How do I measure up? Supporting student self-assessment in skills and graduate attributes

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For success in both educational and workplace settings, learners need to be able to accurately “self-assess”, and to recognise evidence of their abilities and achievements. Work-integrated learning (WIL) provides a vehicle to foster these skills and capabilities and prepare students for the workplace. This paper showcases the Skills and Capabilities Audit Tool, a new self-assessment resource designed for students to use prior to and upon completion of a WIL activity. Emphasis on the development of capabilities which support learner agency, namely to independently self-appraise, reflect and manage personal learning, will help students maximise their WIL experience.

Keywords: Agency, Self-assessment, Graduate capabilities, Work ready graduates

Background / context

Over the past decade there have been increased efforts to find ways to better prepare and support students to maximise their learning experience in work-integrated learning (WIL) (Billett, 2011 & 2009). Learner agency is seen to play an important part in this endeavour (Billett, 2011 & 2009). Agency involves learners having the ability to make decisions, think critically, create meaning, and develop an understanding of self and their own potential (Bruner, 1996). These “agentic qualities”, some of which are understood as “graduate attributes”, are needed for student success in both educational and workplace settings (Billett, 2009; Barrie, Hughes, Smith, & Thomson, 2009).

The Skills and Capabilities Audit Tool presented in this paper is a new resource designed by the authors to foster some of these agentic qualities, specifically skills in accurate self-assessment and reflection.

The Self-Assessment Tool

A review by the authors of available self-assessment tools revealed limited suitable options. In general, self-assessment tools were found to fall into two categories: generic skills and specific vocation based skills. The Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) and the Employability Skills Profiler (ESP) are examples of generic skills based tools, but issues related to validity and cost made them inappropriate for our purposes (Precision Consultancy, 2007, p.3). The vocation specific type assessments were found to be too narrow in what they assess and are designed more for job candidate “screening” purposes. The approach to self-assessment taken by the Career Development Planning and Personal Planning areas were found to be more aligned with our intention and informed the conception and design of our new Tool (Patton, & McMahon, 2006; Smith, et al., 2009; Watts, 2006).

The university’s Graduate Capabilities framework was used to build exemplar lists of skills and capabilities. It was also recognised that disciplines each have their own emphases and consequently the tool was designed to allow users to modify and adapt the lists to suit their own requirements.

Essentially the resource is structured into four units or parts and includes a set of instructions to support and guide the students through each part and associated activities.

Part 1 – Pre-activity self-rating: students are given a list of capabilities (Table 1) to undertake a self-assessment exercise before they commence their WIL activity. Students then choose six “target” capabilities or sub-
categories they would like to concentrate on. The capabilities selected might be ones the student believes they need to develop, or ones identified as relevant to their future career, or ones related to a particular placement.

### Table 1: Excerpts from the Skills and Capability Audit Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduate Capabilities</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Target Capability</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative and innovative</td>
<td>Demonstrates awareness of problems/gaps in knowledge, considers different perspectives, adapts readily to new/uncertain situations, conveys ideas through a variety of mediums, thinks ‘outside the square’ to solve complex issues. Ability to respond to opportunities and challenges.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>Identifies opportunities not obvious to others and finds innovative solutions, where conventional solutions have not worked or are unlikely to work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of critical, creative thinking</td>
<td>Finds effective alternative/novel solutions to problems. Applies skills and experience to areas other than prime discipline.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 2** requires students to gather evidence during their WIL activity which demonstrates the attainment or improvement in those capabilities nominated in Part 1, and to collate and present this in a portfolio; this might include podcasts, photos, PowerPoint presentations, business reports, blogs, SWOT analyses etc.

**Part 3 - Self rating – post activity:** students revisit the table completed in Part 1 after they have finished their WIL activity and are asked again to self-assess.

**Part 4 - Reflection and Analysis:** this final part is designed to help students analyse and reflect on the process of self-assessment and the nature of evidence. Students are asked to assess their three best pieces of evidence and write a 1000 word “reflective” report. Prompts are provided to help students undertake this activity (Figure 1). The overall aim is to encourage honest self-appraisal without the risk of this adversely affecting the final grade, therefore marks are not allocated to Parts 1, 2 and 3 but these components must be completed and submitted in order for Part 4 to be graded.
Reflection prompts

Based on your completed audit tool, how accurate were your pre-activity ratings? Were there any areas where you over or under estimated your abilities? Why do you think you might have over or under estimated your abilities? OR Why do you think your ratings were accurate?

How can you improve the accuracy of your self-assessment?

What kinds of evidence did you gather? What influenced your decision to gather these particular kinds of evidence? Looking back, are there any other kinds of evidence that might help demonstrate your abilities?

What kinds of evidence might you need to persuade an employer that you have particular skills and capabilities? How could you present these?

Evaluation

A focus group of WIL practitioners reviewed the Tool. Feedback centred on: the wording of some of the skills and capabilities; the size/length of the resource; and, the rating scale used. The suggestions related to improved clarity and overall meanings were incorporated into the final version of the Tool. Further evaluation is currently underway with a trial of the first version of the tool.

Discussion

The Skills and Capabilities Audit Tool is a flexible resource that can be utilised in a number of ways. Self-assessment skills, critical thinking and judgement skills can all be fostered via engagement with Parts 1 and 2, while the creation of a portfolio in Part 2 provides students with tangible products they can use to develop a resume and better present themselves to employers. This in turn builds self-confidence and, in more broad terms, promotes graduate work readiness (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012) and supports the employability and careers development purposes of WIL (Patrick, et al., 2008).

When the Part 3 pre-and post ‘experience’ 360 degree self-assessment and Part 4 reflection activities are also used, an extra layer of ‘personal’ learning is offered to students. These two parts emphasise the process of independent self-assessment and encourage students to be intentionally and critically engaged in appraising themselves and the outcomes of their efforts. The student has the chance to compare their initial ‘baseline’ measurement with their final self-assessment and make a judgement about where they were accurate or off the mark. Intentional pre and post self-evaluation prompts the student to consider who they are and who they are becoming, concepts essential to the notion of agency (Bruner, 1996). The ability to independently self-appraise, reflect and manage personal learning are capabilities every student will need throughout their professional life (Billett, 2011 & 2009).

Conclusion / Implications

The nature of the Skills and Capabilities Audit Tool makes this new tool a unique resource as it is built around a WIL activity and has a strong emphasis on the development of capabilities which support learner agency. The flexibility with which the Tool has been designed may also encourage academics to make use of the resource as it affords a relatively small, but easy, way to cultivate agentic qualities in students.

References


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