



# TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Graduate attributes (also referred to as graduate qualities or capabilities) can be explicitly linked to a graduate's future employability. Graduate attributes represent the qualities, skills or capabilities that universities articulate as necessary for graduates to successfully navigate the workforce and to contribute positively to their local and global communities. A common challenge for any university is how to meaningfully engage students in conversations concerning graduate attributes. This is further problematised for central units that do not have direct contact and communication with students. This article provides practical tips and lessons learned from a project which developed a range of support materials for students relating to a university's graduate attributes.

## Project overview

Following the revision of the university graduate attributes, in November 2016 a learning and teaching unit commenced a university-wide graduate attributes project. The aim of this project was to develop a range of resources for students to assist them in understanding more about the attributes and to highlight their

significance. To ensure that these resources were meaningful, the project engaged with students through facilitating focus groups.

## Outcomes of focus groups

In total, over 130 students participated in these focus groups across two campuses. The aim of these focus groups was to elicit student perspectives on:

- what the attributes meant to them
- how they heard about the attributes
- what support resources they would find engaging and meaningful.

From the facilitation of these focus groups, we discovered seven key strategies (appearing in no particular order) that would effectively engage students in these conversations.

## 1. Research social media platforms

Conduct research on the types of social media platforms that are available. Examples may include Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter or Yammer (to name a few). Research the organisations or groups that specifically target a student audience and determine the site owner. For example, we conducted an audit on

all of the student associations and extra-curricular groups that had social media presence. Once you identify the relevant social media sites, study the type of language that is deployed when talking to students. Some factors to consider may include:

- Do the posts include images or flyers?
- What is the character limit or the amount of space for you to get your point across?
- Are there particular groups which students tend to comment, share or like more frequently than others?

Take these considerations into account when developing your own social media campaign for students.

## 2. Leverage existing and develop new networks

Reach out to your existing networks and make a concerted effort to further develop your network with staff on the 'front line' who have direct relationships with students. Seek their advice and input regarding how to reach out to the student population. For example, what type of social media platforms do students use, and does the staff member control any of these group conversations?

Reach out to a broad range of staff members, including:

- Professional staff – this may include staff from central units such as careers and employment or student services. Alternatively, administrative staff or project coordinators based within faculties can provide insight into their students' preferred communication channels.
- Academic staff – this may include sessionals/tutors, course convenors or program directors.

Ask your colleagues and students what social media platforms are the most effective to reach out to students and ask for permission to access any existing group pages. During the facilitation of these focus groups, we discovered that a number of staff sent out regular emails or Facebook posts to student cohorts. Students overwhelmingly indicated that they were more likely to read or respond to a post by a staff member who they knew. Further, if the staff member recommended the activity as an opportunity to assist students in their studies or impact their future employability, students were more likely to engage in the activity.

### 3. Create an engaging flyer or document

As a means to recruit students for focus groups, we developed a range of engaging flyers. You do not have to be a graphic designer to complete this task; rather, identify websites that provide examples of free brochures or flyers. Ensure that the flyer that you create is consistent with the types of flyers that you have seen on the student social media platforms. Remember to limit the amount of text on the page to ensure that students are not overloaded with too much information and adopt student language. If you know any students, have them review the flyer and provide you with feedback on how it could be improved. Finally, provide a key contact for students who may want to find out more.

### 4. Utilise your own professional social media pages

Post on your own professional social media pages, including your LinkedIn account. This strategy was successfully implemented in our project in which we utilised our personal LinkedIn accounts to advertise for focus groups. Consequently, we received an increase in student participation.

### 5. Determine student motivators

During the facilitation of focus groups, we asked first-year students, "What would make you engage with graduate attributes resources?" Overwhelmingly, they stated that they were interested in how it could assist them with their studies. This contradicted our assumption that students would be interested in university graduate attributes mainly to enhance their employability. Second-year and final-year students meanwhile indicated that they were interested in the graduate attributes as it related to their employability and future career.

Thus, it is important to understand what the motivators are for students



when engaging with them through social media platforms. When pitching opportunities for student engagement, it is important to cater to a diverse range of students. Leave your own assumptions at the door and seek to understand what the motivators and value propositions are for students.

### 6. Seek student input

To better understand how we could engage additional students in these conversations, we asked, "How did you hear about this focus group?" This provided a valuable opportunity for us to learn what was working effectively in our recruitment and what we could do differently in the future. Predominantly, students said that they were more likely to participate in the conversations if a staff member or peer with whom they have direct contact with recommended it as a valuable opportunity for them. When engaging with students, do not forget to ask them what captured their attention, and if they have any alternative ideas to improve communication channels or the marketing of the activity.

### 7. Do not solely rely on generic emails

A common complaint made by a number of the focus group participants was related to generic email campaigns. The majority of students said that they either did not open the emails or, in the best-case scenario, just scanned this type of email. Students explained that they believe the bulk of information in such emails does not apply to them. By no means is this tip asserting to avoid utilising all generic emails that your university may send, but rather to not rely on this as the sole source for marketing your graduate attributes initiatives. Draw upon any existing generic email accounts as a method in a multi-pronged approach to engage students.

**ONCE YOU IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT SOCIAL MEDIA SITES, STUDY THE TYPE OF LANGUAGE THAT IS DEPLOYED WHEN TALKING TO STUDENTS.**

### Conclusion

In an era of competing social marketing campaigns and viral videos, it can often be difficult for universities to capture student attention with topics such as graduate attributes. Students have a range of competing demands, including family life, work, studies and any extra or co-curricular obligations. It can thus be difficult for central units to engage students in conversations concerning university graduate attributes or their future employability. Ideally, the seven tips described in this article have provided readers with points to consider when engaging students in conversations relating to university graduate attributes. ■

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