

ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 5/01 (21 JUNE 2001)

Generic skills and subject/course descriptions

In its interim report to the Academic Board on 24 May, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) Working Party, chaired by Professor Sally Walker, outlined a number of ‘good teaching practices’ it wishes to encourage in different ways. Among these strategies was:

“(h) The issue of whether the University should develop a generic structure or framework for subject guides which would include more explicit information about each subject’s goals and objectives and how these reflect and advance the overall goals and objectives of the course. The aim would be to clarify the kinds of skills and knowledge which students might expect to gain from studying the subject and the course.”

The CEQ Working Party has sought support from the Academic Programs Committee to encourage a more widespread and explicit attention to such generic skills. It is evident from course experience questionnaires that recent graduates often feel that their course of study has not equipped them sufficiently with generic skills.

The CEQ asks recent graduates to rate their course on these propositions:

- The course developed my problem-solving skills
- The course sharpened my analytic skills
- The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member
- As a result of my course I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems
- The course improved my skills in written communication
- My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work

Most teaching staff would very likely feel that such skills are embedded in the subjects comprising the course. Student perceptions of their courses might therefore be enhanced if more explicit attention was paid to identifying such skills in the way subjects and courses were outlined.

Proposals to APC of new courses and subjects must, of course, outline their purposes and objectives in terms of skill and content acquisition. Since 1998, however, dot-point lists of objectives no longer appear in the *University Handbook*, largely for reasons of space. The *Handbook* now carries only general statements of course goals, etc. at a faculty level.

APC recommends that faculties and departments pay attention to the way in which subjects and courses are presented to students in departmental or faculty handbooks and on subject home-pages. Courses and programs should be accompanied by an explicit statement which address their rationale, possible career outcomes and generic skills as well as knowledge acquisition.

Subject web-pages, in particular, should include a brief statement of how they contribute to an overall course of study. At present, most subject web-pages contain no more than the subject description from the *Handbook*: statements of objectives, on the other hand, are generally carried only in subject guides, if at all. In some cases, web-pages for courses and subjects have no reference whatsoever to objectives, or even have ‘to be advised’ under the ‘objectives’ heading. (For some examples of subject home-pages that do more than repeat the content of the *Handbook*, people might consult, for example, those from the School of Botany.)

We hope that making such statements will not be perceived as an onerous task: many subjects already provide them, albeit in formulaic and summary form. On the other hand, we feel that attention to

making such skills explicit would make an appreciable difference to student perceptions of learning outcomes.

Recommendation to Academic Board:

That Deans and Heads of Department be requested to ensure that subject guides and web-pages pay appropriate attention to explicit information about each subject's goals and objectives and how these reflect and advance the overall goals and objectives of the course. The aim would be to clarify the kinds of generic skills and knowledge which students might expect to gain from studying the subject and the course.