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Rethinking Graduate Attributes In the 21st Century

By

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Colloquium Themes: Graduate attributes of a 21st Century student

Abstract

Major economical and labour markets shifts has resulted in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) introspecting to review the kind of graduates they want to produce. Graduate attributes phenomenon is not new to the educational sector. In South Africa, the phenomenon has been a topic for a very long time, albeit with no tangible interventions of implementation compared to Western countries such as Britain, Australia and Scotland where their governments have taken so much interest in the phenomenon. Sugata Mitra of 'Hole in the Wall' fame traces education and graduate attributes phenomenon back to the British Empire dating back to the 16th Century.

Now that the British Empire is gone, there is need for HEIs to review and align their graduate identities as defined by graduate attributes to the dynamics of the 21st Century. Theoretically, education transcends over four paradigms which are behaviourist, cognitivist, constructivist and connectivist paradigms. These are the foundations for building graduate attributes. In the 21st Century, graduates are expected to possess a set of skills and attributes that will enable them to navigate the work and business domains. Even though there is no definitely agreed list, various scholars, policy makers and employers unanimously agree on the 4Cs (critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, communication and creativity and innovation) and digital citizenship as the core skills needed in the 21st Century. In addition, different commentators have mentioned global awareness, entrepreneurship and green conscience as equally critical for building life and career skills in the 21st Century.

In order to produce graduates with these qualities, there is need for educators, HEIs, industry and policy-makers to come together and develop wide-ranging interventions in terms of curriculum review, funding, professional, cultural and infrastructural development to support processes and activities that will produce 21st Century graduates.

Keywords: Graduate identity, 4Cs, learning paradigms, passive learning, active learning