



## **Do Students Develop the Way Universities Say They Do? Staff Perceptions of Student Development of Graduate Attributes in the Context of a Transnational Partnership in Kazakhstan**

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**Abstract:** There is a crisis in higher education internationally whereby the value of a degree is being called into question. One of the contributing factors to this problem is the growth of the sector internationally. Questions have arisen concerning the quality of provision, especially in the case of courses offered in different contexts as part of transnational partnerships. This research explores the perceptions of staff involved with the delivery of a unique transnational higher education partnership between a Russell Group university in the UK and a new university in Kazakhstan. The research sought to understand whether student development was perceived to be in line with the graduate attributes of the institutions involved. The research was qualitative, using in depth semi structured interviews with members of faculty involved with the delivery of the foundation course, including administration staff, teachers and managers. Responses from participants indicated that the development of characteristics broadly aligned to those stated in graduate attributes did occur.

**Keywords:** *Foundation year study; Graduate attributes; Higher Education; Staff perceptions; Student development; Transnational partnerships*

### **Introduction**

The problem at the centre of this research is that there is limited understanding of how students develop in the context of transnational partnerships. This is argued to be a relevant problem given the current crisis facing higher education (HE) whereby the value of a degree is increasingly questioned (DfE, 2019) and the growth in the number of transnational partnerships. The 2013 Barber report argues that there is a looming crisis facing universities, describing the future culmination of factors including increasing global competition, the increasing cost of education and the declining value of a degree as an avalanche facing the sector (Barber, Donnelly, Rizvi, & Puttnam, 2013).

The fundamental question...is whether a university education is a good preparation for working life and citizenship in the 21st century or, more precisely, whether it will continue to be seen as good value, given the remorseless rise in the cost of a university education over recent decades (Barber et al., 2013).

In May 2019, the Augar report into the funding of post 18 education in the UK was released. The report supports the evaluation from the Barber report, noting that a “significant minority of graduates...would have been better off financially if they had not embarked on a university course in the first place” (DfE, 2019, p. 91).

Contributing to this problem is the perception that the value of a degree appears to be coalescing around an extrinsic conceptualisation, whereby the value is associated with what it allows the graduate to achieve later in life rather than the intrinsic value that may be associated with the personal development that takes place over the course of a degree. It is argued here that these intrinsic values are represented in the lists of graduate attributes that universities provide, in that in addition to skills associated with employment, graduate attributes also typically refer to values such as curiosity, lifelong learning, conscientiousness and tolerance.

The importance of attributes such as the ability to learn independently, in addition to their intrinsic value, appear to be increasing with the changing nature of the world of work. The 2018 World Economic Forum report on future of jobs predicts that over half of all employees will require updated skills by 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2018). The report observes that “skills continuing to grow in prominence by 2022 include analytical thinking and innovation as well as active learning and learning strategies” (World Economic Forum, 2018, p. ix), skills that typically feature prominently in lists of institution’s graduate attributes.

However, institutions do not typically measure the graduate attributes they claim their students develop (Mahon, 2018). A recent court case in the UK saw Anglia Ruskin University settle out of a court with a student who claimed that the university had not delivered on their promises. This case did not directly involve the development of graduate attributes and it might reasonably be argued that institutions could not be held responsible for an individual’s development of

attributes. After all, any individual would be a variable in their own performance. However, in a world where universities are increasingly seen as vendors of education and where explicit claims are made about the development of graduate attributes (universities do not typically say that they merely provide the opportunity for the development of graduate attributes), it seems reasonable to conclude that should institutions continue to ignore the measurement of graduate attribute development, there may be related legal action in the future. Understanding how staff perceive student development is one measure of that development.

The developmental role of universities is one factor at least which is consistent throughout the multiple historical conceptualisations of the institution (Buckley, 2015; Feldman, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Given that institutions state this development happens in their graduate attributes, it seems reasonable to expect that those academic and administrative staff engaged with the delivery of tertiary education would observe it. However, given certain undesirable and growing trends in contemporary HE including ghost writing and plagiarism (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Lines, 2016), this is not a given in any HE context, including that of transnational partnerships.

The context of this study is a transnational partnership between a Russell Group university in the UK and a new university in Kazakhstan to deliver a foundation year program. This partnership constitutes the manifestation of a number of current trends in HE including massification (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and internationalisation. It is a transnational partnership with a particular societal developmental mandate to

increase participation in HE situated on the new Silk Road. To summarise, the institution represents an attempt to not only influence the future direction of the nation of Kazakhstan but also as a manifestation of the internationalisation of education in that it involves a transnational educational partnership.

While there is substantial literature concerning western institutions (Buckley, 2015; Feldman, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), there is limited research concerning manifestations of transnational institutions and transnational partnerships in particular and the perceptions of those staff involved in the delivery of these programs. The results of this research indicates that students are perceived by staff to develop in the manner suggested by generic graduate attributes (Strivens, 2011) and suggests that universities would benefit from implementing a means of evidencing that development.

## Literature Review

### Graduate Attributes

Graduate attributes (GAs) are the qualities that the graduates of any given higher education institution are felt to demonstrate. Different institutions conceptualise these differently (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004), yet there are some characteristics which arguably define graduate attributes. According to Barrie (2004) these are as follows.

1. Graduate attributes are not independent of disciplines but may be developed through multiple disciplines. That is to say critical thinking for example, can be developed through the study of Physics or English Literature. The important point is that the study of something is required to develop that skill.

2. Graduate attributes are not entry requirements. Rather they are outcomes and as such come about as a result of the process of studying at university.

3. They are referred to as attributes because they involve more than just skills.

4. They come about as a result of the process of HE. There should be no requirement for curriculum extension as these should emerge from notion of university as envisioned by Newman and Von Humboldt (Barrie, 2004).

Also, while there is seemingly no common theoretical base Barrie (Barrie, 2006; Barrie & Simon, 2005; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009), there are common themes running through graduate attributes, typically involving lifelong learning, leadership and citizenship. A list was produced by Strivens (2009) of attributes common to institutions in the UK, USA and Australia.

- Global citizenship/international perspectives/cultural awareness
  - Professionalism, ethics, values
  - Social responsibility/service to the community
  - Lifelong learning
  - Technological literacy
  - Initiative, problem-solving skills
  - Leadership
- (Strivens, 2010)

Some institutions produce explicit lists of graduate attributes while others state that these qualities are demonstrated by their graduates in their mission statements. What is typically common to both these types of institutions is a failure to measure student development of these attributes, especially those not related to skills (Mahon, 2018).

### **Student Development**

Despite there being no typical measure of student development of graduate attributes, there is considerable literature on student development, although most of that literature concerns western institutions with post-Soviet Central Asia featuring minimally in the English language literature at least. Overall, this literature suggests that students do indeed develop in the manner described by graduate attributes. In 1969, Feldman and Newcomb published a meta-analysis of 1500 studies conducted over the previous four decades. One of the many findings was that over the course of study, students typically unlearned certain behaviours while learning new ones. While it is difficult to categorically associate the impact of college with this development, a theme running throughout the literature, it does seem to be a consistently occurring correlation. In 1972, Astin published the results of a longitudinal study running between 1966 and 1970 which followed 25000 students across 217 institutions in the USA. The study used self-administered questionnaires, and revealed that participants became increasingly independent, less influenced by religious ideas and more politically liberal (Astin, 1972). These effects were greater when participants lived on campus (Astin, 1972), which suggests the environment was important.

More recently, Pascarella and Terenzini published two meta studies, the more recent coming out in 2005. While there were substantial differences between these two studies, certain themes were present throughout. The second study showed a shift away from religion, cultural and aesthetic interests as the focus of research feeding into the meta study, which presumably reflected the shifting focus of educational research during that period. The second study still showed gains in participants' sense of there being an

intrinsic value of education coupled with a decrease in the extrinsic value of education. Furthermore, the same impact was observed with attitudes to work, with there being gains in the perception of the intrinsic value of employment and decreases in the perception of the extrinsic value of employment experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These results were consistent between different types of HE institutions and types of students experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A 2015 study by Buckley in the UK found similar results with regard to the UK HE context. The United Kingdom Engagement Survey (a survey based on a survey administered in the USA) administered in 2015, involved 24 HE institutions in the UK with 24,387 student respondents (Buckley, 2015). Participants indicated that the two areas of greatest development they experienced were in the areas of independent learning and critical thinking, factors commonly found in lists of graduate attributes. Buckley observes that "these are arguably the two skills considered most definitive to higher education, and it is therefore a positive finding that students report the greatest development in those skill areas" (Buckley, 2015, p. 25).

### **The internationalisation of Higher Education**

However, there is lack of understanding about student development in the context of transnational partnerships. Internationally, HE is growing (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009) and transnational partnerships are part of that growth (Ziguras & Mcburnie, 2011). For example, according to Universities UK (2010 as cited in S Wilkins, 2011) in 2010 there were more international students taking UK HE courses outside the UK than in it. This pattern of growth has continued since then, with international

student numbers continuing to grow (Universities UK, 2018). However, it is clear that there is a great variety in terms of quantity and quality of provision where partnership programs are concerned (Ziguras & Mcburnie, 2011).

### **Post-Soviet Higher Education**

There is also limited literature on transnational partnerships in the post-Soviet space. While these partnerships exist, there is reason to be interested in this context given that it is substantially different to other contexts such as the Middle East and China where partnerships have been researched to a greater extent.

Higher Education in Central Asia experienced a development quite different to that in the west during the period of the existence of the USSR and immediately after its dissolution. The central government of the USSR saw HE as a cornerstone of the development of society as evidenced by the growth in the numbers of tertiary institutions and the number of people attending these institutions. In Ukraine alone, there were 985 universities by the end of 2013 (Oleksiyenko, 2014) and 1 in 10 people were involved in higher education in some form, as students or teachers (Kuraev, 2016). That there was great interest from western journals on the subject of Soviet HE between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, indicates that this system generated a lot of interest in the west (Chankseliani, 2017). The system under the USSR “attempted to sustain a broad measure of social equity and mass educational opportunity, even if those measures were arguably compromised by episodes of repression, corruption that spread in the post-war era, and political favouritism” (Johnson, 2008, p. 164).

In addition to there being greater participation in HE, there was a difference with the content of HE. Institutions were not autonomous and subsequently curricula were controlled centrally and unified (Kuraev, 2016). Certain subjects, such as Philosophy, Linguistics, Economics and even Botany were overlooked (Johnson, 2008). Burkhalter, Maganat and Shegebayev (2012) make the claim that education was a form of propaganda and was characterised by memorization, lecturing and an absence of independent thought. Suppression of subjects such as Philosophy and other Humanities or Social Sciences may be felt to align with such a lack of the promotion of critical thinking.

In the period immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the centralised system of HE disintegrated in those states which were newly independent. With largely unregulated markets, private institutions opened in many former Soviet states offering programs of varying quality with problems including corruption, lack of regulation and poor quality of provision. The situation involved what Johnson describes as “a universally acknowledged plunge in academic quality” (2008, p. 169).

### **Internationalisation in Kazakhstan**

These tensions were in part responsible for the establishment of the institution which is the context of this research. The overall principle behind the internationalisation of the HE sector is to transform “Kazakhstan into a strong player in the global economic and educational arenas” (Fimyar, 2014, p. 180).

The purpose of the institution was quite clearly to develop society (Fimyar, 2014; Mahon & Niklas, 2016; Saniyazova, 2017). In this sense the university

in question can be seen as falling into the conception of the university as a public good. However, there are two issues connected with this. Firstly, despite the institution having a mission to expand good practice to the wider HE sector and the adoption of the university's structural model by 10 other Kazakhstani universities (Mahon & Niklas, 2016) this model of internationalisation has led to a stark disparity in educational provision (Fimyar, 2014). Secondly, because the foundation year was delivered exclusively by the partner institution, it is unclear whether the attributes of that institution map onto the attributes of the Kazakhstani University. For example, while the GAs of the Kazakhstani institution talk of developing that state, there is no mention of this in the partner institutions' GAs.

There does appear to be at least a potential tension between the promotion of national values and the sorts of attributes (critical thinking, international outlook) promoted in generic attributes. In fact, there may be said to be a tension between the attributes of the two intuitions in partnership. Tension of this variety was also observed at international branch campuses (IBCs) in the UAE where it was observed that the values of the institution did not complement the values of the state (Vora, 2014).

There is a question then as to whether the students in the foundation year develop the attributes of either or both or neither institution. The foundation year is of particular importance again because the first year of HE is where many habits and values are established (Morris, Cranney, Jeong, & Mellish, 2013). Furthermore, given the combination of the history of corruption in post-Soviet HE mentioned above, combined with the growth in academic dishonesty

(plagiarism, ghost-writing and so on) internationally (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Lines, 2016) there is a genuine question connected with how and in what manner students develop in a new academic context such as that at the centre of this study. Overall, issues of academic dishonesty are an internationally growing problem and in cases where students succeed through the means of academic dishonesty, it seems reasonable to conclude that graduates would not be developing attributes connected with ethics, lifelong learning and personal integrity.

### **The Experiences of Transnational Academic Staff**

The perceptions of staff involved in the delivery of transnational partnership programs is not well understood. The literature on transnational academic staff in general is limited (Cai & Hall, 2016; Green & Myatt, 2011; Smith, 2009). However, it is clear that there is a growth in the mobility of academic staff internationally and that this is a product of the trends of internationalisation and commercialisation (Cai & Hall, 2016; Kim, 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that a tension exists between expectations of delivery between home and branch campuses. Part of the general transnational experience appears to involve overcoming the challenges of adapting to new teaching and learning research contexts (Cai & Hall, 2016; Green & Myatt, 2011) In research conducted at a UK IBC in China, Cai and Hall observed that it was difficult for staff to adapt to the differences of the IBC when compared to the home institution.

Although as a private institution in China the IBC relied in part upon its distinctive Britishness to market its courses and attract students, there appeared to be no ongoing work

among the staff to define, maintain, and develop the ethos and values that supported this distinctiveness in the Chinese context (Cai & Hall, 2016, p. 12).

This suggests that even in a situation where the two instances of the institution have the same graduate attributes, there is potential for differences in expectations of development.

In conclusion, a clear mission of universities is to develop students. This developmental intention is often contained in graduate attributes but while the existing literature suggests that students do develop in ways consistent with graduate attributes, there is limited literature on student development in transnational partnerships in general and on transnational partnerships in the post-Soviet space in particular. Subsequently the research question to be address is as follows:

Do teaching and administrative staff working on the foundation program of a transnational higher education partnership in Kazakhstan perceive students' development to be aligned with the graduate attributes of the institutions involved?

## Methods

This research involved the use of in depth interviews because they aim 'to capture the point of view of the respondent rather than the concerns of the researcher' (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006, p. 162). This approach has been used in institutional research internationally (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Cai & Hall, 2016; Neumann, 1992).

Judgement or purposeful sampling (Marshall, 1996) was used to obtain participants for the research.

Maximum variation was achieved by approaching staff involved with all the different subjects delivered in the foundation as well as administration. Critical case information was achieved by involving participants who had experiences of teaching, teacher management and student engagement through administration. Key informant information was obtained from one participant being a member of the foundation's senior management team and who was also the only participant to be involved in the delivery of the program both in London and in Kazakhstan (Marshall, 1996).

Three strata within employees of the foundation program were identified. These were English for academic purposes (EAP) staff, subject staff and administration staff. Within each stratum, participants were selected using simple random sampling (the RAND function in Excel) and contacted by email to participate in the study. Of those contacted four members of EAP staff, three subject staff and two administration staff accepted the invitation to participate. A precedent for using small numbers of participants in qualitative studies has been set in the literature. With regard to in depth interviews, Dworkin (2012) observes that studies typically range in participant numbers from 5 to 50. The interviews were transcribed and coded in an ongoing process with no novel themes emerging after the fifth interview.

In order to provide a better understanding of the nature of participants without identifying them, some background information on the roles participants played at the university is included in Table 1. Participants have been given invented titles to preserve anonymity but to allow for identification of their role. SUB indicates a member of the subject staff, EAP

indicates a member of the EAP staff and ADMIN identifies a member of the administration staff.

Table 1.

*Background information on interview participants*

Participant Label	Role	Nationality	Years of experience	Additional information
EAP 1	EAP teaching fellow	UK	10 -15	International experience in HE
EAP 2	EAP coordinator	UK	10-15	International experience in HE
EAP 3	EAP teaching fellow	UK	5-10	UK HE experience
EAP 4	EAP teaching fellow	USA	<5	International experience in HE
SUB 1	Senior subject coordinator	UK	20-30	UK HE experience
SUB 2	Biology teaching fellow	UK	20-30	International experience in secondary education
SUB 3	Subject coordinator	UK	10-15	International experience in HE
ADMIN 1	Administrator	Kazakhstani	<5	Graduate degree from USA (Bolashak)
ADMIN 2	Administrator	Kazakhstani	<5	Graduate degree from UK (Bolashak)



The interviews were conducted in the summer semester. A ten-item interview schedule was designed and distributed to participants prior to the interview. Interviews were semi structured and varied in length from 22 to 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded (with the permission of participants) and the results transcribed. The interviews covered several areas including the purpose of a university, motivation, development, and barriers to learning.

### Data Analysis

An inductive thematic approach was used to the data analysis in order to summarize the raw data and draw links between the research questions and that summarised data (Thomas, 2006). Coding (see Table 2) proceeded according to the stages outlined by Bryman (Bryman, 2012) and in order to establish consistency, independent parallel coding was used (Stemler & Colors, 2001; Thomas, 2006). Material included in this paper is designed to both illustrate the overall codes, but also how the secondary codes developed into those final codes.

Table 2.  
*Coding*

Overall categories	Second coding	Initial Coding	
Student development	Personality	Critical thinking	
	Independence	Maturity	
	Socialization	Immaturity	
	Skills	Socialization	
	Faculty role		Communication
			Learning to learn
			Faculty role
			Faculty motivation
			Personality/character development
			Confidence
Obstacles students face	Stress: Family expectation Stress: Adapting to new educational and living environment	Parental pressure	
		Family expectation	
		Passive learning	
		New living environment	
		Homesickness	
		Different teaching styles	

## Results

### Staff Perceptions of Student Development

**Personality:** Participants' responses revealed several areas where they felt students developed over the course of a degree. It was clear from the range of responses that there is no single way in which students develop. This idea was summed up by one participant who commented, 'I think they develop in different ways. Some things more and some less' (ADMIN 1).

Despite the variety of responses given, seven of the participants mentioned character development as being a key consideration which implies the importance of this issue to participants.

From a fundamental point of individualism, people should have the basic right to be themselves, and to know themselves, and if university can provide that, and can allow people to learn who they are, if that makes sense, or to develop their sense of self, and their individualism, then that has to be a fundamentally valuable and precious thing (EAP 2).

**Independence:** It was also observed that the students develop as adults, and that the course provides opportunities for them to do so. An example of this is the assessment at the end of the year, where each student defends the research project they have written in a short (30 minute) oral exam known as a viva.

I think it is the first time that they are given the opportunity to be treated more as an equal to their teacher. Give them the chance to have an adult discussion. They get to, during the course

of the year with us they grow up a little bit. You can see that in their viva for example. Like they are talking to you, you know, they are on your level. They are discussing something they researched (EAP 4).

Associated with the idea of maturity was independence, which also featured heavily in responses.

It's developing a sense of independence, I think. Not just to learn what's being thrown at you, or what's presented at you in a book that you recommended, but also to put that material in some kind of context, and hopefully the context would be as wide as possible in terms of the society (SUB 3).

**Socialization:** Socialization was another theme that multiple participants commented on, as ADMIN 1 commented 'I guess our students are studying from each other' (ADMIN 1). This socialisation was also a skill connected to the idea of networking as SUB 3 observed, 'students also develop an ability to network among friends' (SUB 3).

One participant also pointed out that the physical manifestation of the university, the fact that the students were brought together to live away from home in a campus environment, facilitated this development

It's learning how to relate to others, to their peers as well, because the nature of a campus university, particularly one where they're housed in dorms (SUB 3).

Another participant made the additional claim that part of this socialisation may constitute a more progressive attitude towards gender.

There is a difference between male and female especially given the culture here. How the female will be perceived as a decision maker and making your own career that is something culturally I think they've got to take on board a bit more (SUB 2).

Socialisation was also linked explicitly to the nature of the educational program (in this case Biology, which involved students going on a field trip) by one of the respondents.

Respecting other people's point of view. We really do some of that bit on the field trip. That's where they get to do more open science. That's where the team work comes in, where they are working in smaller groups, 4 and 5s. Then you know how to do the task, assigning different roles, that kind of thing (SUB 2).

This relationship of the program to the development of this factor was noted by another participant as well, but in the context of a different course, in this case EAP.

Social development, without question. There would have to be some kind of social development. I think, depending on your cultural background, at, certainly western universities there's enormous amounts of assessment. I think it's based on group work, group assessments, presentations, things like

this, which almost demand that students have to develop socially (EAP 2).

**Skills:** In general, it was felt that students develop skills as a result of their studies, notably communication (which manifests itself also in the idea of socialization mentioned above) and learning how to learn. EAP 4 observed for example that 'their communication skill develops a lot' and that 'learning how to debate and argue' also took place and also that students develop 'critical thinking. Learning how to analyse an issue. Learning that there is not just one right answer' (EAP 4).

This idea of skills linked back to the idea that higher education was a part of the process of working towards a career with participants noting that a degree is 'training for a career' (SUB 3) and similarly that students are 'being trained rather than educated. Being trained up to get a particular job at the end and having the requisite skills for that' (EAP 3).

Moving away from the notion that the skills being developed were linked explicitly to a vocation, the idea that students need to learn how to learn was key. This skill in particular relates to the context of higher education and links to one of the obstacles faced by students discussed subsequently.

I mean yes learn to learn, learn to cope with normal situations. Learn to be able to I suppose assess those normal situations very quickly and perhaps the ability to apply appropriate and pragmatic solutions to that (SUB 1).

Regarding learning to learn, one participant observed that the subject was largely irrelevant to the process of developing that skill.

The process that you actually go through, whether it's a scientific experiment, or whether it's reading and analysis and evaluation, is I guess largely irrelevant. You're still going through a process of, 'What do I need to do? What do I need to read? What do I need to experiment? What do I need to explore to find that answer?' (EAP 2).

In fact, the importance of subject knowledge was conspicuous in its absence from responses. As another participant observed, the knowledge acquired during the course of a university degree becomes obsolete with time.

Unless they have developed the skills to deal with that, they are going to run into a brick wall at some particular point. I mean a scientist can't accumulate much greater factual mass in terms of doing a degree. 20 years later much of that factual mass is actually useless to you and if you haven't acquired the ability to well build upon that factual mass by taking on other things then you're not going to be terribly useful (SUB 1).

While the idea that knowledge changes and becomes obsolete with time seems common sense, there was still a sense among participants that this motivation for subject knowledge, as measured through grades, was important for students. As a participant observed,

Subject knowledge, for sure, but with a goal in mind of getting that certain grade. One thing I find dismaying is that they really are very obsessed and interested with the grade that they're going to get, rather than taking pleasure in taking that bit of knowledge from a certain chapter and then retaining it, and then knowing how to apply it in another situation. That could be another module where they have that as assumed entry knowledge, or it could be to a problem, so to the outside of their course. It is a bit disappointing that they are so focused on their marks, and not asking, 'Why did I get slightly lower on this one?' Not just because they got it wrong, but because maybe they're missing a key bit of understanding (SUB 3).

**Faculty role:** Of particular note was the extent to which all participants felt that faculty had a key role in helping the students to develop. Participants pointed out that the method of teaching and the nature of the administration was such that it forced students to be adults outside of the classroom and independent learners within. As one participant commented with regard to administration, 'when people come here to apply or to submit documents they come with parents or with like grandparents. In the beginning parents come and ask the marks and results and we try to explain that the kids are not like children anymore and at the end you see like that students try to come as themselves and that's good' (ADMIN 2).

With regard to teaching, participants stressed how important the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning was. Participants commented that 'you are not a teacher or lecturer in the traditional sense. You are a facilitator and giving them the tools

to actually investigate it further themselves' (SUB 2) and that 'it's a bit like giving them enough room. Let's see what you go and do with it' (EAP 1).

Overall the belief was expressed by participants that personal development takes place whether an individual goes to university or not, but that the university context provides a special sort of environment for that development.

Well if you are thinking that students come in at 17 or 18 you know because they are young adults they are going to develop socially and in maturity and they are going to develop personally regardless of where they are, but obviously university should enhance and give them extra opportunities and avenues to do that. So, in that sense they will grow up (EAP 3).

While it was clear that participants felt that this area of personal and skills development was more important than subject knowledge, it seems that there was simultaneously the belief that the students themselves would not agree with this. There was the perception that future opportunities are more important than development for students even though participants see development as the more significant aspect. So although participants felt that students developed the most in this area, the perception was that students wouldn't realize this. As one participant noted in response to the questions about what they believed students perceived themselves to be getting out of the university experience.

Interviewer: What do you think students think they're buying?

EAP 2: Future, in a word, and I don't think they necessarily see exactly what that is from all of those different perspectives, and I think a lot of the students will see as a step up, a career, and they won't necessarily see the social development that supports that.

### **Staff Perceptions of the Obstacles Students Face at University**

**Stress: Family expectation:** Analysis of the interviews revealed that the obstacles faced by students in terms of completing their degree were connected with stress. This manifested itself in parental expectation and difficulty in adapting to a new environment.

Most participants mentioned family as a source of pressure and questioned the intrinsic motivation of students in the face of living up to the expectations of their parents.

There's a number of students for who that (obtaining a degree) may not necessarily be their own goal. It may be the goal of their parents that they want their child to go to this university so that their kid will get those opportunities. The classic, 'My son will be an engineer' (EAP 2).

This idea was linked to the notion of the prestige associated with the university by SUB 3 who commented that 'it's prestige, it's about future financial security, but with families being as close as they are here there's also sort of pride pressure, if you like, to follow in the footsteps of a relative. Probably the parents, but not always' (SUB 3).

One participant observed that this sort of pressure is not unique to Kazakhstan but applies internationally.

I think at that age, when people are 17, as in any country, and probably quite a lot of it comes from the parents. I would imagine in the UK not every 17 year old knows exactly what they want to do either. But perhaps here parental pressure is more (EAP 3).

**Stress: Adapting to new educational and living environment:** In general, it was felt that adapting to a new environment both in terms of educational expectations and living arrangements was a challenge. As noted above, the method of instruction at the university is designed to facilitate a critical attitude and promote independent learning. This involves the learner becoming responsible for their own learning which is difficult for students who have come from, and excelled in, an environment focused on rote learning (Burkhalter & Shegebayev, 2012). As one participant observed, ‘they have been told that they are the best and the smartest in their schools and that this is what you do’ (EAP 4).

This adaptation was observed to be part of the normal transition from secondary to tertiary education, as one participant noted ‘they learn how to analyse, how to give facts, how to think critically. That's the biggest change for them. Plus, they also learn to give their opinion which, usually, they are not asked’ (ADMIN 1).

However, it was pointed out that for the students at this institution, the gap was probably larger to bridge than for students entering western tertiary education from western secondary education. One reason for this is

that in Kazakhstan, schooling lasts for 11 rather than 12 years (although this is slowly changing with the introduction of a 12th year in some schools). Another reason is the legacy of Soviet style instruction from the state as it was pre-1991, a system ‘fraught with many fear-based behaviours antithetical to critical thinking and an open, democratic society (Burkhalter & Shegebayev, 2012, p. 55). So, part of the role of the faculty was felt to be ‘trying to get them (the students) away from a rote learning perspective, which a lot of our students have come from the post-Soviet educational perspectives, and I think by having that kind of methodology, and the students are perfectly capable of doing it’ (EAP 2).

In addition to adapting to a new educational environment, it was acknowledged that students have difficulty adapting to the new living environment. Moving away from home, learning to be responsible for meals, laundry and other everyday chores was observed as an obstacle.

I think leaving home for western students is easier than it is for our students. But I think for all students, leaving an environment you are comfortable in for the first time is difficult (EAP 4).

It is of interest to consider here whether the developmental aspects mentioned above could take place without a transition of this sort. There seems to be a strong link between new types of teaching and assessments and developing academic related skills. Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the extent to which socialization would develop without the challenge and stress of adapting to a new environment. It seems reasonable to conclude that the challenge of

adapting to new situations is at least part of the road to student development.

### **Students as Consumers of Education**

The students at the university were non-fee-paying at the point this research was conducted. Subsequently, given the international trends towards the commercialisation of education, it was interesting to consider if staff perceived students as customers.

There was a consensus that even in a non-fee-paying context, students were becoming customers and consumers of education with one participant noting that 'it's true and it's getting more and more like that in European and American free market economies. It's absolutely, it's 100% free market' (EAP 1). Another participant also noted that, 'I think parents are consumers of education' (EAP 4), an observation which further stresses the role parents play in the Kazakhstani higher education experience.

The notion of students as customers was seen as something of an obstacle to student development as it puts the focus not on studying what you are interested in but on study as a means to the end of future opportunity.

There's this kind of ideal that in education it should be the pleasure of finding things out, a sense of curiosity. So, when you're suggesting that there's an aspect of them being consumers or customers, it makes it sound more like a business (SUB3).

As is implicit from the comment above, there was also consistency in responses to what students were thought to be purchasing. Most participants talked about opportunities in the future and subject

knowledge, as one participant noted, 'I think they'd say that, I think they'd say they're buying opportunity to a better job, better life' (EAP 1) and 'future, in a word' (EAP 2) and 'I think they are paying for the key to future prosperity' (SUB 1).

This idea of future opportunities contradicts what participants in general agreed were the actual benefits of a university. Furthermore, as one participant observed, this may prevent students from taking certain subjects in favour of others that are deemed more future friendly.

Many years ago, people may have chosen subjects at university and career path, basically because they enjoyed the subject. Increasingly students look towards potential earnings and status and other things in order to make a decision (SUB 1).

## **Discussions**

The research question which is the focus of this study concerns how foundation staff perceive student development. While, it was apparent that staff did not see a uniform development among students, the development that staff perceived to take place was broadly in line with the notions of graduate attributes. Students were perceived to have grown in the areas of organisational skills, independence and socialization. Broadly speaking these relate to the graduate attributes of awareness, community engagement, technological and problem-solving skills and social responsibility (Strivens, 2011) and also with the perceived importance of active learning outlined in the World Economic Forum report on future of jobs (World Economic Forum, 2018).

One area of development that commonly features in graduate attribute lists but was absent from these results was leadership. Given the seeming necessity of people to be led in order for leadership to be demonstrated, it is perhaps unsurprising that this was the case. It is difficult to conceive of a situation whereby an entire cohort of students could develop and demonstrate leadership skills when the principle opportunity to do so would involve other people who are also supposed to be developing in the same way. Subsequently institutions may be advised to revisit this quality or explain how opportunities to develop it are given.

Overall, the development noted, while in line with generic notions of graduate attributes, did not appear to be aligned more with one institution's attributes than the other. Certain comments could be interpreted as demonstrating preparation for an international jobs market, as specified by the graduate attributes of the UK university, while others indicated an awareness of the developmental needs of Kazakhstan.

Secondly, this development is aligned with intrinsic notions of the value of a degree. While being independent and organised are of course compatible with the extrinsic goals of getting a better job or a higher salary, they belong to the softer set of skills which as was argued earlier, are not frequently publicised as contributing to the value of a degree.

Furthermore, it is of additional interest, that staff appear to value the development of these sorts of attributes above other aspects, such as content knowledge. Comments made throughout the interviews, indicated a perception that this sort of personal development was ultimately the most

valuable. One participant summed it up in the following way.

From a fundamental point of individualism, people should have the basic right to be themselves, and to know themselves, and if university can provide that, and can allow people to learn who they are, if that makes sense, or to develop their sense of self, and their individualism, then that has to be a fundamentally valuable and precious thing (EAP 2).

Participants in this study performed a variety of different roles in the university. Kim (2010) describes the following division of labour with regard to transnational academics.

1. Academic intellectuals, whose creative role is to engage as 'legislator' and 'interpreter' contributing to a 'creative destruction' and reconstruction of the paradigms of academic work;
2. Academic experts, many of whom increasingly define their roles as 'researchers' with transferable methodological research skills; and
3. Manager-academics, many of whom have assumed their role as general managers with transferable management skills rather than traditional academic leadership (Kim, 2010, p. 579).

It is evident that the participants of this study fall into the first and third categories mentioned above. Despite this distinction in roles, there was still consensus between participants with regard to student development.



## Conclusion

This study has addressed the question of how teaching and administrative staff perceive student development. Responses from participants indicate that the development of characteristics broadly aligned to those stated in graduate attributes is the most significant value of a degree. Furthermore, that this was the development that they observed most commonly in the students they interacted with, a finding in line with the literature on student development internationally. It is noteworthy that even in an educational context as unique as the one featured in this study, student development is largely consistent. One area of development that was not noted, related to the idea of leadership. This would appear to be a difficult quality not only to enable but also to demonstrate the development of.

Overall, demonstrating student development of graduate attributes is an idea that institutions would be well advised to consider. Not only would this be a reasonable act given that these claims are so widely made, but also it may serve to shift general perceptions of the value of a degree away from extrinsic notions of education as a means to an end, but towards the intrinsic notion of education as an end in itself.

While this study has demonstrated that staff do perceive students to develop graduate attributes, this type of evidence of student development is not practical in an ongoing year by year manner. It is recommended that universities consider alternate and practical means of demonstrating student development.

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