

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative – An Interview With Professor Simon Jarvis

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Introduction and overview

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative was launched in November 2010 by Professor Simon Jarvis, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Development (Jarvis, 2010). The initiative, which forms part of the university's plans for transformation, seeks to recognise that while disciplinary knowledge is important, graduates of the university will also leave with specific attributes, values, and skills that will help equip them for life outside higher education. The initiative makes explicit the attributes that a Greenwich graduate can expect to develop over their time at the university by clearer communication through programme design. A year since the launch, I caught up with Simon to talk about the Greenwich Graduate Initiative, its development and its future implementation. I interviewed Simon in October and asked questions developed by the *Compass* editorial board. Simon's interview was transcribed and his verbatim quotes are the basis of this article. Simon's quotes are presented in (unattributed) speech marks for shorter quotes and (unattributed), indented quotes with speech marks for longer extracts.

The origins of the Greenwich Graduate Initiative

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative originated from a bid submitted to the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Change Academy in 2009. The Change Academy programme was devised by the HEA to enable cross-institutional teams to come together to think creatively about, and develop, a major change initiative and to provide a year's support to successful teams. The University of Greenwich put forward a bid entitled 'Developing an Institutional Model for Embedding Academic and Transferable Skills', which sought to find:

The most effective relationship between academic curricula and skills development in contexts which are dissimilar, with an increasingly diverse student population, distributed provision, and necessarily divergent academic and professional cultures (University of Greenwich, 2009).

It was during the residential week in September 2009 that the focus of the bid changed:

The emphasis slightly changed to thinking beyond the kind of element of transferrable skills *per se* to the broader picture of values, attributes, and skills that you may want to develop in graduates. From that we came to the Greenwich Graduate Initiative.

Case studies

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This change of focus reflected shifts that were happening in higher education, where there were movements away from the development of transferrable skills for employment towards the development of broader graduate attributes (Barrie 2007; QAA Enhancement Themes). The rationale is that "universities should explicitly set out to equip their graduates with a specific set of skills and qualities that sit alongside their disciplinary knowledge" (Educational Development Unit, 2011). This is something that Simon recognises:

“I think for me it was also an element of trying to understand what are we trying to achieve for our students once they leave the institution. Employers were saying that yes, there is an important role for this subject discipline’, but many of the things that they were looking for were around: what is the mindset to go into work, what is the ability to problem solve, to critically think, to communicate; what are the things that applicants may bring from other parts of their life or extracurricular activities that actually feed into developing what might be considered an old fashioned phrase, that is the all-rounded person.”

What is the ‘Greenwich’ in the Greenwich Graduate Initiative?

Given higher education’s growing interest in the development of graduate attributes, a number of institutions have introduced their own graduate attribute initiatives (for example: Queen Mary, University of London; University of Hertfordshire; University of West of Scotland; University of Sydney). I asked Simon what was uniquely ‘Greenwich’ about the Greenwich Graduate Initiative. Simon drew attention to the three core elements of the initiative: scholarship and autonomy; creativity and enterprise; and cross-cultural and international awareness. These core elements were selected to reflect the University of Greenwich:

“We’ve tried to look and see where the institution is at, what we believe is best suited for us and that we also have confidence in being able to deliver. We want to ensure that at the end of this, the Greenwich graduate would be someone who would feel they could breathe and live those elements of attributes that we’ve tried to develop, and that they could explain those to their mates in the pub or to their grandmother or at interview, rather than it being theoretical.”

Simon went on to outline the three core elements individually, starting with cross-cultural and international awareness:

“Global awareness, the diversity issues, reflects one the strengths of the institution. We are a very diverse community of learners and there are elements there that we could naturally learn from each other. It also reflects that, going forward, more and more of our graduates will be working in a global environment and working for companies that might well be sending staff to work in other parts of the world, and also takes account of where future growth is going to be in the next five years or so, which is most likely to be in countries such as India and China. There’s also the diversity, maximising what we have within the classroom in terms of our student body.”

The creative and entrepreneurial aspects of the initiative were described in the following way:

“Many of our graduates are not necessarily going to go and work for big corporates. We know that many of them go and work in small industries or are going to set up their own industry and be self-employed. So the enterprise and creativity part of the agenda was really to try and see

how we can reinforce that within our course and programme structure to give students greater confidence to go out and do some of those activities.”

Scholarship and autonomy were seen to underpin curriculum design and development.

“I think you have to go back to basics about ‘what is a university for’. A university education is about transforming lives and also generating new knowledge, or understanding new ways of using existing knowledge. It’s absolutely critical that we have members of staff who are undertaking scholarship activities, thinking of new ways to deliver their material, taking risks or are engaging in enterprise work, engaging with industry and businesses or developing new research and new knowledge. They can propagate that out to the students in terms of their enthusiasm and what that means in terms of their discipline – understanding that things don’t stand still. There is a strong connection between research, scholarship, and the development of teaching and learning.”

There is also a need to:

“Try and think how one works across the disciplines in particular so that one doesn’t become too narrow within a specialised area and understanding; that there are many other things that impinge upon the world of work. In particular, for our graduates to understand that they will be working with other disciplines or other team members who will come with different ways of thinking.”

Given that the Greenwich Graduate Initiative was designed to reflect the flavour of the University of Greenwich, I asked Simon whether he felt that the initiative could be used to brand the university:

“I think the challenge is to try and see what are the elements that would make the university stand out and would also make it clear to your potential applicants what they might expect in the broadest sense of coming to the university, not just that, for example, they would study for a degree in nursing, get a job in nursing at the end of it but what else they may get. So, in that sense, I think it does have a role in branding or making it clear to people what we hope to deliver upon.”

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative and the post-2012 environment

From 2012, the university will charge undergraduates studying for a Bachelor’s degree £8,300 per year. Simon noted that it was difficult to predict what impact fees would have on the higher education sector, though in the short-term he felt there was likely to be “a decline in the number of applicants coming into higher education” but that when things settled down “it may not be as fearful as we think”. Simon did, however, feel that the sector had not clearly communicated the repayment options for students:

“We have failed as a sector to put across that the tuition fees are not fees that you pay on day one. These fees are subject to a repayment scheme. In many cases you may never have to repay the whole loan, depending on your salary and your circumstances. So in a sense it is a form of taxation. We have not really explained it to individuals that well because the whole media debate has been about the fee that has been set while actually, unlike most products that you would buy, you don’t actually pay the fee on day one; you’re actually paying for it much further along the road, although that might obviously bring with it a higher price in terms of interest plus the original loan.”

It is likely that students, who feel that they are paying more for their higher education, will be more expectant, something that Simon welcomes. "Students will become more demanding and I'm not sure that I see that as a bad thing". In this kind of environment the Greenwich Graduate Initiative is a means of making it clear to potential applicants what the university has to offer:

"We are trying to make it clear to individuals and to their parents and their guardians and their supporters or to employers who might be paying for future students to come to the university, that we're here to offer you a programme around some academic discipline, but in addition to that we believe and hope that we can deliver on these attributes and values and how we might develop those in all of the students whether they are within the classroom or outside of the classroom. I think we should also recognise that many of these attributes can equally well be developed in an extra-curricula environment, whether that's doing some part-time work, or whether that's being involved in some student societies or being involved in sporting activities."

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative and the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR)

The articulation of the attributes developed during a higher education programme is all the more important in a competitive graduate job market. Simon outlined why:

"We need to be able to ensure that our students can go and portray either on an application form, or at an interview, what is unique about them or their experience to date that would allow them to be offered a job as opposed to another graduate. I am conscious that what potential employers or would-be supervisors for those students going onto further study are potentially looking for is not just the degree classification *per se* or your knowledge and ability in that subject area [...] Particularly important, I think, for employers and for future study are those intangible elements and the right mindset. I think part of our role as a university is to try and ensure that opportunities to develop transferrable skills and attributes are available in our course structures for all students, without losing sight of the academic rigour that must always underpin all of that."

Simon noted that employers are going to be looking not just at the degree classification that students achieve, but also the attributes that they develop during their time at university. In a review of undergraduate degree classifications, Bob Burgess (Burgess, 2007) suggested that degree classifications were no longer sufficient and that from 2012 all students would be expected to produce a Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). I asked Simon his view on this and whether the HEAR is compatible with the Greenwich Graduate Initiative.

"It's very compatible with that. It allows those statements in the HEAR document to be made clearly and explicitly, and to be made in quite a simplified manner across our courses and across our programmes. I'm not sure that one can totally do away with degree classifications because they provide a measure of achievement at one level. If you are an employer looking at 100 applicants, you need some quick measure for doing the first cut. However, what HEAR does provide is a more indepth record of what the student has achieved, so I think they have a role to play perhaps in the second cut."

Implementation of the Greenwich Graduate Initiative

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative was launched in 2010. In order to roll out the initiative, meetings have been held with the senior management teams in the Schools; focus groups have been held with staff and students; and Simon has presented each of the three campuses. The aim of this awareness raising has been to try and alleviate fears that staff and students might have about the initiative. In addition, Simon feels that actively communicating with staff and students is essential to the development of an academic community, where students feel part of something greater than just their programme:

“Actually much of what is in the Greenwich Graduate Initiative is not new and I think that’s the important element. It is a more focussed way of expressing many of the things we do at the moment which we do without really flagging them up and actually shouting about. It is ensuring that all of our constituents – staff, students and employers – explicitly know what we are about and ensuring that we deliver.”

One of the more guided means of implementation has been through the Greenwich Graduate Initiative’s inclusion in the review and approval procedures for programmes. It is therefore embedded in programme design: “Greenwich graduates need to be at the forefront of people’s thinking. They are not an afterthought”. In order to do that, the review and approval approaches now require specific mention of the Greenwich Graduate Initiative (University of Greenwich, 2011). There have to be “certain things that have to be achieved in order to get your programme through at the next approval event and that has to be real and meaningful. It’s not just a piece of paper that you are ticking”. This kind of approach is necessary in order to assure that the university can develop in areas where there is particular need. Simon highlighted the example of employment statistics for the University of Greenwich, “our Achilles heel”, he said. The Greenwich Graduate Initiative is a way of embedding into a programme on day one what employers are looking for rather than “being a knee jerk reaction to, ‘oh employability’s not very good in our programme at the moment’ what can we add on top:”

A key factor in successful implementation is buy-in from staff and students. For staff this comes through clear and focused priorities that will improve the university where it needs to be improved. For students, this involves “making it very clear to the students what you are trying to achieve, and you indicate to them that, ‘yes, you understand some of their fears’ and this may be a challenge to them in the first instance”.

A less-guided means of implementing the initiative was highlighted in a recent survey of university Teaching Fellows. This showed that staff were undertaking a range of different learning and teaching innovations and experiments in order to introduce the Greenwich Graduate Initiative to their students. Simon recognised that the institution needs to be “recognising and valuing more explicitly the innovation that goes on the institution with regards to learning and teaching”. I asked Simon how he envisaged such innovation being built on across the university to enhance the student experience, rather than remaining small isolated pockets of interesting practice. He suggested that this was a quality enhancement issue that all universities faced when trying to initiate change. He suggested using Teaching Fellow and Associate Teaching Fellow networks; giving staff time and confidence to experiment and take risks; rewarding and recognising staff effort; and developing ways for staff from

different disciplines to creatively work together. Simon also highlighted the Educational Development Unit's role as a critical friend to the Schools as a means of supporting change. Simon emphasised the

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¹⁸ need for staff to have time to think about what they were doing and noted what the freeing up of time might mean in practice:

“That probably means that we have to be more confident in stopping doing some things and taking away some of the busyness in order to free up time to think and to look at a new development, and to see how a new development that has been implemented somewhere else could actually be imparted to us.”

Concluding remarks

The Greenwich Graduate Initiative, with its particular Greenwich flavour, is part of the university's commitment to enhancing the student experience. It articulates the values, skills and attributes that, along with disciplinary knowledge, the university is committed to developing within the student body. The implementation of the initiative, through the redesign of review and approval processes that focus on the development of graduate attributes, combined with quality enhancement processes through the Educational Development Unit's 'critical friend' role, will result in more explicit articulation of what a student can expect to develop through a University of Greenwich degree programme. Such clear articulation is important for potential students, who will receive a better understanding of the opportunities and potential of a University of Greenwich education before they arrive. Focussed programme design, which foregrounds the development of the attributes across a programme, will ensure that graduates can competently and confidently articulate the impact of their university study.

Simon, who is a firm believer in the transformative potential of education, sees the Greenwich Graduate Initiative as a means of ensuring that all students achieve to the best of their ability and potential.

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