

Developing an attributes and skills framework

Professor John Barrow, Dean for Employability & Entrepreneurship, University of Aberdeen, shares his personal perspectives on participating in an Advance HE collaborative project.

I have been involved in many short-lived working groups or task and finish groups during my time in higher education (no comment on how long that might be!). These groups are usually good at creating a space for colleagues to come together who might perhaps not interact with each other very often and they can create meaningful outputs that can effect change, but - and it's a big but - they will often involve the same staff who show an interest in the topics being discussed.

But there are alternatives; one of which is to take part in a wider community of practice style group, sharing learnings and understanding problems from a much wider perspective. This was the main driver for participating, along with my colleagues, in an Advance HE collaborative project. It was an incredibly useful experience for me personally and really helped shape the project I was leading: to create and embed a new set of graduate attributes across my institution.

The collaborative project gave an opportunity to engage with a specific and focused topic (in my case "Adding Value through Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education") and provided our university with an opportunity to reflect on what we do well, and potentially not so well, and ultimately gave us the opportunity to interact with a wider academic community through workshops with other institutions grappling with the same problems.

For me, involvement in the collaborative project really did create a space for reflection and innovation that has supported our institutional activities.

In the beginning...

In 2021, I was tasked with leading a transformational project at the University of Aberdeen aiming to bring in a new set of graduate attributes. Our original set of graduate attributes were over 10 years old, and we had a new strategic plan (Aberdeen 2040), which was beginning to shape our approach in multiple areas of university activity at the same time as the impact of Covid-19 was diminishing.

...at the point of implementation

Now in 2024, and as I write this, we are about to go live with our new set of graduate attributes, called the MySkills framework. One of our strategic priorities is to enhance the employability prospects for our students and one facet of that is the MySkills framework. This framework will provide our students with a common approach to recording and reflecting on their experiences and skills development while at university and give them the opportunity to develop their skills. This is not the end of this institutional journey but very much the beginning as we aim to eventually roll out this framework to all aspects of university life and embed these skills in the diverse range of curricula offered at the university. If you want to read more, see [here](#).



The University of Aberdeen MySkills framework showing the skills and associated skill groups.

Looking back

Reflecting on the MySkills project, which has taken multiple years to come to fruition, I can see how us participating in an Advance HE collaborative project in the preliminary stages has really shaped the approach we have taken.

The collaborative project allowed us to reflect on our activities by providing a dedicated space to do this. In the fast-paced and busy environment of higher education, it is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day tasks and lose sight of the bigger picture – I for one am guilty of this. The collaborative project provided a structured yet flexible framework that encouraged me, and the others in our institutional team, to step back, consider broader issues, and engage in reflection.

Through our participation in a collaborative project, one key aspect of the initial phases of the project was for us as an institution to critically examine our practices, which then allowed us to identify areas for improvement, and then develop new strategic approaches. This self-reflection process was not only beneficial for me to see how we viewed ourselves as an institution, but it also provides insights for colleagues across the university as well as those in senior management.

The structure of the initial phases of the collaborative project forced us to stop and think about where we were at in terms of our provision and even got us to reflect on our institutional culture. The Advance HE team were able to identify commonalities with our practices and highlight differences that could both set us apart but also be barriers to implementation of any future ideas. This ability to both reflect on our own institutional perspectives, but also have the shared reflections of other institutions, really helped to put our practices into a wider context.

Shared learning

Another key aspect I discovered from the collaborative project was the opportunity for shared learning amongst the institutions taking part. Universities often face similar challenges, and collaborative projects provide a platform for sharing experiences, insights and best practices. This

collective wisdom was incredibly valuable, offering new perspectives and solutions that might not have been considered by me otherwise.

The use of both collaborative days and drop-in café style events really gave us the opportunity to have colleagues come together in a variety of ways, all of which allowed the Advance HE team to create reports that I was able to share internally with colleagues. The very fact that the reports were created by an external team with their sector insights really allowed us to understand a way forward with our strategy to implement a new set of attributes and skills. At the time we had multiple routes on the table so the learnings that were shared throughout the project really helped shape our direction of travel.

Participating in an Advance HE collaborative project is not just about the ability to reflect as described above; it is also about action and making things happen. While it is nice to reflect and to think about strategies and approaches, the most important thing is to use those thoughts and approaches to enact change. Our collaborative project enabled me to drive forward my own activity as well as the activities of others within my institution.

At the same time as we were running workshops and evaluating the shared data from the project, I was also trying to understand ways in which we could develop a new approach to our graduate attributes that was grounded in the evidence collated from the collaborative project but also considering our own staff and student perspectives.

Conversations that I had with the Advance HE team became invaluable in me being able to refocus and have that external voice that was able to both motivate and critique throughout the time of the project.

Developing novel approaches

One of the primary goals I had when starting out on the collaborative project was to be able to develop new approaches to the various challenges we had, whether that was workload of academic or professional services colleagues, or identifying ways of gathering information in a meaningful way across the institution that could reliably inform our direction of travel. By bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise, collaborative projects can lead to the creation of innovative solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of the participating institutions.

The collaborative project played a crucial role in enhancing our institutional capacity. By taking part in the project, we were able to build our expertise within our institutional group, develop new skills that we could take forward in our own project meetings, and strengthen our overall capabilities as a project team. This capacity-building was essential for addressing the complex and evolving challenges of higher education.

Personal and professional growth

Beyond the institutional benefits, taking part in the Advance HE collaborative project was also rewarding on a personal and professional level. The project offered numerous opportunities for growing my skills and developing connections with others from institutions around the UK. This has impacted on our graduate attributes project directly as even after the collaborative project had formally completed, I was still able to use those connections as a network of critical friends.

This opportunity to build networks with colleagues from other institutions has been the most rewarding, personally. The connections I made created links that are still ongoing, offered an opportunity for knowledge exchange and opportunity for professional support and advice.

Transformation and reflection

Participating in an Advance HE collaborative project provided a university-wide opportunity to transform practice but also gave those individuals involved a space for reflection. These two things allowed us to drive forward individual and institutional activities for our own project, which has now come to fruition.

I have no doubt that if we had not participated in the Advance HE collaborative project early in our own project plans then we would not have achieved what we have, or it would have been more challenging without the external voice, guidance and expertise that was available to us.

Going back to my opening statement, I would view these collaborative projects as a “super task and finish group” which is able to leverage both internal institutional knowledge and sectoral knowledge synergistically to get an output that is much better than a sum of its parts. Thank you, Advance HE!

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Email: communications@advance-he.ac.uk

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