

Title: **Advancing Evidence-informed Practice in Generic Skills Development: what academics think and do**

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the session, delegates will:

- Appreciate the variation that exists in conceptualisations of skills and of skills teaching at University;
- Understand the implications of this for practice in educational development;
- Have reflected on how this research may apply to their own context and therefore be able to, where appropriate, adapt the way that they teach skills or assist others in doing so;
- Be able to discuss the different understandings identified with others involved in skills development.

Session Outline

This session discusses an ongoing research project at the University of Surrey which seeks to inform practice in transferable skills development. The Dearing Report (1997) highlighted the need to improve graduates' skills. However, the report's failure to engage with anything more than a superficial discourse of 'generic skills', presents a challenge for educators and educational developers. Where there ought to be clarity, there is a conceptual vacuum:

"Although the Dearing Report (1997) was influential in setting future policy direction, it did nothing to clarify the conceptual confusion surrounding the notions of key or, as we have called them, generic, skills; indeed it exacerbated them. It amply illustrates the lack of any theoretical or conceptual base to their consideration of these skills by forcing very different categories of skill into the same 'key' box, whilst at the same time limiting their number to those which seem most able to be assessed." (Bennett, Dunne and Carré, 2000)

Previous research at the University of Sydney (Barrie, 2004) has indicated the considerable variation in academics' understandings of skills. The current study involves qualitative research interviews with academic teaching staff which are analysed adopting a fine-grained, thematic approach which highlights how academics think about skills. In particular, it demonstrates how they believe skills may be developed through their teaching within the discipline.

This session will explore the variation in perspectives on skills emerging from the research and the likely implications for educational development. The next phase of the study will seek to encourage academics to reflect on their own beliefs and practices, in the light of the findings, to promote development across the whole institution.

Session activities and approximate timings

- Presentation of the ongoing project and the analysis of research interviews; discussion of the emerging descriptions and the potential implications for educational development. (25 mins.)
- Delegates discuss the descriptions in groups and reflect on how these relate to their own understandings and contexts and possible uses in HE development (12 mins.)
- Questions and feedback. (8 mins.)

References

Barrie S.C. (2004). A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy. *Higher Education Research and Development*. 23 (3), 261-275.

Bennett, N, Dunne, E., and Carré, C. (2000) *Skills Development in Higher Education and Employment*, SHRE and Open University Press.

Dearing, R. (1997) *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*, HMSO.