

## **Developing lifelong learning and self-directedness in higher education – are we even close to succeeding?**

### **Introduction**

The one ability that every student who successfully completes a tertiary qualification possesses is the ability to pass an examination. Research has shown that most students have a shallow approach to learning, and that even those who prefer to use a deeper approach, thereby mastering the learning outcomes, adopt a strategic approach in order to be successful in examinations (Donald, 2002; Troskie-De Bruin & Otto, 2004). A strategic approach entails both an attempt to understand and apply the relevant subject content and the memorisation of a sufficient number of facts in order to pass an examination with a good grade. Donald (2002) found that most students master the art of integration and transfer of knowledge and experience only two years or more after they have started working. Employers, on the other hand, require employees who can identify issues correctly and produce innovative solutions that will enable an organisation to develop and sustain a competitive advantage (Candy, 1995; Coetzee, 2011; Griesel & Parker, 2009). A post-school qualification develops graduates who know how to answer questions correctly, while businesses require employees who can provide original solutions and do ground-breaking work.

There seems to be a huge gap between what higher education provides and what employers require, but is this reality or perception? Griesel and Parker (2009) enumerate employers' expectations of employees:

- competent communication in English as the language of business, which implies being able to successfully demonstrate competence and comprehension
- comprehension of the business and working environment
- proficiency in the use and production of field-specific as well as general knowledge, including a lifelong learning orientation
- workplace-based, culturally intelligent, practical and strategic problem-solving
- self-confidence, self-efficacy and autonomy
- competent functioning as a team member and in intercultural environments

The great divide between employer expectations and higher education outcomes exists in the domain of practical application and information utilisation (Griesel & Parker, 2009).

According to Donald (2002), students in tertiary education embark on their studies with little understanding of what will be expected of them. In order to fully comprehend any discipline, students must be familiar with its various viewpoints, procedures and developments. Students need to develop the ability to not only acquire new knowledge, but also to cultivate their own unique knowledge by developing the abilities to disagree with current or established points of view, question established fact and put forward possible solutions to difficult and complex situations (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Donald, 2002).

These days, universities have heterogeneous student cohorts – more students who are not necessarily prepared for further education are accepted into higher education, while at the same time increased responsibilities have been added to the academic workload. Not only do academic teaching staff have to deal with more students, but those students need more personal attention from the lecturer, while the lecturer is battling to reach research and publication targets, ensure quality education and engage in a meaningful manner with the community (Donald, 2002). Tertiary education requires students to realise and accept that for the most part they are responsible for their learning and expected to engage with their academic activities at more than a surface level (Donald, 2002). In order to utilise what they have learnt to construct new knowledge, students need to develop the facility to cultivate the necessary knowledge scaffolds and images that allow them to purposefully relate their new learning to specific practical, real-life situations (Donald, 2002; Botha, 2012). This implies that the development of reflective competence, analysis and evaluative ability are vital end results of tertiary education (Candy, 1995; Coetzee, 2011; Donald, 2002).

What is our purpose as lecturers or educators in higher education? Given the preceding description of what students ought to master at tertiary level, the purpose of teaching in higher education is to make learning possible (Candy, 1995). We should ask ourselves whether our teaching or facilitation of learning leads to quality learning. This begs another question – what is quality learning? In order to identify what may constitute quality learning in open distance learning, we must first describe the product of higher education – a graduate with the knowledge, skills and attitudes (graduate competence) that facilitates employability.

Coetzee (2011) describes internal graduateness as the possession of three universal personality characteristics, which are maintained by a series of standard, transmittable higher order competencies. These higher order competencies are described in the table below:

Interactive competence	Using English proficiently and appropriately in the business environment; relating successfully to a heterogeneous group of people; linking and cooperating positively and capably with colleagues and associates at all levels; expertly using information and communication technology; making excellent use of subject-specific and general knowledge.
Problem-solving and decision-making competence	Suggesting strategic and practical resolutions to complex and/or vague dilemmas and situations; fully comprehending the contiguous complexities of a state of affairs; evaluating all the facets of a problem; pro-actively fuelling their own growth and development; confidently suggesting solutions to problems; innovatively and creatively constructing knowledge from own experiences and knowledge.
Lifelong learning orientation	Possessing an open mind; actively and autonomously seeking out and constructing new knowledge and

	competencies in order to remain employable in any situation; keeping an eye on personal performance in order to guarantee goal achievement; meta-cognitive capability.
Enterprising competence	Being innovative; pro-actively demonstrating initiative in business ventures or activities; being self-disciplined, autonomous and rational in problem-solving; examining the viability of suggestions; expertise in business; managing corporate politics skilfully.
Information utilisation	Being able to communicate information lucidly and credibly for personal, organisational or community advantage; applying individual knowledge in order to solve or change circumstances; critical thinking skills.
Goal-directed behaviour	Taking responsibility for achieving personal and job-related goals; displaying behaviour that leads to goal achievement; autonomy and reflective thinking capability.
Principled and conscientious behaviour	Initiating and maintaining a system of ethics and standards relating to a profession, society, organisation and personal life; being accountable for decisions and deeds; taking the initiative in showing others the way; facilitating in others the capacity for ethical and conscientious behaviour.
Logical thinking	Being adept at sound, common-sense ways of thinking; reflective and high-level thinking that results in precise explanations and conclusions; meta-cognitive competence.

Table 1: Graduateness characteristics. Adapted from Coetzee, 2011.

According to Griesel and Parker (2009), employers believe graduates from tertiary institutions to be generally deficient in terms of English communication competence and comprehension of the business and working environment.

Candy (1995) describes quality learning at tertiary level as consisting of superior results of learning acquired in an excellent way. In order to achieve quality learning, students need to develop both individual, transportable competence and discipline-specific competence. The individual, transportable competence that should be developed in the higher education environment can be described as follows:

- The ability to learn successfully
- Self-management capability
- Proficiency in developing personal goals
- Knowledgeability, being well-read, and the ability to utilise information resources successfully

- The ability to capably convey information both orally and in writing
- The capacity to work cooperatively
- The ability to take control and guide others successfully
- Logical, higher level cognitive ability

Candy (1995) describes these competencies as lifelong learning competencies, but the commonalities between these lifelong learning competencies and the graduateness competencies defined by Coetzee (2011) are evident. The development of discipline-specific proficiency revolves around the cultivation and application of knowledge that is inclusive, contemporary, exact, sound and pertinent to both the field of study and the working world. Therefore, quality learning can be described in terms of at least three dimensions: the essential content of the module or qualification; the significant learning outcomes that will indicate student mastery of the essential content; and the qualitative characteristics of student learning (Candy, 1995).

The lifelong learner should possess an open mind, have a sense of individual autonomy and management, take responsibility for searching for and building new knowledge and competence, be able to monitor personal performance and goal achievement, and possess meta-cognitive competence (Candy, 1995; Coetzee, 2011; Donald, 2002).

How do we develop lifelong learning in students? Facilitating the intellectual development of students assists in the development of self-directedness and fosters an attitude of lifelong learning (Candy, 1995; Donald, 2002). We can facilitate autonomy in students by constructing a learning environment that inculcates the realisation that quality learning is mostly a product of student effort. This attitude must be modelled by university teaching. Teaching should provide a scaffold for students to construct their own meaning. Module organisation is paramount – this includes deciding on the syllabus, aligning tuition and assessment and basing tuition and assessment on valid, relevant learning outcomes formulated correctly at the relevant NQF level (Botha, Oosthuizen & Louw, 2011; Donald, 2002). Use active, challenging learning strategies that are situated in real-life contexts and that allow students to be accountable for the results of their effort (Donald, 2002; Knowles, 1984). Adopt flexible learning approaches, provide inclusive examples and relate module content to work environments, encouraging students to think like the professionals they are striving to become. Explain to students what quality learning entails and which skills they should develop in order to ensure that they practise quality learning. Assessments should focus students' attention on the development of critical thinking skills, not the memorisation of unrelated pieces of information. Formative, summative and self-assessment activities should encourage students to reflect on their own learning. Students should be encouraged to find the questions to answers themselves, and to find more information than what is required. Assessment should encourage integration of module-specific, field-specific and domain-specific knowledge.

The specific characteristic that crops up in every description of an ideal graduate is self-management, autonomy or self-directedness – the ability, attitude or competence to take charge of learning, development or life. Knowles (1984) describes the adult learner as someone who is capable of autonomy, self-management and self-direction, who is ready to learn because a need to know exists, who wants to learn in order to achieve a specific, individual goal, who is mostly internally motivated to learn, and who possesses a wealth of experience that can be used successfully in

the learning situation. Adult learners require a psychological climate of mutual respect, collaboration and mutual trust, supportiveness and authenticity. Adult learners need to be involved in the planning of their learning, in formulating their own learning goals, in arranging their learning and in the self-evaluation of their learning. An adult learner should be treated as capable of self-direction and autonomy, even when the behaviour displayed by that learner belies the belief. When an adult learner is treated as being capable of self-direction, the ability to function autonomously will be developed. When an adult learner is treated as being capable of higher order or reflexive or critical thinking, will the ability to think independently not also be developed?

## Summary

The development of reflective competence will remain with the graduate long after subject-specific knowledge has become obsolete (Candy, 1995). What are we really teaching in tertiary education? Are we teaching students to think independently in order to create lifelong learning competence, or are we teaching students to be successful students by passing examinations? And what role does the business world play in this equation?

## Sources

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