

# **The Reality and Challenges of Embedding Graduate Attributes in the Business Studies Curriculum: Case Study of a Higher Education Institution in England**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges of embedding Graduate Attributes in the curriculum of business studies. A case study was used to reflect on the experience of the business school of a specific higher education institution in England to adopt graduate attributes as a strategic vision, and to investigate the challenges which the institution faced in embedding those attributes in the curriculum.

A multi-method approach was adopted in the research. One email and four individual unstructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with academic staff and a manager, and thematic analysis – via NVivo software package – was used to code the qualitative data. Descriptive and non-parametric inferential statistics – via SPSS and Microsoft Excel software – were conducted in secondary data of 257 questionnaires filled by students, of which only 92 of them were practically included in the analysis. Document analysis was also conducted on some formal published and unpublished documents (e.g. *Module Handbook* and *Program Periodic Review*) within the case study.

Two broad emerging qualitative themes, titled (i) marketization of education (ii) strategic vision and different hierarchical levels; were discussed in accordance with the quantitative results, existing literature and context of the case study. The research found that, firstly, marketization of education increased the workload pressure on academic staff and boosted consumer characteristics among some students who are more interested in receiving high exam grades and developing personal employability skills than improving their intellectual. Secondly, a lack of awareness among students and staff about their university's GAs, although both parties understand the general concept of those attributes; which can be attributable to inefficiency in delivering and promoting the university's strategic vision within the module level.

This research should contribute in increasing the awareness in the academia about how to implement GAs effectively, considering a wide range of suggestions which were proposed to enhance the graduate attributes within the pedagogical practices. Although the research considered only one case study of a business school, the findings which the research concluded and discussed are still believed to be relevant to most of HEIs in England, with consideration of the specific context within each institution.

**Keywords:** Graduate Attributes, Employability, Accountability, Marketization, Higher Education, HEIs, Pedagogy, Curriculum, Business, Management, United Kingdom, England.

## 1. Introduction

As economy becomes more knowledge oriented (Duncan, 2015) and employers become more interested in “real-world” skills from graduates (Millican et al., 2011), business students are now looking to increase their employability by developing certain attributes desired in the business world.

Graduate Attributes (GAs) have been placed increasingly under the attention of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Treleaven and Voola, 2008), because they are considered by employers as reasonably acceptable standards which could be used to judge the competency of graduate candidates (Green et al., 2009). GAs are now seen as the students’ overall achievement of their academic life; which does not only include the academic knowledge which the students obtained, but also the soft skills which the students gained during their experience at the university (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Those attributes include – but not limited to – critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, teamwork, discipline knowledge, social responsibility and ethical standards, professionalism and respect to others (Healey et al., 2013; Hunt and Chalmers, 2013; Bartkowiak-Théron and Anderson, 2014; Yamada, 2014).

In Australia, GAs have been subject to debate and research since the 1990s (Barrie et al., 2009; Rigby et al., 2009), but permeated to the UK HEIs only recently. This has been attributed to the quick introduction of marketization of education in England (Parr, 2015), widespread of accountability notion in higher education (Natale and Doran, 2012) and popularity of League Tables (Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2015) which have Graduate Prospects as key measurement indicator of success. All this made English HEIs very keen to equip their students with sufficient and up-to-date GAs.

Due to the importance of GAs in increasing the employability of students (Hager and Holland, 2007); the university, whose business school is the case study of this article, included GAs in its strategic vision a few years ago with an aim , among others, to enhance the employability of its students. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the experiences and challenges faced by the staff of the business school in embedding GAs within the curriculum. The specific research question is “*What are the challenges faced by the academic staff in embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum of a business school?*”

## 2. Methodology

A multi-method case study was undertaken by combining qualitative methods used to collect and analyse the primary data, and quantitative methods used to analyse secondary questionnaire data which was previously collected in the business school. The research mainly relied on the qualitative methods to draw upon thematic analysis to address the research question. The quantitative data was for supporting the qualitative findings.

### *Quantitative Study*

Secondary data of 257 questionnaires was previously collected from students in the business school. The questionnaire was originally developed to measure the students' understanding and perception to university's GAs. It asked the respondents first whether they are aware of the university's GAs, and then instructed those who answered "yes" to rank the attributes, by using five-point Likert scale, in order to three criteria (table 1).

**Table 1: Ranking Criteria of the University's GAs**

Sets of Likert Statements	Ranking Criterion	Likert Scale
Set1	Importance placed by the respondents	From 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)
Set2	Importance that would be placed by the employers	From 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)
Set3	Emphasis that has been put on GAs during the respondents' studies	From 1 (no emphasis) to 5 (lot of emphasis)

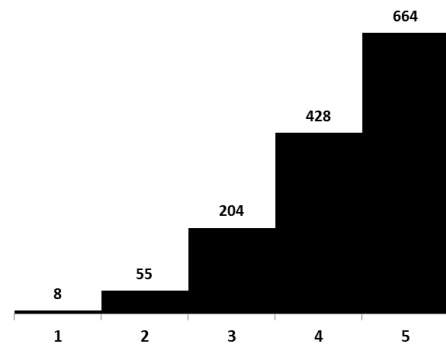
Descriptive and non-parametric inferential statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data. SPSS software package was mainly used to analysis the data, with the help of Microsoft Excel software in some cases requiring special arrangement of the data set.

Median was used to summarize, merge and rank Likert data; because it is the best option for ordinal and highly skewed data (Macfie and Nufrio, 2006) (as shown in table 2 and figure 1). However, Interquartile Mean was also used as an equitable mechanism for ranking Likert data.

**Table 2 : Frequencies Table of All Likert-Scale Data (15 Statements)\***

Likert Values		Frequency**
Not important / No emphasis	1	8
	2	55
	3	204
	4	428
Very important / Lot of emphasis	5	664
Missing		21
N (92 respondents)***		92 X15 = 1380

**Figure 1: Histogram of All Likert-Scale Data (15 Statements)\***



\* It is shown above that the data as whole is highly skewed. Moreover, most of the individual Likert statements have also skewed distributions.

\*\* Based on all raw Likert data.

\*\*\* The respondents who answered “yes” to Q1 and filled Likert statements (see table 8).

### *Qualitative Study*

Qualitative methods were primarily used to address the research question, because firstly, qualitative methods enabled me to address the exploratory research question and link it to the context within the university (Dul and Hak, 2008). Secondly, qualitative tools helped in gathering deep information from the research’s small sample (Saunders et al., 2009).

Individual unstructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with four academic staff, working in the business school, who were chosen based on convenience sampling. The qualitative data also contain email correspondences between me and an academic manager in the school (see the participants’ details in table 4). The interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the participants. The tapes were transcribed verbatim to avoid any data collection error (Zikmund et al., 2012); using a system of transcription symbols – inspired from Jeffersonian’s method (Potter et al., 1987) – to make the text more understandable, and to inform the reader about the context (table 3). Consent was also obtained from the manager to include the email correspondences in the research data.

**Table 3: Symbols used in the Qualitative Quotes**

Symbol	Use
[...]	Omitted parts, by the researcher, because it is not related to the point discussed.
[text]	Writings added by the researcher to complete the sentence or to make the text grammatically correct.
(text)	Writings added by the researcher to make the text more meaningful. Additional comments from the researcher to describe meaning of the text or the context in which it was mentioned.
<text>	The speaker's emotions and facial expressions.

The research was conducted according the university's *Protocol for Reflective Practitioner Work by Academic Staff*. In order to comply with the ethics regulations and not reveal the identity of the research participants, a special anonymity system was used to refer to the participants (Burton and Steane, 2004) (table 4).

**Table 4: Research Participants\***

#	Anonymity	Participant's Details	Interview Duration (minutes)
1	M-FTL-ML	A male full-time lecturer who is involving in module leading	21:27
2	M-VL-ML	A male visiting lecturer who is involving in module leading	24:35
3	F-VL-T	A female visiting lecturer who is not involving in module leading	18:18
4	M-VL-T	A male visiting lecturer who is not involving in module leading	20:30
5	Manager	A manager who is involving in curriculum design	Email Interview

\* The majority of the participants are visiting lecturers which reflects a disproportionate representation of permanent staff  
The anonymity codes consist of the first initials of the participant's gender "M or F", Job title "FTL or VL" and teaching responsibility "ML or T". The researcher referred to himself within the transcripts by using the word "Me".

M: Male

F: Female

FTL: Full-time Lecturer

VL: Visiting Lecturer

ML: Module Leader

T: Seminar Tutor

Manager: code is intentionally lacking personal details in order to protect the manager's identity which might be easier to unhide

Thematic analysis – via NVivo software package – was used to code the interview transcripts and categorize the emerging themes under two key topics (see figure 3). The qualitative study also includes document analysis of some formal published and unpublished documents within the business school such as *Module Handbook*, *Program Validation* and *Program Periodic Review*.

A subjective approach was used in presenting and discussing the qualitative findings (Falvo, 2010), and first person writing style was adopted in the discussion and conclusion sections; whereas, generalization of quantitative results was avoided in some cases, since it was not clear whether the sample data was statistically representative to the population (Bryman and Cramer, 2003). A number of semantics were used in the discussion and conclusion sections (see table 5).

**Table 5: Semantics used in Discussion & Conclusion**

Word	Refer to
Interviewee(s)	Educator(s) participated in face-to-face interviews
Respondent(s)	Student(s) participated in a questionnaire survey
School	Business school which is the research case study
University	University which includes the research case study
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions in general

### 3. Results and Findings

#### *Quantitative Study*

The data of 257 questionnaires were reasonably divided between males (52.3%) and females (47.7%). The majority of respondents were between 18-24 years old (89.5%), and undergraduate students (91.3%) (table 6).

**Table 6: Respondents' Age and Level of Study**

			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	Valid	18-24	229	89.1	89.5	89.5
		25-34	23	8.9	9	98.4
		35-44	2	0.8	0.8	99.2
		45 and over	2	0.8	0.8	100
		Total	256	99.6	100	
	Missing	System	1	0.4		
	Total	257	100			
Level of Study	Valid	Level 4	69	26.8	27.2	27.2
		Level 5	53	20.6	20.9	48
		Level 6	110	42.8	43.3	91.3
		PG	22	8.6	8.7	100
		Total	254	98.8	100	
	Missing	System	3	1.2		
	Total		257	100		

**Table 8: Decision on Including Likert Data**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Not aware of the university's GAs and did not answer Likert statements	119	46.3	47.6
	Not aware of the university's GAs but answered Likert statements	38	14.8	15.2
	Aware of the university's GAs but did not answer Likert statements	1	.4	.4
	Aware of the university's GAs and answered Likert statements ★	92	35.8	36.8
	Total	250	97.3	100.0
Missing	Did not answer Q1, but answered Likert statements	7	2.7	
	Total	257	100.0	

With regard to the first question (Q1) asking the students whether they are aware of the university's GAs,  $(36.8\%)+(0.4\%)=(37.2\%)$  of the respondents declared that they were aware of the university's GAs while  $(47.6\%)+(15.2\%)=(62.8\%)$  were not (table 8). The responses on Q1 vary based on the level of study (table 7).

**Table 7: Level of Study versus Q1**

		Prior to today, have you been aware of the University's Graduate Attributes		Total
		Yes	No	
Level of study	Level 4	20.9%	79.1%	100.0%
	Level 5	58.5%	41.5%	100.0%
	Level 6	30.8%	69.2%	100.0%
	PG	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%

% within Level of study

Postgraduate students were more aware of the university's GAs than undergraduate students

Level 5 students were more aware of the university's GAs than the students in the other undergraduate Levels

Based on table 8, I only included in the analysis the data of 92 respondents who answered "yes" to Q1 and filled Likert statements. Therefore, all the results presented below were concluded from the data of those 92 respondents.

Table 9 shows that Medians were large and Interquartile Ranges were small in all categories.

**Table 9: Medians and Interquartile Ranges of the university's GAs**

	Importance to Respondents		Importance to Employer		Emphasis during Studies	
	Median*	Interquartile Range**	Median*	Interquartile Range**	Median*	Interquartile Range**
Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability	4	1	5	1	4	1
Learning and research skills	4	1	5	1	4.5	1
Professionalism, employability and enterprise	5	1	5	0	4	1.25
Respect for others	5	1	5	1	4	2
Social Responsibility	4	2	4	1	4	1

\* The respondents put a huge emphasis on GAs in all three sets of Likert statements

\*\* The variance between the observed values were not very significant which means that Medians were quite representative to the data that they were calculated from

Cronbach's alpha test was applied on Likert statements to test the internal consistency which is one of the reliability measures; its alpha value (0.845) was in a highly acceptable level (>0.8) (Burns and Burns, 2008). Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed, respectively, no significant difference between genders or between levels of study for every individual Likert statement.

Friedman test suggested a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ) between the three sets of Likert statements (table 10). Post hoc analysis, using Wilcoxon signed-rank test (two pairs at the time) and Bonferroni adjustment (new significance level of  $0.05/3 = 0.017$ ), concluded statistically significant differences ( $p<0.017$ ) between each set with the other two. Looking at the differences, table 10 shows the respondents' thought that employers place slightly more emphasis on GAs than themselves, and those attributes were not articulated fully in the curriculum (table 10).

**Table 10: Ranking of Set1, Set2 & Set3**

Set of Likert Statements	Mean Rank*	Median**	Interquartile Mean**	Interquartile Range**
Set2: Important to Employer	2.27	5	4.70	1
Set1: Important to Respondents	2.05	4	4.50	1
Set3: Emphasis during studies	1.68	4	4.14	2

\* Resulted from Friedman test

\*\* Based on raw Likert data

Similarly, Friedman test concluded a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ) between the five different attributes (table 11).

**Table 11: Ranking of Different Attributes**

Set of Graduate Attributes	Mean Rank*	Median**	Interquartile Mean**	Interquartile Range**
Set A3: Professionalism, employability and enterprise	3.51	5	4.72	1
Set A4: Respect for others	3.14	5	4.57	1
Set A2: Learning and research skills	3.05	5	4.52	1
Set A1: Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability	2.99	4	4.40	1
Set A5: Social Responsibility	2.31	4	4.05	2

\* Resulted from Friedman test

\*\* Based on raw Likert data

By conducting the same Post hoc analysis as above (but with new significance level of  $0.05/5 = 0.01$ ), table 12 was calculated. The table shows statistically significant differences ( $p<0.01$ ) between the Social Responsibility and most of other attributes; whereas, there were no statistically significant differences between all the other attributes. Thus, the pairwise differences between Social Responsibility and the other attributes were the only responsible of Friedman test's result.

**Table 12: Results of Post Hoc Analysis (Between Attributes)**

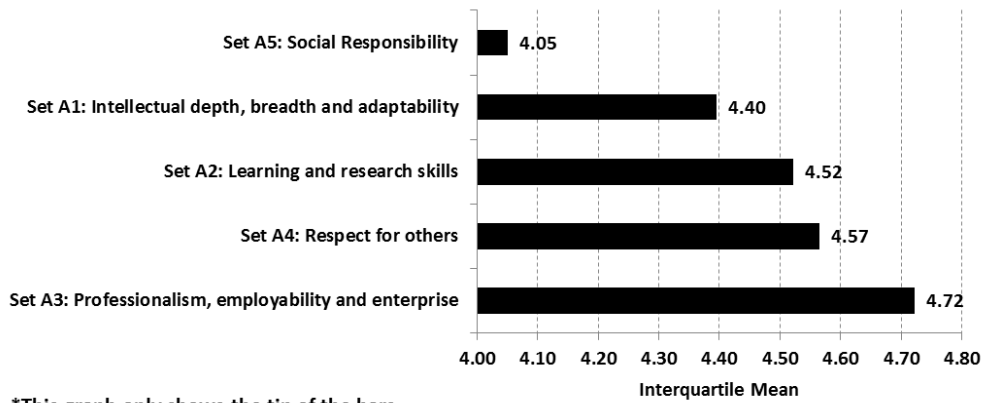
	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5
<b>A1: Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability</b>					
<b>A2: Learning and research skills</b>	.651				
<b>A3: Professionalism, employability and enterprise</b>	.002	.010			
<b>A4: Respect for others</b>	.494	.799	.049		
<b>A5: Social Responsibility</b>	.001**	.000*	.000*	.000*	

\* Statistically significant difference between Medians of the two attributes at 0.01 level

\*\* The exact  $p$  value is 0.001319 which is remarkably close to significance

Table 11 shows that the differences between attribute sets were relatively not significant; however, Social Responsibility had a noticeable low rank in comparison with the other attributes, which explains Post hoc's results above. Whereas, employability was placed among the top attributes (figure 2).

**Figure 2: Interquartile Mean of Different Attributes\***



By conducting Friedman test on the raw data of Likert statements, it was not surprising to conclude a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.000<0.05$ ) between the Likert statements. However, the ranking resulted from the test provided an interesting insight into the way which students perceive GAs across categories (see table 13).

**Table 13: Ranking of Different Likert Statements**

	Likert Statement	Mean Rank*	Median	Interquartile Mean	Interquartile Range
Importance to Employer	Professionalism, employability and enterprise	10.55	5.0	5.00	0.00
	Respect for others	9.79	5.0	4.72	1.00
	Learning and research skills	8.54	5.0	4.68	1.00
	Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability	8.14	5.0	4.65	1.00
	Social Responsibility	7.63	4.0	4.61	1.00
Importance to Respondent	Professionalism, employability and enterprise	9.51	5.0	4.74	1.00
	Respect for others	8.90	5.0	4.71	1.00
	Learning and research skills	8.20	4.0	4.56	1.00
	Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability	8.04	4.0	4.48	1.00
	Social Responsibility	6.64	4.0	4.09	2.00
Emphasis during Studies	Learning and research skills	8.28	4.5	4.60	1.00
	Intellectual depth, breadth and adaptability	7.49	4.0	4.47	1.00
	Professionalism, employability and enterprise	7.10	4.0	4.52	1.25
	Respect for others	6.11	4.0	4.12	2.00
	Social Responsibility	5.11	4.0	3.55	1.00

\* Resulted from Friedman test (rank of each statement among the other fourteen ones)

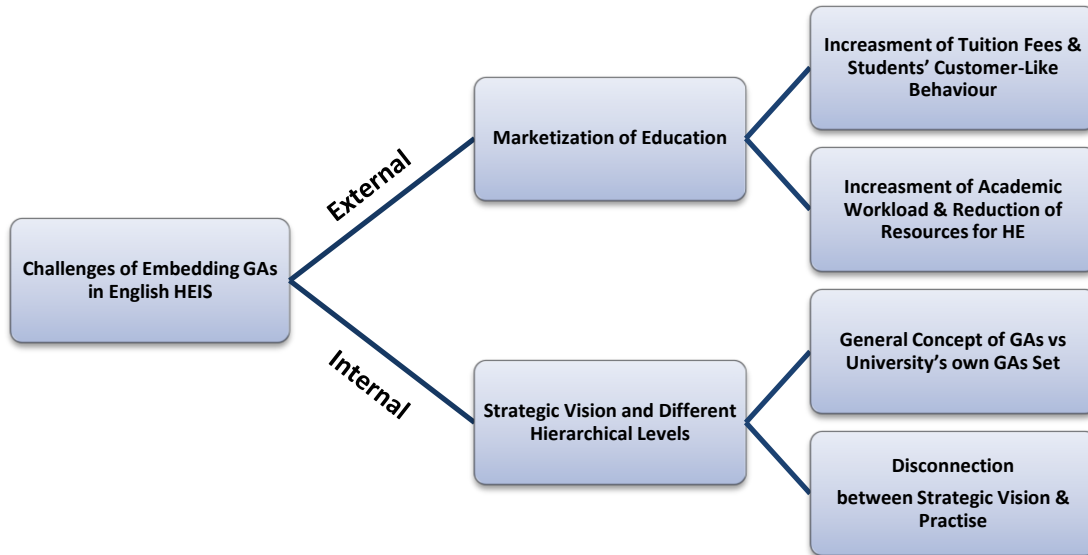
All Likert statements have relatively close scores. However, the attributes in “Important to Employer” score higher than the corresponding ones in the other two categories

Students place identical order to the attributes based on their importance to the employers and themselves; while they think that the university has different priority, than employers and themselves, in implementing the attributes

### Qualitative Study

A common approach of presenting qualitative findings was used, by integrating the qualitative findings and discussion together in the interest of the storyline (Daymon and Holloway, 2010). Therefore, a brief summary of different qualitative themes was illustrated in figure 3, whereas the detailed qualitative data were left to the discussion section.

Figure 3: Research Qualitative Themes



## 4. Discussion

In the attempt of addressing the research question which is “What are the challenges faced by the academic staff in embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum of a business school?”; we discussed below two key themes, covering a number of interrelated narrower sub-themes emerging from the qualitative data, which represent the most significant external and internal challenges to implement GAs (figure 3).

### Marketization of Education

The majority of interviewees emphasized that the new notion of students as “paying customers” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 29), which was strongly reinforced in the recent years by the dramatic increase of university tuition fees in England (Coughlan, 2011), limits the school’s ability to design the curriculum and implement GAs effectively. A module leader commented on this issue as:

“I think what’s wrong here [...] is] how we treat students as customers [...] At the moment you know students [...] are paying so much. The business relationship I think [...] is dangerous and undermines the university as an institution” (M-FTL-ML)

This notion made the students in UK HEIs more value-demanding (Woodall et al., 2014) in return of their payment. However, M-FTL-ML’s concern about the risk of creating unhealthy relationship between students and academics (Beckmann et al., 2009; Furedi, 2009) could be justified. As students are expecting higher teaching quality (Tomlinson, 2014), they might misjudge or disagree with academics about the aspects of teaching quality. The students’ high demand made them over-dependant on the education system, which accordingly led to a lot of pressure on staff, as explains:

M-VL-ML: The teachers are under a lot of pressure to make sure students get through which comes from that part of the education system where quite a lot is done for them (students) [...] There is so much pressure to hit targets [...] and they (students) come here [...] with the same sort of attitudes that the lecturer is gonna do a lot of the work for them.

Me: What is the drive of [...] making things easy for the students?

M-VL-ML: People who are fee-paying [...] expect more. I paid for this therefore I expect more of the service, I am a customer.

In addition to the pressure to “improving the student experience, in particular since the £9,000 tuition fees hike” (Parr, 2015), budget cuts (Wilkins et al., 2013) and growth of student numbers in UK HEIs are all main factors contributing in increasing the workload burden of academic staff (Parr, 2014). We could argue that this situation led to compromise the service provided to students. For instance, a bigger classroom size (Parr, 2015) means more work should be done by teachers to respond to students’ emails and sort out their administrative issues, and less time left for planning teaching activities or co-ordinating between staff, as shown below:

“The conversations that I have with the module leaders are very brief and they only say oh [...] this is what you have to do and this is the deadline, so we don’t have in depth relaxed conversations [...] We never discussed this (GAs)” (F-VL-T).

I actually felt the frustration about the burdensome administrative workload from at least one interviewee; which by the way represents a trend, among a wider academic population in UK HEIs, existed even before the recent resources cuts (Corbyn, 2009).

Surely, those circumstances could not reinforce an incubator environment for creative and innovative education (Parr, 2015). Thus, as M-VL-ML argued that “a lot of emphasis

sometimes [is placed] on the box ticking of the assessment and less on the soft skills such as professionalism as it is quite hard to measure". In fact, Ritzer anticipated in 1996 that focusing on hitting targets and students' course progression, which are considered as indications of success (Beckmann et al., 2009), might make education service like "fast food industry" where production efficiency and cost effectiveness are more important than student learning and development (cited in Nickolai et al., 2012, p. 212). Therefore, when combining the huge pressure on academic staff with students' customer-like behaviour; we sometimes see ourselves not only unable to enhance GAs between students, but also promoting the very opposite equivalent to them. A teacher talked about ethics as one of the university's GAs:

"I think you end up with sort of game happening. The university says we must have ethical behaviour [...], but in reality the steps to enforce ethical behaviour [are] time consuming and involve a lot of hard work (referring to plagiarism) [... Teachers] are not trying to get the highest level of ethical behaviour, but what they're trying to do is reach the end of the course with less than 10% failing rate so everything look ok and we do not have any remediate work to do [...] I think the students kind of know that too [...] they kind of know a bit of unethical behaviour can be gone away with [...] so it goes on" (M-VL-T)

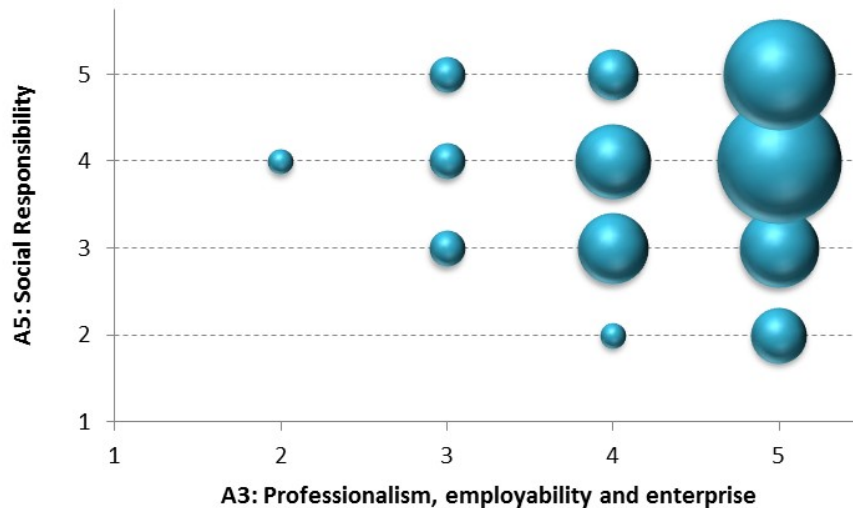
Marketization of education made HEIs more obsessed about their brand (Parr, 2015), as a result of increasing tuition fees and introduction of national and international performance evaluation systems using limited quantifiable indicators (Campbell, 2014). On the other hand, students are looking for the value of their money and concerned about their post-graduate future; whereas, some of them ignore the importance of their study effort in increasing the chances of getting jobs after graduation (Selingo, 2015) and pay off their student loan book (Wyness, 2013). Moreover, some students tend to see employers as buyers of the university's admission system (including students' record) rather than their education (Duncan, 2015). Therefore, it was not surprising to hear that students prioritize exams and achieving high grades to increase their chance of getting a job (Scullion, 2014) out of developing their intellectual, F-VL-T talked about an incident happened to her:

"After I had explained the point to the students, I could see the students were really impressed and they were like oh wow this is such a good point, but one of the students sitting in the front asked me: sorry, is this coming in the exam? and I said no. She said oh well then fine, and she stopped taking notes. So my idea is we only do the minimum level of work. This is how the culture of the university is; you know the idea of students as customers" (F-VL-T).

The quantitative data showed that some GAs are more challenging for the school than others: the students surveyed were very alert and have a firm perception about employability skills (such as effective communication, problem solving, digital literacy and numeracy) which are,

in addition to qualification, the most important elements that employers are looking for in any potential applicant (Blades et al., 2012). Whereas, social responsibility values (e.g. ethics), which might be difficult to measure immediately by employers, scored at the bottom of the attributes list and was scattered and significantly different than the other attributes (see table 11&12 and figure 2&4).

**Figure 4: Social Responsibility versus Professionalism, employability and enterprise**



The size of balls refers to the number of respondents who got their responses matched in the ball  
 The majority of A3 data is concentrated within a small range (mainly 4-5)  
 The data of A5 is scattered within a bigger range; The students hold a wide range of different views about A5

Even M-VL-ML told me, criticising students' behaviour, after the interview that GAs includes habitual an emotional things which can be brought by students when they are needed in the professional life, but some students seem not interested in implementing those attributes during their academic life. Actually, many studies such as *THE's Best University Workplace Survey 2015* (Parr, 2015), revelled that this trend of criticising and blaming students for the negative aspects brought by marketization of education is not uncommon among educators. However, portraying students as careless and lazy (Ng and Forbes, 2009 cited in Natale and Doran, 2012) and blaming them of taking advantages of being customers could hinder the efforts for engaging them in the learning process (Carey, 2013). Williams (2012) suggested that we need to deeply investigate the causes of this student attitude which is certainly not limited to the increment of tuition fees.

One possible reason of this student attitude, highlighted by the interviewees, could be sort of disconnection between how the curriculum is designed in the school and the students'

expectation from the curriculum. In this respect, the quantitative data showed that students surveyed align their judgement of GAs to their perception of what employers are looking for. However, the same data also suggested that the students think that the university has different priorities, from employers and themselves, in implementing the attributes (see table 13). Another reason could be attributed to the lack of insisting on the students' ethical behaviour as mentioned in M-VL-T's quote earlier, and to unsatisfactory emphasis on social responsibility values in the curriculum as suggested by the quantitative data (table 13).

This poses a challenge which the school should face by revising the current curriculum and teaching practises to make sure that they endorse ethical values and meet the students' expectation, and at the same time, enlighten the students about the important role of intellectual in improving their competence and increasing the chances of getting a job.

#### Strategic Vision and Different Hierarchical Levels

Although developing students with the university's GAs is one of the strategic objectives of the university under the study, all interviewees admitted that they have not been instructed or guided by their line managers about implementing those attributes within teaching activities. For example:

“Nobody told me that I should be considering graduate attributes when I am teaching, so obviously I do what [...] my line manager tells me to do” (F-VL-T)

However, the interviewees were able to provide a relatively clear definition of GAs and link it to the employability, because many GAs concepts (e.g. employability and social responsibility) are fully discussed within the business and management literature (Ryan et al., 2011). Actually, three out of the four interviewees taught some of GAs concepts as business subjects within their modules. A module leader explaining why he is familiar with GAs:

“I heard it (GAs) only because I was involved in a module called (omitted: module title) and some of the stuff we related to the attributes of graduates [...] because] there are some attributes you need to show off in your CV” (M-FTL-ML).

These quotes are somehow compatible with the results that only 37.2% of surveyed students were aware of the university's GAs; however, those among 37.2% believe that the university's GAs are very important to employers and businesses, although they were implemented well but not perfectly in the school's curriculum. In particular, professionalism

and employability were placed by respondents among the top important attributes, as might be a result of, firstly, the students' awareness of their importance for the potential employers, and secondly, the school's commitment on the professionalism and employability attributes, as explained by a module leader:

“It is about employability. You have to increase the chances for them to get a job and that's why some of the assignments are design to boost some of the skills” (M-FTL-ML).

We can see that the business school was successful to some extent in articulating the general concept of GAs within the broad curriculum; but less successful in implementing GAs in the daily teaching activities and reflect them in the students' attitude, or promoting its own GAs vision – as part of its identity – between teachers and students, as a teacher stated:

“There is a slight disjunction between what we're trying to promote and sometimes what we're putting into practise” (M-VL-ML).

Most of interviewees see the university's strategy as something introduced to promote the university's image and “just to prove that something is done” (M-FTL-ML). However, I think that the problem might not be in the strategy itself but in the way of delivering it throughout the university's hierarchy, and specifically, in articulating it by educational activities in the bottom line. Put differently, the issue, raised during interviews, is that the university's strategy has been hampered between the programme level and module level.

Although an academic manager explained to me that “module leaders are asked to articulate how they will address graduate attributes in their module guides” (Manager), I found by looking at a sample of module handbooks that GAs were actually mentioned in some of those modules, but in very general and vague phrases and without any information explaining how those GAs will be included within the teaching activities. Whereas, GAs were tackled more formally and deeply within the programmes' paperwork, as explained below:

“When a new programme is developed or is going through a periodic review, part of the paperwork asks how the programme will address graduate attributes” (Manager).

By looking at the validation documents of some programmes, I noticed – unlike module handbooks – that those documents contain some explanations of how GAs are covered throughout the programme, although I was not sure how the detailed GAs information of each module was collected.

This raises a question of to what extent module leaders see GAs as academic business topics taught as part of the module's curriculum, or as essential elements which HEIs should equip students regardless of discipline (Walsh and Kotzee, 2010). The school needs to make GAs as part of the module level's concern; otherwise, it will miss a big opportunity if teachers in classrooms are still not informed properly about GAs, and not engaged in implementing them as part of the university's learning and teaching strategy, thus, they end up with a case like this:

“I sort of slightly see it [[GAs]] as one thing is mentioned in the university <laughed>. Yah, I don't attempt to achieve the graduate attributes through my teaching, no” (M-VL-T)

## **5. Conclusion**

The research explored the challenges faced by academic staff in embedding GAs in the curriculum of a business school in England. I found that (i) marketization of education increased the workload pressure on academic staff and boosted consumer characteristics among some students who are more interested in receiving high exam grades and developing personal employability skills than improving their intellectual (ii) Lack of awareness among students and staff about the university's own GAs, although both parties understand the general concept of those attributes; which is attributable to inefficiency in delivering and promoting the university's strategic vision within the module level.

In addition to the suggestions presented in the discussion section, I recommend that some administrative help could be provided to teachers, by allocating an administrative tutor for each programme, thus teachers can invest more time in reflecting GAs in their practise. The pressure on academic staff could also be reduced by using technology, such as blended learning (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004), which could make education both cheaper and more effective (Duncan, 2015). For example, online platforms could be used more effectively to encourage students to ask and help each other, and to organize their learning activities prior to and after the classroom sessions; rather than directly contacting the lecturer in every single issue they face. Moreover, the university needs to have a very deep discussion about how it could make a balance between the student satisfaction and its values and social responsibility. Discussions also need to be made about whether and to what extent the university should focus on teaching or learning facilitation, and whether it domesticates students for “lifelong consumerism” or “better life.”(Natale and Doran, 2012, p. 192).

More collaboration should be done between the programme tutors and module leaders with regards to GAs by, for example, greater involvement from module leaders in programme periodic review process and more visibility from top managers in the bottom line as M-VL-ML suggested. In addition, more formal and informal events could be conducted to familiarize students and educators alike about the university's GAs. We could also look at the positive examples of implementing GAs and try to enhance and replicate them throughout the school. For example, the quantitative study showed that a relatively high percentage (65.0%) of postgraduate students surveyed were aware of the university's GAs, whereas low percentages were scored for undergraduate students. We could investigate the education practises which made a significant number of postgraduate students aware of the university's GAs and then try to implement them throughout the other study levels.

I also suggest that those attributes should be explained more deeply in the module handbooks and could be included in the module feedback survey. This will help students to understand how GAs have been implemented in their study, and to encourage them to reflect those attributes to themselves and their courses when they submit the feedbacks. On the other hand, this could raise the teachers' attention about the strategic aspects of their educational work within a very heavy workload environment, and it could also help teachers to assess the way they articulate GAs in their teaching activities.

In the light of a recent survey by ComRes which suggested that more than half of UK students in humanities and social science subjects, including the business and management studies, do not think that their courses represent good value (BBC, 2015); this research provides a significant opportunity to understand the students' expectation toward the curriculum of a business school in the £9,000 tuition fees era. The research should also contribute in increasing the awareness in the academia about good teaching practises and how to implement GAs effectively; for instance, F-VL-T mentioned that:

“Giving this interview has made me realized I should be more focused on graduate attributes. Maybe, I am not doing my job as a tour, I should be a better tutor <smiled>” (F-VL-T)

However, further research could be done to explore how GAs can be used to enhance the identity of HEIs in their internal and external marketing campaigns; and how those attributes are tackled between junior and senior educators or between academic and non-academic staff within HEIs.

Although the research considered only one case study of a business school, and suffered from a small qualitative sample with disproportionate representation of permanent staff and probably non-representative quantitative sample; I believe that the findings discussed above are still relevant to HEIs in England, with consideration of the specific context within each institution.

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