

# Holistic Student Development Powering the Student Journey: A Model for Graduate Attributes, Curriculum, and the Second Transcript

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## Abstract

There is growing acknowledgement that academic success involves more than just disciplinary achievement. In response, many higher education institutions aim to instill generic graduate attributes such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, ethical responsibility, self-management, information literacy, global awareness, leadership, adaptability, and lifelong learning in students. This qualitative study uses an autoethnographic approach, where the authors, academic leaders from a large private higher education institution, reflect on integrating these attributes to prepare students for a rapidly changing workplace. The authors' reflections are contextualized within recent literature, highlighting correlations and variations. Institutional data, including a large employer survey, workshop documents, and project reports, are referenced to explore insights from implementing a Second Transcript Model (STM) at the institution. This research advocates for a holistic approach to provide students with opportunities to develop and display their knowledge, skills, and attitudes both inside and outside the formal curriculum. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to envision learning as a holistic journey, incorporating academic success, workplace readiness, and social responsibility. In conclusion, the STM represents a paradigm shift towards nurturing graduate attributes that prepare students to be resilient, adaptable, and socially responsible citizens, capable of navigating the complexities of a fast-changing 21st-century global landscape.

## Keywords

Higher Education, Graduate Attributes, Co-Curricular Initiatives, Second Transcript

## 1. Introduction and Background

Within higher education, there is an increasing recognition that academic success extends beyond the traditional concept of disciplinary achievement. Rather, what is emerging is a growing acknowledgement that the failure to provide a holistic learning experience for students may negatively impact graduate success, especially their transition into the world of work and society. Summarizing the identified concern, [Crutchfield \(2020: p. 1\)](#) points out: “The role of higher education is not just to distribute academic intellect or economic success to students, but to support and develop the growth of mind, body, and spirit for all college students. Through the theoretical lens of holism in society and interconnected non-academic areas of learning, new influences of higher education on the greater good can be considered for the students they serve.”

Notwithstanding most universities discussing and describing graduate attributes in policies and marketing materials, there is little evidence in the literature of case studies or practices where these successes and challenges are discussed. However, what is clearer in the available research is a consensus that university curricula often present significant gaps when it comes to the teaching and development of non-academic skills and applied learning.

Aligning with the ethos of the well-known American Indian proverb which states, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children,” universities today are actively focusing on graduating students as global citizens with a deep sense of social responsibility. There is also a growing realization that university education is not an end in itself; graduates must be equipped to successfully transition from university to the world of work. Preparing students for the workplace encompasses a wide range of skills beyond the academic curriculum.

This reality has been confirmed by several employer surveys reflecting on social-emotional learning skills “as amongst the most important skills employers seek when recruiting new graduates” ([Casillas, Kyllonen, & Way, 2019: p. 35](#)). Against this backdrop (and recognizing that not all skills are teachable), there is a clarion call for universities to envision the learning experience as a holistic journey including 1) Academic success; 2) Workplace readiness with appropriate skills and competencies; 3) A heightened sense of community as values of social responsibility and global citizenship take root.

The graduate attributes agenda within a university is multi-faceted and complex, as the development of attribute competencies often spans inter-institutional faculties and university structures. It calls for a deliberate breaking of silos and for stakeholders to embrace two of the more commonly identified graduate attributes, namely collaboration and teamwork. Furthermore, many critics argue that the identified graduate attributes are often part of the incidental learning experience on the student journey and, therefore, do not require further focus. For example, time management as a graduate attribute—students know they should not be late for class, must submit assignments on time, and need to be at examination venues

punctually. They learn these rules through their experiences throughout the student journey, and anything more would thus be superfluous. However, this mindset misses several key values that will be discussed further below.

Taking up the challenge of formally instituting a graduate attributes program for students, STADIO Higher Education, a private higher education institution in South Africa, began designing its “Second Transcript Model” (STM) to encapsulate the three pillars identified above—academic success, workplace readiness, and social responsibility—and integrate them into the student journey. This is not a novel idea, and the authors recognize the existence of additional statements or co-curricular initiatives implemented in several European countries and Australia.

The essence of the STM is that all students will receive the standard academic transcript detailing academic success based on their registered academic programme. However, in addition to this, students will also receive a second transcript at graduation, outlining the non-academic skills and competencies acquired during their student journey. While some attributes are compulsory and integrated into the curriculum, there are also voluntary opportunities for students to develop and display additional skills and competencies. Student participation in these voluntary opportunities is entirely discretionary, but STADIO has ensured that they are available at no additional cost to all students. This approach aims to avoid making financial ability a barrier. The second transcript is designed to provide graduates with a competitive advantage in the workplace. Introducing a financial barrier to participation in the program would be counterproductive and, it is argued, would only serve to widen existing socio-economic gaps. The STM is based on the principle that all students should have equal opportunity and access to the identified development possibilities. In this paper, the authors seek to reflect on the implementation of the STM to integrate the institutionally approved graduate attributes, skills, and competencies, thereby providing a holistic student experience at their institution.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on educational assessment highlights that student transcripts, while useful, often provide an incomplete picture of a student’s skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Transcripts typically capture academic achievements through grades and course completion but may not fully represent a student’s practical skills, critical thinking abilities, and attitudinal development.

As described by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, graduate attributes “are descriptions of the core abilities and values a university community agrees all its graduates should develop because of successfully completing their university studies” (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009: p. 6). Research suggests that integrating assessments that evaluate knowledge, skills, and attitudes together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of a student’s competencies. For instance, DiPerna & Elliott (2000)’s model of academic enablers emphasizes the importance of evaluating interpersonal skills and motivational factors (Uji &

Kawaguchi, 2021), which significantly impact academic success but are often underrepresented in traditional transcripts. Additionally, assessments that incorporate behavioral and affective dimensions, such as attitudes towards technology and learning, can offer deeper insights into a student's engagement and self-efficacy, which are crucial for their overall development (Crutchfield, 2020). Therefore, while student transcripts are valuable, they should be complemented by other forms of assessment to capture the full spectrum of a student's educational experience and capabilities.

The literature indicates that traditional student transcripts often fail to reflect important soft skills and attitudes that are crucial for student development and employability. Soft skills, which include interpersonal communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, are essential for success in both academic and professional environments. However, these skills are rarely captured by the grades and course completions typically recorded in transcripts.

For example, Casner-Lotto & Barrington (2006) found that employers frequently report a gap between the technical skills evidenced by academic achievements and the soft skills needed in the workplace. They emphasize that new workforce entrants often lack key soft skills such as communication and teamwork, despite having strong academic records. This discrepancy highlights the limitations of transcripts in fully representing a student's capabilities. Similarly, Touloumakos (2020) argues that soft skills are often decontextualized and not systematically developed or assessed within traditional educational frameworks. This makes it challenging to gauge a student's soft skills through standard academic transcripts alone.

Furthermore, the need for integrating assessments of attitudes and behaviors into educational evaluation is underscored by the recognition that these attributes significantly impact a student's ability to apply their knowledge and skills effectively. Kamin (2013) notes that while technical competencies are crucial, soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and resilience are equally important but are seldom reflected in conventional academic records.

There are, however, limited examples of the integration of graduate attributes in academic transcripts, like the European Diploma Supplement and the Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement (AHEGS) which includes extra-curricular achievements by students during their student journey (James et al., 2008). The AHEGS acknowledges a variety of co-curricular activities that enhance the overall educational experience and skill set of students. Categories of co-curricular awards typically include leadership roles, committee and council participation, community volunteering, participation in peer mentoring and support programs, active membership or leadership in clubs and societies, professional development engagement, contributions to publications and media, and participation in skill-based competitions and challenges. These categories ensure that students' co-curricular achievements are comprehensively documented, providing a well-rounded view of their higher education experience and enhancing their employability

(Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009). For these co-curricular activities and experience to be recognized and certified, the onus is on students to provide the relevant evidence, including forms or verification documents, official nominations or endorsements from lecturers, program coordinators, or student organization leaders.

In her master's dissertation, Ragan (2001) conducted an action research project to develop and implement a co-curricular transcript program at Rowan University, drawing insights from existing programs and engaging stakeholders for successful implementation. The study identified key components of effective co-curricular transcript programs, highlighted the importance of student involvement, and demonstrated the positive impact of such initiatives on student development and employability. She identified the need for employer perspectives on transcript value, long-term effects on student success, impact on retention rates, effectiveness of marketing strategies, and comparison of transcript formats for best practices in higher education.

As emphasized by Crutchfield (2020: p. 7), "...balancing academic knowledge with other areas of knowledge, ...higher education can cultivate students who apply their skills with wisdom, civic responsibility, and evolved moral compasses" and (2020: 7): "...balancing the affective, social, and intellectual dimensions of learning student experiences in college can become more interconnected, less separate, and in turn, higher education becomes holistic", that to obtain a comprehensive understanding of a student's skills and potential, educational assessments should include soft skills and attitudes, alongside traditional academic achievements.

### 3. Methodology

In this qualitative study, we employ an autoethnographic approach (Butz & Besio, 2009), where the authors, both academic leaders from a large private higher education institution, engage in self-reflection. Autoethnography allows researchers to explore their personal experiences and connect these instances to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. The authors' reflections on their understanding, experiences, and institutional practices related to graduate attributes, curriculum, and the STM is presented in relation to recent published literature, drawing parallels and noting divergences. Institutional data, including a large institutional survey of workplace employers' views on graduate skills and attitudes, project reports, and guidelines are considered to explore the formulation and integration of graduate attributes towards better preparation of graduates for a fast changing world and workplaces.

The study does not draw on quantitative data and it does not purport to be generalized. Instead, through auto-ethnographic reflection and reporting by the authors, it focuses on a specific case and context. This approach enables the exploration of complex, nuanced aspects of the situation that may not be captured through quantitative methods. This methodology not only highlights the subjective

and interpretive nature of the research but also underscores its aim to provide insights into the specific case being studied, rather than making broad generalizations.

ChatGPT-4o was employed to generate a first draft of the analysis of the survey data, and for language fluency and editing. However, an over-reliance on AI tools was consciously avoided and the intellectual contributions, arguments and conclusions presented in this paper, are exclusively the product of the authors (Kohane, Beam, & Manrai, 2024).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are discussed below, in terms of the reasons for developing the STM, followed, respectively, by the identification and promotion of the graduate attributes, and the recognition of the students' additional achievements, and concluding with the challenges associated with the implementation of the STM.

### 4.1. Reasons for Developing the STM

What drove the development of the STM? To address the need for an acknowledgement of students' holistic competencies, STADIO's plan was to build a bridge that would aid students to develop the skills and knowledge required to enable a successful transition or "crossing" into the labor market (Casillas, Kyllonen, & Way, 2019). The decision by the institution to implement the STM was predicated on several assumptions:

- The expectations of industry and the professions are changing, and workplaces are preferring graduates who can enter the organization with the minimum skills required to do the job. In a competitive economy, it is no longer viable for industry to take on university graduates who still require months, and sometimes years, of training.
- There is a shift in the cognitive skills expected from graduates transitioning out of higher education. The World Economic Forum is explicit in what it describes as 21st century skills that are imperative for success in 21st century industry, and these are the attributes that will be actively sought by prospective employers (World Economic Forum, 2023).
- Technology has significantly transformed the world of work, necessitating that graduates be equipped for this new environment and prepared to adapt to future changes driven by rapid advancements in technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- STADIO academics would understand the need to equip graduates with skills and competencies both integrated in the curriculum, and extraneous or supplementary to the regular curriculum.
- The Second Transcript, detailing the further skills and competencies of the student, would give STADIO graduates a competitive advantage over other jobseekers; or equip them with the necessary skills to become self-employed.
- Students would immediately recognize the value of a Second Transcript and

eagerly participate in the programme, especially since these opportunities are available at no additional cost.

For the adoption of the STM, we adhered to STADIO's vision, mission, and three core commitments, namely: widening access, student-centeredness, and readiness for the world of work. Skills, competencies, and values crucial for graduates' transition to the workforce and their role as responsible global citizens were identified. These were agreed upon at the institutional level after multistakeholder consultations, including student voices, and approved by the Board. This broad consultation process aimed to facilitate institutional commitment and collective focus to realize the purpose of the STM and its implementation programme. Then the hard work began.

At the institutional level, the first phase was to identify and define the first set of graduate attributes for STADIO students. Casillas, Kyllonen, & Way (2019) describe "design science" as the scientific study of processes developed to solve problems and improve practices, with three criteria to evaluate successful design—desirability, feasibility, and viability. Applying these guiding principles, and using various sources of institutional data, the concept and design of the STM responded to three questions identified by STADIO:

- What are the graduate attributes that represent the institution and the graduates it aims to produce?
- Why would students be attracted to the programme and how can these graduate attributes be promoted through the STM?
- How will students be recognized for their additional achievements?

## 4.2. Identification of Graduate Attributes

What are the graduate attributes that represent the institution and the graduates it aims to produce? Through workshoping processes by academic staff, graduate attributes were identified, in three categories, namely base literacies, skills and character qualities, as follows: reading/comprehension, writing, cultural and civic awareness, technology and numeracy (base literacies), creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication (skills), and grit and resilience, adaptability and agility, leadership, design thinking, judgment, cultural and social awareness (character qualities).

A large institutional Survey (Joubert & Poalses, 2022) seeking employer feedback on graduate readiness for the workplace, revealed that, in addition to the acknowledgement of the credibility of qualifications and academic competence, employers valued the professionalism of graduates as one of the most important attributes, emphasizing the importance of a professional demeanor in the workplace. In addition, employers identified the following attributes as limited or lacking (Joubert & Poalses, 2022):

- Adaptability/Flexibility: Employers highlighted the need for graduates to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in response to changing work environments and evolving job requirements.

- **Leadership Skills:** Employers identified a lack of leadership skills in graduates and emphasized the importance of developing leadership capabilities for roles that require guiding and motivating teams.
- **Ability to Market Oneself:** Employers mentioned a lack of skills in self-promotion and marketing among graduates, underscoring the importance of being able to effectively communicate one's strengths and capabilities to potential employers.

### 4.3. Promotion of the Graduate Attributes

Why would students be attracted to the programme and how can these graduate attributes be promoted through the STM? To develop the identified graduate attributes, two types of micro-credentials, referred to as STADIO Stripes, were introduced to students at no extra cost.

STADIO Stripes are categorized into two main types: Curriculum-embedded (CUR) Stripes and those Open for All (O4A). Specific exceptional student achievements linked to identified graduate attributes, can be awarded, based on authentic and verified assessment which are already part of the set curriculum. In addition, students can, at any time, enroll for self-directed courses, some of which are online, to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes, that are assessed and verified, but which are stand-alone courses, not linked to formal curricula (STADIO, 2023).

These Stripes are further classified into three dimensions—Self, the World of Work, and Society—and are offered at three levels of difficulty/complexity: level 1 is *Explore* (starting out), level 2 is *Discover* (getting there), and level 3 is *Arrive* (reaching the summit). Examples of Stripes addressing the *Self* dimension, include “Create an effective LinkedIn profile”, “Manage time for increased productivity”, “Formulate AI prompts for Large Language Models”, “Maintain digital wellness for socialization and studies”, “Use reflective writing to inform decision making”, and “Verify the credibility of information”. Those Stripes aligned with the *World of Work* dimension, include, for example, “Make a persuasive presentation to IT clients/sponsors’ (IT)”, “Prepare a risk management plan” (Management), and “Stage a pop-up retail experience” (Fashion). Finally, examples of micro-credentials linked to the *Society* dimension are “Develop a sustainability-focused mindset”, and “Design a solution for impactful change”.

For each of the Stripes, the associated graduate attributes are clearly identified, to allow students to systematically build their second transcript seeking to enhance their employability and personal development.

### 4.4. Recognition of Students' Additional Achievements

The STADIO Stripes that students obtain can demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes linked to the approved STADIO graduate attributes. Students can compile a second transcript to present these achievements to potential employers, helping them differentiate themselves from their peers. One effective method for

showcasing the achievement of Stripes or micro-credentials is through the use of digital badges. These badges provide a concrete representation of the skills and knowledge gained from micro-credentials or Stripes. By sharing these badges (or Stripes) on professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, individuals can clearly display the specific competencies they have acquired to potential employers. Such an example is as expressed by Education student, Simukelo Phiwe Biyela (STADIO, 2023: n.p.) as follows: “I like to think I am a proud and dedicated lifelong learner and I strongly feel that micro-credentials really added value to my professional journey. Completing my Stripes allowed me to stretch my capabilities and I can now showcase my new skills to prospective employers. Every Stripe I earn is stored digitally in one place, using a credentialling system, and I can display the catchy Stripes or badges on networking sites like my LinkedIn profile.”

#### 4.5. Challenges Associated with the Implementation of the STM

Not all academics immediately bought into the notion of inculcating graduate attributes and holistic development as part of their teaching and learning role. There have been excellent pockets of adoption but there are still many academics who cling to the “separateness” and “disconnection” between providing students with quality discipline knowledge and developing workplace skills and qualities of responsible citizenship. This challenge is not unique to STADIO. Miller (2011) and Crutchfield (2020) both identified the challenge of asking higher education to become these nourishing environments that extend beyond a focus on fragmented academic content areas and address the aspiration of holistic student experiences outside of the academic curriculum (Crutchfield, 2020).

Sibuqashe (2019)’s study on the success of integrating graduate attributes into the curriculum at a public university in South Africa also clearly highlights academic reluctance and perceptions of disengagement as constraining factors when it comes to implementing a successful programme to promote graduate attributes. He states: “The findings of this study indicated that academics treat graduate attributes as outcomes that are disengaged from the course specific outcomes. It was also discovered that academics perceived the integration of graduate attributes as just another added responsibility on top of their overloaded job” (Sibuqashe, 2019: p. iv).

Regarding available time, Casillas, Kyllonen, & Way (2019) also recognized that for many academics the resistance was not so much the concept but finding time in the curriculum to complete outcomes that were mandated as well as the additional topics now presented as graduate attributes (Casillas, Kyllonen, & Way, 2019). Similarly, the report prepared by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009) confirmed that academics were not opposed to the idea of graduate attributes and, in fact, recognized their potential. However, they did not believe that graduate attributes should be a focus of their teaching. Summarizing the problem, it describes the fundamental issue as that being that “their [academics’] understanding of the nature of graduate attributes is

incompatible with their understanding of what university teaching and learning is all about” ((Barrie, 2004) cited by (Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009: p. 7)).

The second challenge is scalability and sustainability. With the global economic decline and the reality that all sources of funding for higher education are under strain, there is an ongoing debate about the efficacy of allocating resources to projects such as the STM. While the project is a Board-approved initiative, resources remain limited, and the expectation, as with many other areas of higher education, is for academics to do more with less.

The institution addressed this challenge in two ways: by prescribing the integration of graduate attributes during program curriculum review cycles, so it did not become an additional burden for staff; and by developing interdisciplinary programs relevant to all students, rather than specific to a single discipline. This approach expanded opportunities for students even in programs where discipline-specific lecturers had not embraced the second transcript project. Additionally, some staff members have recognized the benefits of cross-disciplinary teamwork, increased the number of available graduate attribute modules and better fostered integrated skills and learning. The third hurdle was creating the shared understanding of the graduate attributes and the institution’s defining elements. There is a clear need for ongoing professional staff development, as many academics struggled to understand how to effectively deliver on the requirement of presenting the graduate attributes.

## 5. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of embedding graduate attributes into the educational experience to prepare students for the rapidly evolving demands of the 21st-century workplace. By utilizing a qualitative autoethnographic approach, the authors explored the Second Transcript Model (STM) implemented at STADIO Higher Education. The findings reveal that a holistic approach, which includes academic success, workplace readiness, and social responsibility, is essential for developing well-rounded graduates equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

The importance of seeking ongoing feedback from academic staff, employers, and students in identifying relevant graduate attributes and topics, and integrating them effectively into the curriculum, is underscored. Furthermore, student uptake of the available Stripes can provide valuable insights into which skills and attitudes students value, indirectly offering feedback on the relevance of the approved graduate attributes.

The introduction of STADIO Stripes, offering both CUR and self-directed O4A micro-credentials at no additional cost, exemplifies a structured and inclusive method for promoting these attributes. Additionally, it is essential to regularly review and update graduate attributes to align with the dynamic changes in society, technology, and the workplace.

Challenges such as academic reluctance, time constraints, and resource limitations

were identified, emphasizing the need for institutional commitment and interdisciplinary collaboration to overcome these hurdles. By fostering a shared understanding of the value of graduate attributes and providing continuous professional development for staff, institutions can better support the holistic development of their students.

This shift in focus reflects a broader understanding of the purpose of higher education, which extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Institutions are now tasked with cultivating well-rounded individuals who possess the creativity, critical thinking, adaptability, and cultural awareness necessary to navigate and contribute to an interconnected and dynamic world. Such an educational framework is vital in addressing contemporary societal challenges, including social justice, environmental sustainability, and technological advancement. In conclusion, powering the student journey through initiatives like the STM is not merely a supplementary aspect of higher education but a fundamental shift towards preparing students to be resilient, adaptable, and socially responsible citizens. This approach equips graduates with a competitive edge in the job market and the ability to navigate the complexities of a fast-changing global landscape, thereby fulfilling the broader educational mandate of nurturing future-ready individuals.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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