FOCUS ON: GRADUATE SKILLS

Key findings from 'Sharing Practice' and 'Shaping Strategy' events

December 2019

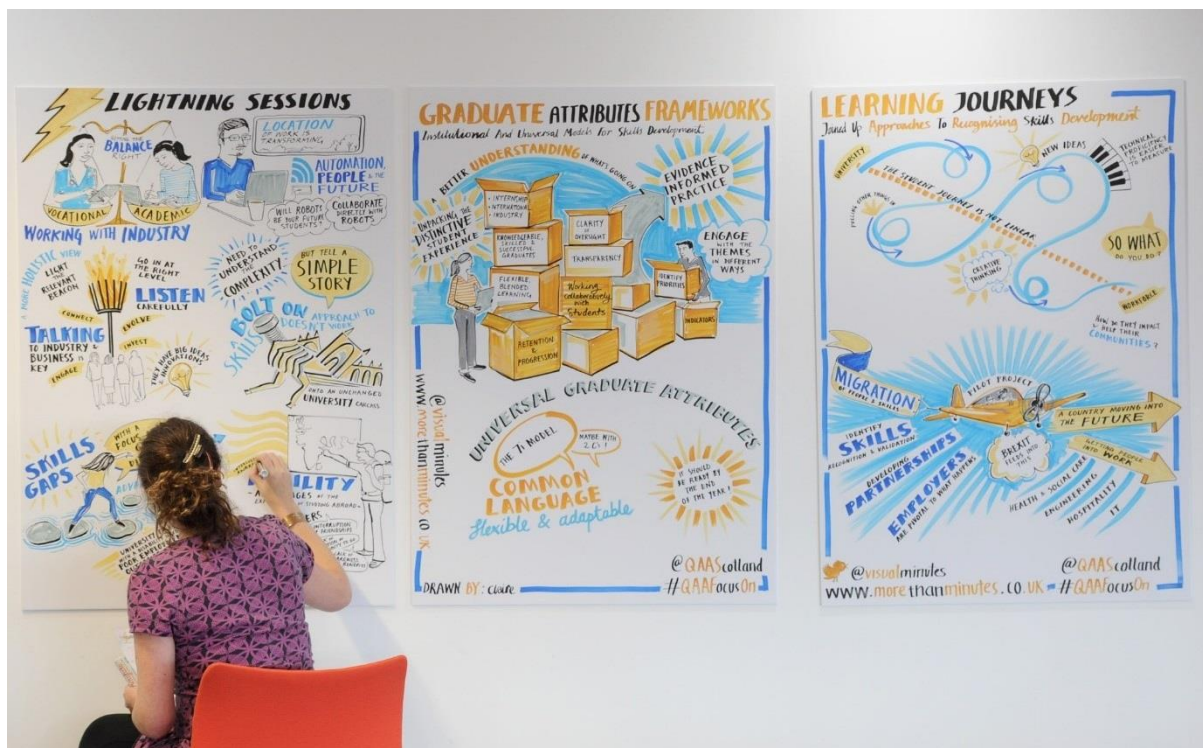QAA Scotland

Focus On: Graduate Skills

With debate on apprenticeships and skills high on the agenda in higher education, 'Focus On: Graduate Skills' was relevant and timely. The project as a whole considered:

- **Readiness for employment**: How can we most effectively embed skills, including digital skills, inside and outside the curriculum for graduates from all disciplines?
- **Equality and diversity**: How can we support students from all backgrounds and characteristics to develop skills that will help them to secure and sustain success in the workplace?
- **Global perspective**: How do we ensure that all Scottish graduates are enabled to live and work in a global society, and that the Scottish sector is informed by global developments?

This document presents key messages and examples of practice from two flagship events we held in June 2019.

Presentations and visual minutes from these events are available on the [Focus On: Graduate Skills webpage](#),[1] along with:

- two research reports exploring the views of [students,](#) [graduates and employers](#) on the skills students develop during their time in higher education in Scotland
- a [summary report](#) drawing out key findings from the research
- a [postcard](#) based on the findings of the research, including questions designed to stimulate discussion in your institution or students' association
- links to Wakelets capturing [Twitter activity at our events](#) and our related [Twitter chat](#) in December 2018
- a [booklet](#) that provides an overview of Focus On: Graduate Skills.

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/graduate-skills

About the events

Focus On: Graduate Skills - Sharing Practice

This event celebrated good practice and allowed delegates to share current approaches to graduate skills development. As part of this project, we commissioned two research reports exploring the views of students, graduates and employers on the skills students develop during their time in higher education in Scotland. The teams who conducted these research projects presented their findings at this event. We were also delighted to be joined by Professor Simon Barrie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning Transformations) at Western Sydney University, Australia. Professor Barrie offered an engaging and thought-provoking keynote presentation on the graduates attributes journey.

Professor Simon Barrie presenting

Focus On: Graduate Skills - Shaping Strategy

The 'Shaping Strategy' event was a summit for senior colleagues from the sector. Leading figures from higher education and government joined a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the future of graduate skills in Scotland, our approach in an international context, the future challenges we face, and our readiness as a sector to meet these challenges.

Delegates had the opportunity to engage in small, informal conversation sessions with speakers including Professor Barrie and Dr Wendy Cukier, Founder and Academic Director of the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, Canada. This brought an important international dimension to the event. Professor Barrie emphasised the need to shift from thinking about jobs, or even about skills, to thinking about hybrid capabilities. In Dr Cukier's presentation, she argued that higher education sectors could build stronger relationships with other organisations to enhance the development opportunities open to students, and also provided some sobering statistics on the outcomes for diverse groups, illustrating the

work still required in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion. We were also joined by Professor Sarah Sharples, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Nottingham. Professor Sharples' presentation encouraged delegates to consider the way humans and robots will interact in future ('cobotics').

Alongside these speakers were representatives of the Scottish sector. These included Professor Sara Carter, Associate Principal (Learning and Teaching), University of Strathclyde and member of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board. Professor Carter highlighted the current inconsistencies in how 'graduate jobs' are defined, and suggested that in the long term, 'Industry 4.0', like previous industrial revolutions, is likely to create more work opportunities than it disrupts. Jason Miles-Campbell from Jisc Scotland argued that higher education needs to keep pace with industrial change - moving towards 'Education 4.0'.

Professor Sir Jim McDonald, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde, emphasised the need for higher education to be open to closer partnerships with industry. We also heard from Professor Crichton Lang who is Deputy Principal at the University of the Highlands and Islands, where they have introduced over 100 short courses on professional skills in response to industry need. Professor Brad MacKay, Vice-Principal (International Strategy and External Relations) at the University of St Andrews, spoke about student mobility and employment, including the benefits that international study brought to students, and the barriers that might stop them from participating. The day was chaired by Professor John Harper, Principal of Robert Gordon University, who talked about the current state of the nation in relation to graduate skills in Scotland.

Each event attracted delegates from all 19 Scottish higher education institutions, as well as the rest of the UK.

Key messages from the events

The following is a summary of key messages from the closing sessions of the two events, illustrated with examples of a wide range of practice that was shared at '**Focus On: Graduate Skills - Sharing Practice'.** Participants at this event were offered the opportunity to participate in a Mentimeter poll to share their thoughts with policymakers and sector leaders. These messages were fed into '**Focus On: Graduate Skills - Shaping Strategy'.**

Over the two days, there was consensus that the sector would benefit from reflecting on the following areas.

Working in partnership

- Advocate for students by promoting a clear, compelling and confident vision and narrative about Scottish higher education's contribution to the national skills agenda.
- Continue their commitment to working with students as partners by including students in the design, delivery and evaluation of skills development opportunities inside and outside the curriculum.
- Do more to engage business and the local community.
- Work to create a continuum of skills development with greater connections between school, further and higher education.
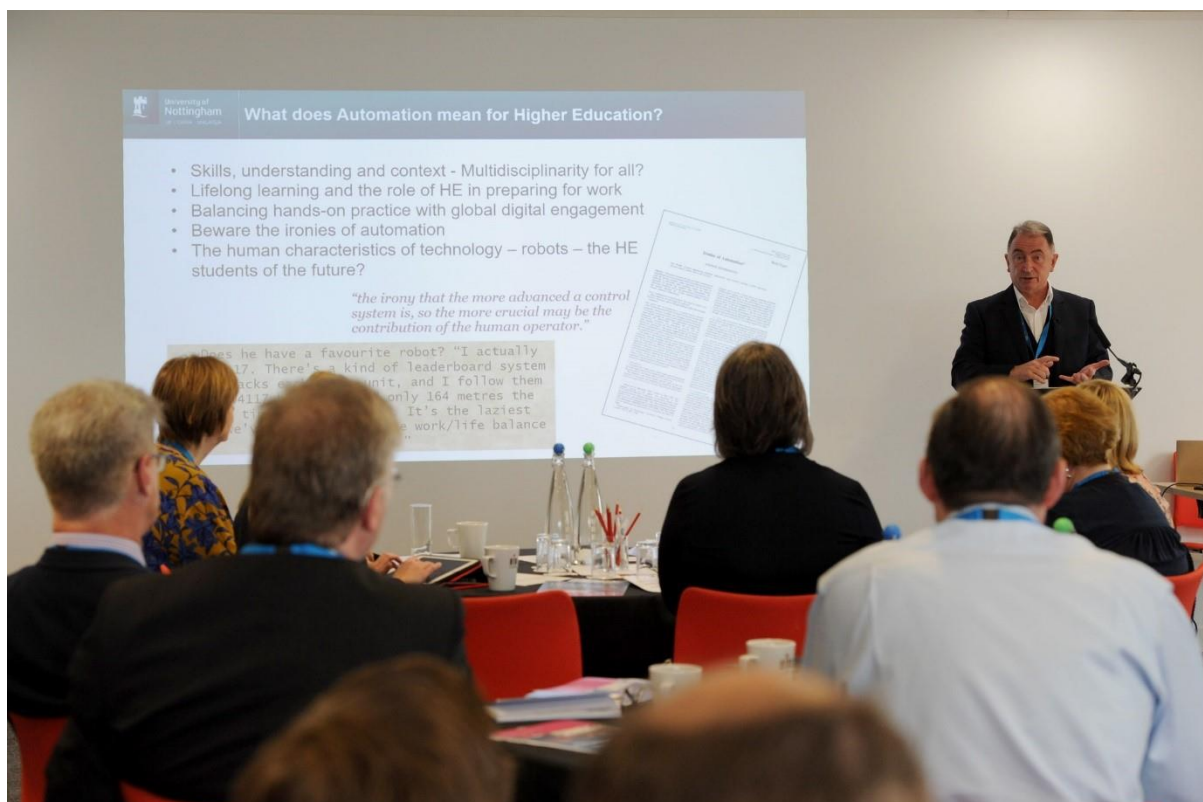
Examples of practice

The Scottish Innovative Student Awards (SISA) are run by the Scottish Institute for Enterprise in collaboration with three of Scotland's Innovation Centres: the Digital Health and Care Institute; the Data Lab; and Censis. The awards were established in 2017 with the aim of supporting Scotland's innovation ecosystem by building a student's capacity and confidence for innovative thinking, and to recognise the key stages in their mindset

development and skills acquisition. Feedback from participating academics is revealing key insights into emerging best practice around embedding innovation and enterprise across a wide range of disciplines and student levels. At the same time, feedback from students receiving the award is providing insights on how to enhance their experience of developing their mindset and innovation skills by focusing on making them future-ready.

Colleagues from Glasgow Caledonian University presented on Skills into Scotland, a national process for the recognition of skills of those educated overseas. Its development involved key organisations, such as the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Government, and the community organisation - the Bridges Programme. The process supports people with skills and expertise, and employers with skills shortages, in four key sectors - health and social care; construction (engineering); hospitality; and IT.

At the University of the Highlands and Islands, the Educational Development Unit, subject specialists, and the Curriculum Development Employer Engagement Team work in partnership to ensure that labour market intelligence directly influences the design and development of new curriculum.

The Department of European Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh has been supporting students to undertake extracurricular activities in local secondary schools. However, conflicting pressures from coursework and other commitments have made it difficult for some students to participate fully. To address this issue, the University, in collaboration with Edinburgh City Council, has designed 'Languages Beyond University', a course at SQCF Level 8 that students can take in their second year, which provides academic credit to formally recognise students' learning.

Promoting diversity

- Develop skills for life, not just for work, by developing intrapreneurial and entrepreneurial mindsets
- Encourage the development of skills for sustainability and social enterprise

Examples of practice

Queen Margaret University develops students' employability skills and graduate attributes through mentoring and work-related experience in partnership with local business. Research into this work demonstrates that mentoring can support students from all backgrounds and characteristics to achieve their goals, believe in their potential and develop promising careers. It can offer particular benefits to widening participation students.

Dr Cukier's talk at our Shaping Strategy event highlighted the challenges faced by diverse groups in Canada. In particular, there had been a decline in the representation of women in the commercial sector; people with 'foreign-sounding' names were 30% less likely to be called for job interviews; graduates with severe disabilities had the same poor outcomes in employment than people who had left high school early; the worst education and work outcomes were faced by indigenous youth; and socioeconomic status was a significant barrier. Dr Cukier highlighted to participants, the importance of understanding student demography and recognising and acting on inequality of opportunity.

Dr Wendy Cukier presenting

Ensuring flexibility

- Consider flexibility in curriculum design to encourage work-based skills development.
- Commit to institutional strategies and processes that allow for flexible and agile approaches to skills development.
- Review approaches to pedagogy and institutional culture to build skills in confidence, resilience, digital literacies and metaskills.

Examples of practice

The aim of the new Learner Experience Framework at the University of Strathclyde is to encapsulate and support the development of the distinctive student experience. The transition to this framework involved the engagement of student interns, alongside consultation at subject and faculty level. Key areas of the framework include: internships; international opportunities; industry/employer engagement; and flexible blended and digital learning opportunities. The development of the Framework has helped the institution identify ways to drive the development of key priorities for curriculum design, which help create additional opportunities for students.

The Principal's Award is Abertay University's employability skills award, completed by 50-70 students each year. Participants undertake a number of activities and tasks, and conclude the programme with a 40-minute interview with an external professional. The final interview is a key learning moment for the participants. Participants also submit three reflective logs, in which they analyse their skills in practice over the course of the award. These logs allow the institution to feed back to, and work with, the students on a one-to-one basis, encouraging and guiding reflection. The main outcomes of the award are increased self-awareness, greater confidence and self-belief.

The University of Dundee offers 30-hour micro-placements during the semester as part of an academic module to allow students to participate in much-needed work experience

opportunities, and the flexibility to arrange this around other commitments makes it accessible to as many students as possible. All placements are sourced and managed by the Careers Service, and wrap-around support before, during and after the placement ensures that the transferable skills gained are recognised and applied to future career plans. An online portfolio allows students to reflect creatively on their performance and share evidence of the positive impact they made in their host organisation, resulting in many students securing paid summer jobs or continued work experience with their placement providers.

In highly-vocational disciplines such as engineering, undertaking a disciplinary summer placement provides access to real-time projects and artefacts that expose students to practice knowledge and support the development of employability skills. Correspondingly, it is disputed if employment in non-disciplinary jobs provides students with opportunities to enhance their employability skills. [Research on this topic has been conducted at the University of Strathclyde.](#) A survey was conducted of 410 undergraduate civil engineers across four universities in the West of Scotland, who were employed in disciplinary placements or in ad-hoc jobs during summer 2015. This research has raised important questions regarding the worthiness of summer placements across all disciplines in higher education and, in particular, the role that universities, employers and supporting agencies have in developing graduates with metacognition skills.

As part of a randomised study at the University of Glasgow, a range of measures was used to determine if [playing selected video games at university](#) could improve students' adaptability, resourcefulness and communication skills. By the end of the study, students who had been asked to play the selected games over the course of a semester showed statistically significant gains in graduate attribute attainment compared to students who did not play the games.

Further examples of practice

There is still no agreed list of graduate attributes, nor clear definitions for them. [PhD research is being conducted at the University of Aberdeen](#) with the aim of building a universal and clear model of graduate attributes that can be used both as a common language between stakeholders and as a research tool.

The fourth Industrial Revolution and the associated emerging skills agenda are emphasising the importance of creativity as a metaskill that both knowledge economies and cultural industries need. As part of the current Enhancement Theme - 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience' - Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland have conducted [a review of higher education learner journey relationships with the creative sector in Scotland.](#) The review starts by outlining this journey in terms of the linear school-to-work regime upon which much policy depends for accountability and standards. It moves on to identify some of the complexities associated with this model when it comes to assessing student success in creative arts subjects, and it challenges the current common linear school-to-work regime policy. The review places success within the creative arts as part of an integrated system of creativity and, from this perspective, suggests an alternative non-linear, reiterative education-and-work regime as the necessary focus for measuring the impact of higher education creative arts. It acknowledges that this requires articulation of the development of attributes and skills within deviating gyrations of creative practice over time. It also indicates that compartmentalised understanding of the skills agenda needs to be complemented with a fuller, holistic understanding of creativity as a system, a skill, and a form of expertise if the needs of the fourth Industrial Revolution are to be met.