

# PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITY AND THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

## Executive Summary

Dr Jenny Willis

March 2011

1. The research was commissioned by SCEPTRe in September 2009 as a legacy resource to support future curriculum development related to professional training.
2. Two questions were posed, the first dealing with structural arrangements, the second with conceptual aspects of professional capability:
  - I. How do we develop professional capability through the undergraduate curriculum?
  - II. Are there any generic core competencies that relate to becoming professional being developed through the curriculum and professional training programmes.
3. An additional question was to examine the current validity of the Surrey Graduate Skills Statement, established in 2003, against existing curricular notions of 'graduateness.'
3. The research was for purely pedagogical purposes, and was supported by PTCC, to which committee regular progress reports were made.
4. The original methodology was to begin with the curriculum common to 3- and 4-year students of an undergraduate programme, in order to determine how professional capability is developed. Difficulties in creating a meaningful tool for comparison between subjects led to a revision in autumn 2010, when the focal point moved to the professional training year.
5. The primary data source was departmental printed documentation, including professional training and other handbooks, assessment *pro formas*, on-line information and resources, the University prospectus and module catalogue.
6. The aim of conducting interviews with a key member of staff in every department proved to be impossible due to both the unavailability of academics and the practical constraints of this project. Interviews were conducted with a small number of departmental staff, as indicated in individual chapters.
7. The research instruments developed for analysis of data comprise:
  - I. a matrix for analysis of P-credits against the University's regulations for the assessment of professional training
  - II. a matrix for disaggregation of professional training modules and assessment by Level
  - III. a matrix for the comparison of formally assessed dimensions of professional capability, constructed around the University's Graduate Skills Statement and PDP policy themes
8. Analyses are made initially at departmental level, then collated to produce faculty overviews and finally means for the University.
9. The report was intended to include a full narrative account of each department, working alphabetically through and within Faculties. However, the scale of this study proved to be too great to achieve this within the time available. A compromise was necessary: whilst some departmental accounts are fully written, others provide only the matrices for the subject, accompanied by the reference material that has informed them.
10. Of the 6 modes of assessment included in the regulations for P-credits, the student report(s) and assessment by the workplace supervisor were most significant, with mean weightings of 37.5% and 36.6% respectively. This indicates that a combination of academic and practical skills, together with interpersonal skills is sought.
11. Preparation for the role of assessor is found to lie in printed guidance notes, or the accumulated prior experience of workplace supervisors and visiting tutors.

12. A mixture of assessment methods is found: some rely on objective measures and standards, reflecting a realist model, whilst others are associated with the relativist model, where subjective judgements are made.
13. To assist assessors, matrices are frequently provided which match narrative descriptions of the nature of performance or achievement against the grade to award.
14. Considerable diversity has been found in the form of grade awarded for formative assessments: they include percentages, marks from 1-5 (in both ascending and descending scales), and grades A-F.
15. The 120 P-credits awarded for professional training are usually accredited separate from the degree, but in subjects which are aligned with accreditation by the professional body, they may contribute to the degree e.g. 10% for Engineering.
16. Disaggregation of the professional training process shows that preparatory activities take place at Level 2. These are a requirement of those going on placement, and in a few subjects they carry accreditation (which is carried into the final 120 Level P award).
17. In practice, the professional training experience also continues into Level 3, with returning students being required to give presentations if this has not already happened on a return day during Level P. Presentations are usually assessed but they are also built into a process of peer development as they are given before Level 2 (and sometimes Level 1) students.
18. A model is shared by the School of Management, which embeds professional capabilities from Levels 1-3, for all students on all programmes, and accredits modules using the 15-credit framework.
19. When the domains of capability that are assessed are examined, a consistent picture emerges across faculties: intellectual and cognitive skills are most significant, followed by employment related competences and communication skills.
20. Looking at the detailed dimensions of professional capability assessed by faculties, team work is the sole dimension that scores 100% for all.
21. The second most important dimensions (report writing, understanding the host organisation, applying academic theory to practice and written communication) represent a mixture of cognitive skills and understanding, interpersonal and communication skills.
22. Where faculties differ in the significance of dimensions, this can be accounted for by the nature of subjects e.g. numeracy may not be relevant to all disciplines.
23. Despite the difficulties of assessing personal dispositions and qualities, it was clear that all faculties include them in their assessment schemes, alongside more objectively measurable dimensions. Like point 12, above, this indicates a mixture of realist and relativist assessment models.
24. The Graduate Skills Statement is found to be relevant to the dimensions of professional capability developed and assessed by faculties, but it has been proposed that personal dispositions should be introduced as a seventh domain. This reflects current practice and the nature of qualities being sought by employers.
25. The University's professional training criteria are aligned with the IBM's most recent analysis of employer demands for future leaders.
26. Six recommendations are made, which invite departments to use the opportunity of reviewing programme content and assessment under the 15-credit module scheme to consider the issues raised in this study, using a matrix approach and bringing together representatives from each faculty.