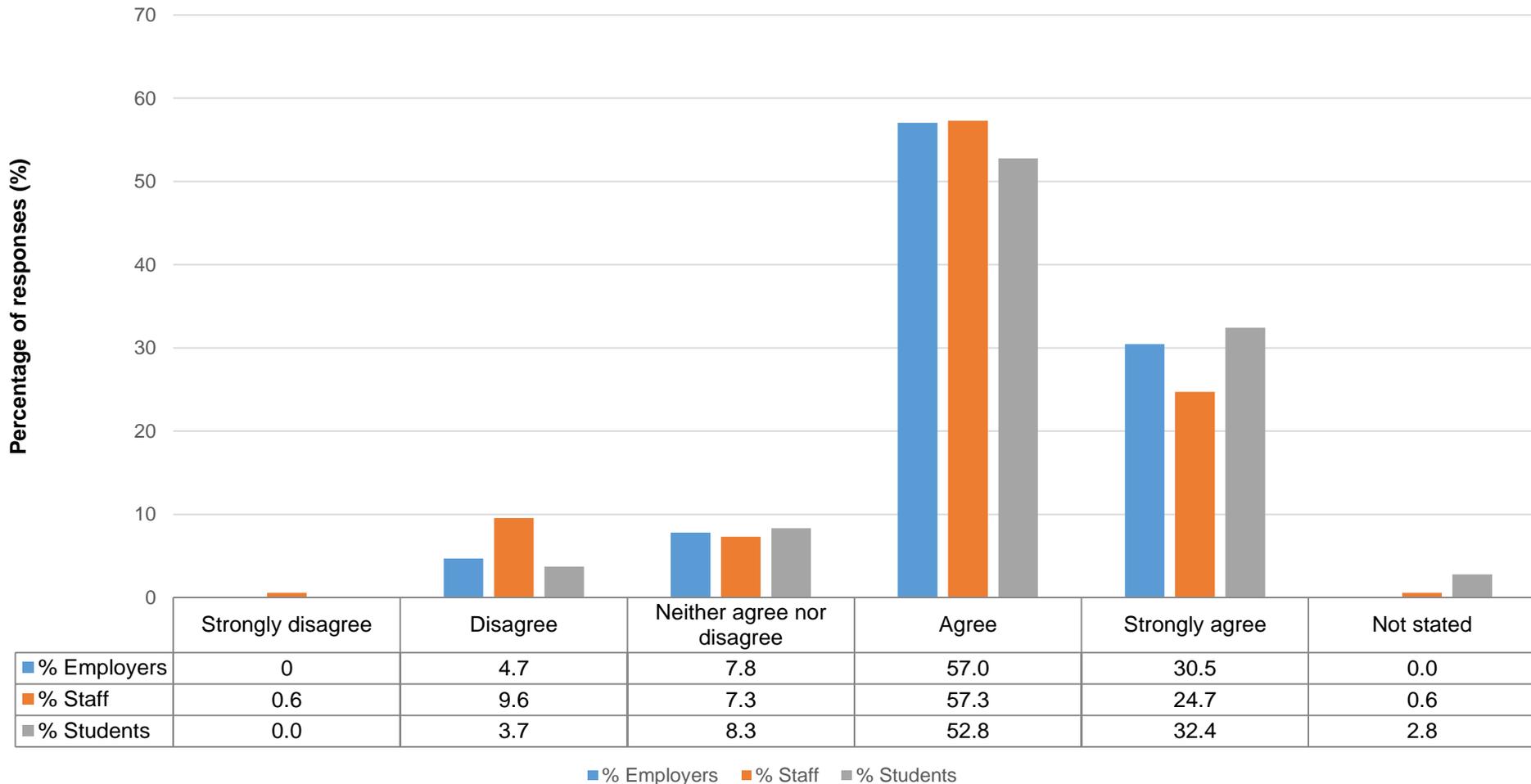
How far do you agree that these top-level attributes reflect the ideal characteristics of a student or graduate from the University of the Highlands and Islands?

Comparison of responses across the three datasets on the top level attributes



How far do you agree that the terminology used for these attributes is understandable and appropriate?

Comparison of responses across the three datasets on the terminology of the top level attributes



Qualitative analysis

Key themes identified from the qualitative analysis were:

- Importance of the initiative
- Aspirational nature:
 - Challenge of levelling and measuring
- Accommodating diversity
 - Need for distinctiveness as individuals and as an institution
- Some suggestions for refinements



Importance of the initiative

- *This is a really good and positive initiative. (Employer)*
- *These skills are what we look for in candidates applying for a position within our organisation. (Employer)*
- *The terminology reflects the language used in our competency based interview questions.(employer)*
- *These core attributes are essential for the students to know even at undergraduate level.It allows them to have a guide as to what to be striving for (staff)*
- *The reason for me to attend the University is to gain all the listed attributes, especially as regards knowledge in a particular field. It is also to gain the experience I'm needing for my future career (student)*



Aspirational nature

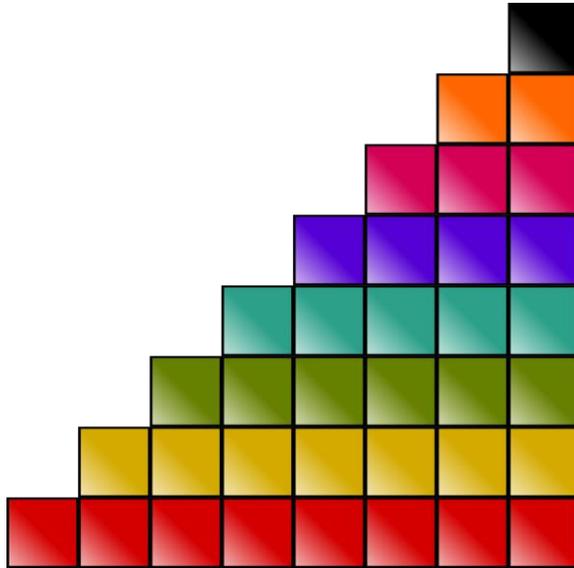


Image courtesy of pixabay.com

It's a comprehensive list of attributes but it could be daunting to newly graduated employees and I wouldn't expect them to be anywhere near as polished as this. The whole list looks more like a CPD profile to work towards in their first 5 years. (employer)

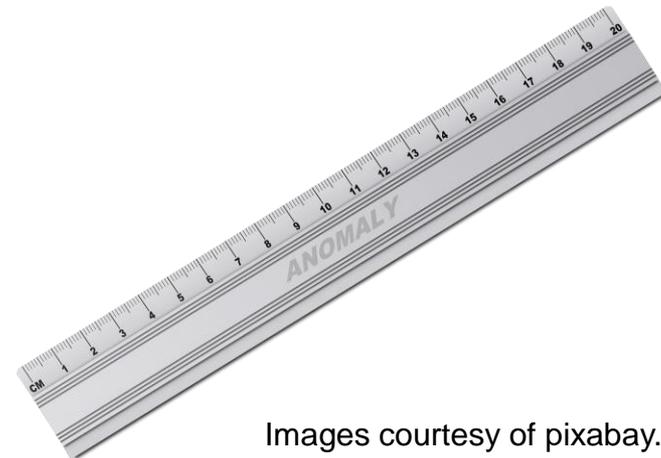


Measuring and levelling



The above attributes would need to be tailored for students at various levels of student. The language would need to be modified to ensure a wide understanding across FE and HE (staff)

These are very idealised - and I wonder how you will measure them.(employer)



Images courtesy of pixabay.com



Accommodating Diversity

Different jobs: ...for an employer the priorities will depend on the position (employer)

Different subjects: This chart appears to reflect a social sciences or health perspective.... (staff)

Different students: As a mature student most are life skills learned already.... (student)

Equality and diversity: I worry that the dynamic, go-getting style of person that you describe in parts of this may not be free from gender bias (employer)



Distinctive individuals



There is something around producing drones....
that is off-putting. Maybe an additional point ...
something like 'developing a distinct personal style'
might help? (employer)



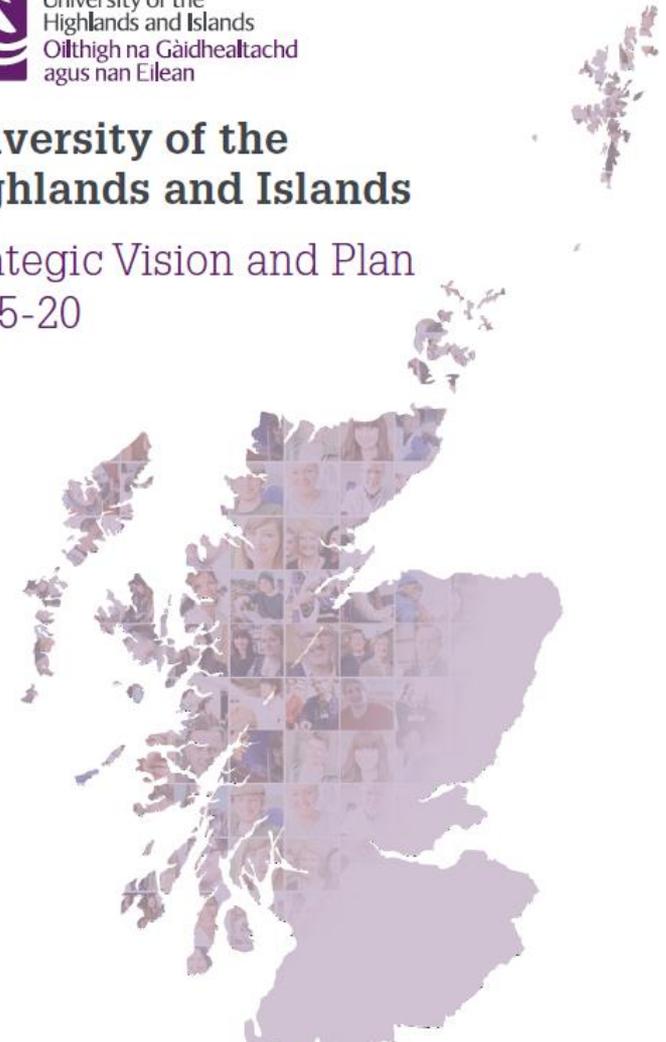
Distinctive university

With the exception of Community Awareness, the other four attributes are core attributes that would be sought for all graduate level personnel. This is not to say that your characteristics are not appropriate - rather that I think you have the correct ones and that the addition of Community Awareness is what is special about the H&I (employer)



**University of the
Highlands and Islands**

Strategic Vision and Plan
2015-20



Terminology

- Importance of clarity
- ‘Community Awareness’ and ‘Knowledge and Academic Skills’ problematic
- Some cross over between interpersonal and communication.
- The subset of skills is helpful to understand attributes....
-but this subset is problematic risking some omissions and cross-over



Image courtesy of pixabay.com



Conclusions

- Staff, students and employers display an appetite for the attributes.
- There is broad agreement on the structure and content of the attributes.
- Consideration must be paid to:
 - The aspirational nature of the attributes
 - How to accommodate diversity and distinctiveness within the attributes
- Detail of attributes helpful, but risks being prescriptive, and not giving full coverage.



Next steps

- Revise overarching attributes names:
 - Community Awareness → Social awareness
 - Knowledge and Academic Skills → Critical thinking
- Remove underpinning skills lists, instead develop materials to provide explanatory examples and details
- Present revised attributes and recommendations for implementation to university for adoption



Questions for you

- What are your initial reflections on the attributes and suggestions for implementation?
- What is your experience of assisting students with their development of key attributes?

Please contact us with your ideas, or if you would like to engage with this work further.



References

- Barrie, S. C. (2004) A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy *Higher Education Research & Development* 23(3) pp261-75
- QAA (2011) [Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes – Outcomes](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/graduates-for-the-21st-century) [online] Available from:
<<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/graduates-for-the-21st-century>>

