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## **Inquiry into Graduate Attributes: reviewing the formal and informal management curricula.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is aimed at any departmental faculty or head of school in charge of conducting curriculum review and presents a holistic approach based on Appreciative Inquiry and recently used by a University Business School in the South West of England. As a future-facing or strengths-based approach, our Inquiry into Graduate Attributes (IGA) brought together students, academics, employers and employment consultants to agree on the most desirable generic attributes of Business Management graduates five years into the future, and to propose changes to course content, assessment and co-curricular activities in line with these. The IGA approach provides a methodological model for integrating the expectations of different stakeholder groups whilst acknowledging the various ways in which understandings of knowledge and outcomes are related to disciplinary epistemology. For researchers interested in the use of Action Research in the process of curriculum review, this article presents a relatively novel use of an applied Appreciative Inquiry technique, which we hope will initiate a broader conversation around the dynamics and reflective practices of curriculum design.

**Keywords:** Curriculum Review; Appreciative Inquiry; Graduate Attributes; Formal and Informal Curricula

## INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing market awareness, a number of UK universities are seeking to emphasize their distinctiveness by referring to the generic attributes of their graduates. However, whilst the marketing purpose of Graduate Attributes may be more or less clear, it is more difficult to assess the extent to which any institutional Graduate Attribute framework can be effectively used as a set of guiding principles by course designers and curriculum reviewers if they are not articulated at program or subject level. Graduate Attributes for Business Management students should therefore indicate the generic outcomes achieved by “career-ready” (Mitchell and Allen, 2014, p. 101) graduates as required by graduate employers and as elaborated in subject benchmark statements for business management students such as those produced by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2015).

On examination of the literature on Graduate Attributes and curriculum review, we found no examples of precise methodology by which Graduate Attribute frameworks are constructed and little evidence of how they are used to underpin course design. In particular, we observed the following:

- There is variation in the conceptualizations of graduate attributes in terms of disciplinary content (Jones, 2009) and generic cognitive attributes (Barrie, 2007; Green, Hammer & Star, 2009)

- Much review work seems based on surveys of either students, employers, or academics, treating these as isolated stakeholder communities (Athavale, Davis & Myring, 2008; Caza, Brower & Wayne, 2015; Wolf & Wright, 2014)
- Most curriculum review work seems to be carried out reactively at module and theme level and, therefore, runs the risk of producing disconnected program changes (Fliedner & Mathieson, 2009; Mang & Brown, 2013)
- Most curriculum review work fails to recognize the potential of the informal curriculum to provide spaces for learning activities or the importance of future-facing educational programs (Caza & Brower, 2015)

To avoid these pitfalls, we adopted a holistic, future-facing method based on Appreciative Inquiry (*Inquiry into Graduate Attributes* or IGA), in which participants from a range of stakeholder groups were asked to agree on the most desirable attributes of business management graduates in the year 2020 and beyond. We then used this set of Graduate Attributes as an underpinning framework and a set of reference points for a comprehensive program level review of the Business Management (BM) curriculum of a University Business School in the South West of England.

This article therefore makes two contributions, which have both practical and theoretical implications in the field of Management Education. Firstly, we offer Business School Deans, university managers and Business Management course designers a methodological blueprint (IGA), which they can use to begin future-oriented conversations with integrated groups of stakeholders prior to embarking on holistic reviews of their curricula. We also provide a case study demonstrating how a particular set of locally agreed Graduate Attributes guided a future-facing review of curricular content and learning activities leading to greater coherence between the formal and informal curricula of a modular Business Management program. For researchers interested in the use of Action Research in the process of curriculum review, our methodology represents a relatively novel use of an applied Appreciative Inquiry technique. We also hope that our case study will initiate a broader conversation around the dynamics and reflective practices of curriculum design.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Appreciative Inquiry*

Our curriculum review took the form of second-person Action Research project (Reason & Bradbury, 2006) in which practitioners inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual

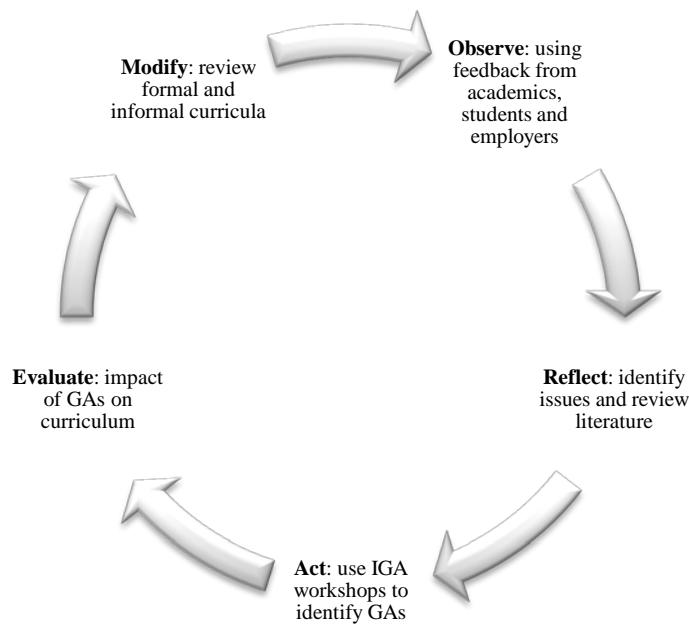


Figure 1 An Action-Reflection Cycle (after McNiff & Whitehead, 2011)

concern (see Figure 1). Broadly speaking, Action Research is conducted with the express purpose of influencing practice and often begins with a collaborative exploration of the values underpinning practice. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2011), the Action research cycle typically consists of five steps: observe, reflect, act, evaluate and modify, although this form of research allows for a number of different approaches depending on the context. These include Participatory Action Research, Feminist Participatory Action Research, Rural Participatory Research and Appreciative Inquiry.

We chose an approach based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry since we felt that this approach allowed for an exploration of the values underpinning our program and the

production of a framework on which to build our curriculum review. Appreciative Inquiry is a conversational approach to organizational change rooted in the philosophy of Social Constructionism which recognizes organizations as living-human-systems and the power of conversation to enhance their capacity for positive change (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore, 2008). This is in contrast to the problem-oriented views characteristic of many Action Research approaches which see organizations as machines and therefore support scientific approaches based on retrospective data analysis. (See Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) for a thorough introduction to the epistemological underpinnings of Appreciative Inquiry).

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) identify three significant ways in which Appreciative Inquiry is distinctive: “it is fully affirmative, it is inquiry-based, and it is improvisational.” The affirmative element of Appreciative Inquiry can be contrasted with problem-focussed approaches which attempt to improve organizational capacity by resolving specific defects:

*Appreciative Inquiry does not include deficit approaches to organizational analysis in areas such as root cause of failure, gaps, barriers, strategic threats, or resistance to change. All Appreciative Inquiry activities, practices and processes focus on the organization at its best – past, present and future.* (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 11).

Adopting a fully appreciative approach to curriculum review therefore requires an exploration of what stakeholders see as the ultimate aims of the program. Conversations then revolve around how these aims can be achieved through learning activities and assessments. This approach might be contrasted with one which attempted to solve specific problems such as low levels of student engagement, low marks on certain modules, or poor student evaluations. Whilst not ignoring the existence of specific problems (indeed these may be the initial impetus for the curriculum review), Appreciative Inquiry attempts to lift the performance of a whole program through positive conversations in which all stakeholders agree on what the program is designed to achieve.

An inquiry-based form of curriculum review necessarily explores the views of stakeholders, as opposed to retrospectively evaluating data on what is deemed to have been successful in the past. In this process it is important to encourage all participants to ask affirmative questions about what they would like to see in a program running at its best. “Appreciative Inquiry posits that organizations move in the direction of what they consistently ask questions about, and that the more affirmative the question the more hopeful and positive the organizational response” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 12).

The improvisational element of Appreciative Inquiry prompted us to use the ‘4D cycle’ (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny) as a loose framework around which to design an initial one-day workshop attended by participants from our main stakeholder groups: employers, academics and students. The aim of this series of conversations was to produce a Graduate Attribute framework which we could use as a basis for our curriculum review.

In organizational development, Appreciative Inquiry is often used to discover “the enduring factors that have sustained an organization over time” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 24) in order to facilitate thinking about the future potential of that organization. Applying this logic to the process of curriculum review, we designed our inquiry to enable participants to identify curricular content and learning activities which they considered emblematic of the program when functioning at its best, whilst at the same time encouraging all participants to articulate their aspirations for its future – “the 2020 BM curriculum.” The Inquiry into Graduate Attributes (IGA) approach can therefore be defined as a series of focussed conversations among integrated stakeholder groups designed to generate a vision of the enduring aims underpinning the curriculum.

#### ***Observation: setting the context***

In designing our inquiry, we were conscious of Jones' (2009) findings that generic attributes are strongly influenced by the epistemic culture of each discipline and of Green et al.'s (2009) account of the numerous internal and external pressures which influence the local context of any curriculum design. An example of an external pressure is the modularization of the curriculum in response to increasing student numbers, which "has the potential to impact negatively on the development of student learning across their degree program both in terms of specific disciplinary expertise and in terms of graduate attributes" (Green et al., 2009, p. 23). Other institutional pressures relevant to our local context include large class sizes, pressure to reduce formative assessment (in response to large class sizes), the employability agenda (HEA, 2012) -- often seen as an important component of providing "good value for money" in a marketized Higher Education system -- and the need to achieve higher student satisfaction statistics used to calculate institutional rankings in a competitive environment. All of these pressures have the potential to produce curriculum changes aimed at achieving short-term gains rather than embedding structures which might promote the longer-term aims of academic programs.

In addition to these macro-level pressures, various micro-level characteristics of the HEI's environment shape local stakeholders' perceptions of what their program's Graduate Attributes should look like. An example in our local context is the emphasis on sustainability issues and green initiatives which is promoted in our university's strategic plan and embodied by its Sustainability Unit and close identification with the Regional Centre for Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development. A further example is the Business School's Growth Hub, a unit which actively promotes links between the university and local business organizations, particularly SMEs. We therefore expected sustainability and entrepreneurship to feature prominently in our discussions. The discussions we held as part of our IGA were therefore not intended to produce a universally transferable, cross-disciplinary set of generic

skills, but rather a list of attributes which could be agreed upon by a range of stakeholders within the Business Management disciplinary community in a local context.

Our observation phase included extensive discussion during scheduled committee meetings of feedback from students, academics and work placement providers (employers), as well as additional focus groups with students at every level of the program. During these discussions, a significant theme was the gap between students' enthusiastic appreciation of activities related to employability and the relatively sparse student attendance at these events, which were delivered by external professionals as part of the informal curriculum. Some students suggested that such events needed to be provided during the normal timetabled weeks. Other comments related to the didactic approach on certain modules, particularly in lectures, which led to lower levels of student engagement. On the basis of these observations we decided to launch an extensive review of both the formal and informal curricula, which would reassess the overall purpose and priorities of the Business Management program. With this holistic approach we hoped to avoid the pitfalls mentioned in the introduction, as well as the danger of "rearranging the standard formal elements" as noted by Caza and Brower (2015).

### ***Reflection and Literature review***

Generic outcomes have long been identified as reference points for university courses in many countries and have been named, among other terms, graduate attributes, core skills, key skills or generic skills, with the term 'generic graduate attributes' or 'graduate attributes' being used as the standard term in Australia (Barrie, 2007). In our curriculum review and in this article, we use the term 'Graduate Attributes' to encompass a set of generic capabilities which go beyond narrowly defined contextually relevant skills. The definition by Bowden et al. (2000) reflects our own understanding:

*Generic graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future.* (Bowden et al. 2000, cited in Barrie 2007)

With its recognition of the currently indeterminate nature of the social and professional contexts within which graduates will be operating in the future, and its articulation of Graduate attributes as *including, but going beyond disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge*, this definition echoes the future-facing and holistic orientation of our own curriculum review.

Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 114) refer to Barrie's (2004) hierarchy of conceptions of graduate outcomes, which at the lower end of the scale are generic, e.g. *numeracy* and *communication*, and at the other end are “deeply embedded in particular disciplines.” (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 114). They also note that most universities want both kinds of graduate outcomes to be addressed and recommend the process of curriculum mapping (Huet et al. 2009) as a systematic means of checking the alignment between the two. However, this process presupposes the existence of a set of university generic outcomes, which is not always the case. For epistemological and pragmatic reasons which we explain below, we set out to produce a framework of Graduate Attributes at program level, which we believe to be most useful for course design and review purposes.

As part of our post hoc analysis of our curriculum review process, we compared the published institutional Graduate Attributes frameworks of five HEIs within 100 miles of our own (see Table 1) to assess the extent to which there is any consensus between institutions, and to find out whether other institutions’ GA frameworks were specific enough to be used as guidelines for curriculum reviews.

**Table 1: institutional GA frameworks of HEIs within 100 miles**

HEI 1	HEI 2	HEI 3	HEI 4	HEI 5
<i>Critical self-awareness and personal literacy</i>	<i>Self-reliant and connected</i>	<i>Global skills</i>	<i>The resilient and thriving individual</i>	<i>Critical thinkers</i>
<i>Research Literacy</i>	<i>Globally responsible</i>	<i>Digital skills</i>	<i>The critical and creative learner</i>	<i>Creative thinkers, doers and makers</i>
<i>Academic Literacy</i>	<i>Future-facing</i>	<i>Ethical skills</i>	<i>The sustainable and global citizen</i>	<i>Internationally networked</i>
<i>Digital and information literacy</i>	<i>Enterprising</i>	<i>Entrepreneurial skills</i>	<i>The competent and confident professional</i>	<i>Able to understand and manage complexity, diversity and change</i>
<i>Active citizenship</i>	<i>Ready and able</i>			<i>Digitally literate</i>
				<i>Ethically aware</i>
				<i>Employable</i>

The most frequently cited attributes in these frameworks refer to a range of skills related to critical thinking, global awareness, digital literacy and employability, but these are expressed in combination with a variety of personal, professional and academic skills. Despite certain similarities, this variation suggests that institutional Graduate Attributes frameworks are created in response to a number of macro- and micro-level pressures and are therefore not automatically transferable between institutions. We elaborate on some of the pressures on our own institution in our methodology. From this evidence, it was not possible to determine whether these frameworks were intended to be used as overarching guidelines for departmental curriculum development or were rather part of a more generic branding effort by these institutions.

In the literature on Graduate Attributes, we found further indications that university communities hold qualitatively different conceptualizations of Graduate Attributes, with some considering them as contextualized skills connected to specific curricular content, whilst others see them as generic dispositions or capabilities which go beyond the formal curriculum and prepare graduates to make useful contributions to society at large (Barrie, 2007). This conceptual disagreement over the relationship between disciplinary content and generic cognitive attributes also has important consequences for instructional design, with ‘generalists’ supporting the view that Graduate Attributes can be taught separately from

content, and ‘specifists’ insisting that they can only be achieved within their disciplinary context (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009).

At a departmental level, there is also evidence of variation regarding the precise conceptualization of similar Graduate Attributes in different disciplines. For example, exploring the understandings of *critical thinking*, *problem solving* and *communication* across five disciplines, Jones (2009) found that, despite occasional commonalities, these Graduate Attributes are often closely related to disciplinary epistemology and reflect different understandings of knowledge and outcomes. For example, *critical thinking* is understood by historians as “a close examination of evidence and context”; by physicists as “an examination of the logic, accuracy and predictive powers of a model”; and in medicine as “the application of sound clinical reasoning.” Jones concludes that Graduate Attributes should reflect the epistemology of each discipline if they are not to be seen as “external to disciplinary knowledge” and consequently, undervalued by teaching staff (Jones, 2009). Green et al. (2009) also argue that: “the meaningful articulation of graduate capabilities within a disciplinary context requires substantial consultation with a range of stakeholders, including employers, graduates, and disciplinary or subject experts” (Green et al., 2009, p. 22). We therefore decided that our own curriculum review should engage all of our most directly relevant stakeholder groups (students, academics, employers and graduate employment consultants) in future-facing conversations in order to agree on a common framework of Graduate Attributes and a common terminology to express these.

The literature on curriculum review in Business Management and related management disciplines is vast and goes back to the 1950s. However, for our own purposes, this review concentrates on contributions to peer-reviewed journals from 2000 up to and including 2015. These publications illustrate the use of a wide range of methodological approaches, including: surveys of teaching faculty and business school deans (Barrie, 2007; Athavale,

Davis & Myring, 2008; Athavale, Myring, Davis & Truell, 2010; Wart, Baker & Ni, 2014); student surveys (Leberman & Martin, 2005; Caza, Brower & Wayne, 2015); employers and deans (Shuayto, 2013); employer surveys (Sincoff & Owen, 2004; Wolf & Wright, 2014); and analyses of learning outcomes, mission statements and assessment methods (Palmer & Short, 2008; Sampson & Betters-Reid, 2008; Genc & Bekmez, 2009). Additionally, many studies seek to identify best practice by focussing on the most common elements of successful Business Management education using case study, comparative, or data-driven methods (Puri, Jocums & Latif, 2010; Wu, Huang, Kuo & Wu, 2010; Mang & Brown, 2013; McCord, Houseworth & Michaelsen, 2015).

Most of the works we cite here treat each stakeholder group as a homogeneous, isolated community and some present evidence of significant differences in perspectives among them. These differences can lead to accusations of irrelevance or incompleteness since any curriculum will be seen as serving the interests of certain groups at the expense of others. Examples related to MBA curricula are the sharp difference in importance attributed to ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ skills between business school deans and employers found by Shuayto (2013) and the difference in views between policy makers and MBA alumni regarding the relative importance given to certain managerial competencies such as *managing strategy and innovation* and *managing human capital* (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). Furthermore, most of the published research on curriculum review which we cite here is based on retrospective approaches, according to which, curricular changes should be derived from what has been successful up to now. Whilst retrospective approaches might be considered suitable for designing workplace training programs where the parameters of current skills requirements are relatively well defined, some scholars argue that they are less appropriate for designing future-facing educational programs, where “we don’t know all the requirements of our

students' future roles because they haven't been determined yet" (Caza & Brower, 2015, p. 103).

Regarding the specific outcomes of curriculum reviews, much of the published work we found seems to canvass support for the inclusion of specific topics in the formal curriculum, such as: ethics (McDonald, 2004; MacFarlane & Ottewill, 2004; Rutherford, Parks, Cavazos & White, 2012); pricing (McCaskey & Brady, 2007); value creation (Weinstein & Barrett, 2007); management history (Smith, 2007); systems, human relations and real-world business knowledge and experience (Fliedner & Mathieson, 2009); and career development planning (Smith, Pettinga & Bowman, 2012). As noted by Caza and Brower, "it is not uncommon for a school's 'curriculum reform' to consist of little more than rearranging the standard formal elements" (2015, p. 107). However, we found little published evidence of how curriculum designers have used generic Graduate Attributes frameworks for the explicit purpose of informing holistic future-facing reviews. In order to avoid starting out with an excessively fine-grained focus on current curricular content, we examined a number of works which took a holistic view of the aims and overall purpose of contemporary Business Management education. These included themes related to *Graduate Attributes* (CMI, ABS & QAA, 2014; QAA, 2014; QAA 2015; Ryan & Tilbury 2013); *Graduate Capabilities* (Fullan & Scott, 2014); *Principles for Responsible Management Education* (PRME, 2015); and *Education for Sustainability* (EfS) principles (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

During our focussed conversations with integrated stakeholder groups, we explored the potential of the informal curriculum to provide spaces for learning activities such as guest speaker presentations, volunteering opportunities and work placements, which would otherwise be difficult to fit into an already crowded formal Business Management curriculum. However, in our subsequent evaluation and implementation of our Graduate Attributes in the curriculum review, we required a more sophisticated tool than this basic

formal/informal distinction for understanding the nature of what was currently included on the course, but not always formally acknowledged. We therefore found Caza and Brower's (2015) typology of aspects of the informal curriculum very useful in this respect:

- *the hidden curriculum* (learner activity is assessed, but objectives are not explicit)
- *the espoused curriculum* (learner activity is tied to formal goals, but not assessed)
- *the neglected curriculum* (activity is unrelated to formal goals and not assessed)

Attending to these distinctions enabled us to identify and resolve the discontinuities between the stated and tacit goals of the existing Business Management program. For example, on certain modules, students' demonstration of higher cognitive skills, such as critical and holistic thinking modes, appeared in assessment criteria, but were not clearly identified as curricular aims in any documentation (*hidden curriculum*). Similarly, our department expected students to engage with careers and job placement services in order to enhance their employability (*espoused curriculum*), but practical work experience was not explicitly assessed in the formal curriculum prior to our current curriculum review. We also identified areas of the *neglected curriculum* such as guest speaker events and certain international "field trips" which were not formally assessed or referred to in the program documentation. In this way, Caza and Brower's (2015) typology provided a more differentiated picture of the informal curriculum, thereby enabling us to enhance the visibility of those elements which were of clear value to the program, but which had previously enjoyed insufficient formal recognition.

#### **Action: Inquiry into Graduate Attributes**

As noted previously, a review of the literature on curriculum review in related subject areas revealed evidence of a preponderance of surveys of individual stakeholder groups, usually academics or employers, as well as retrospective document and data analysis. Our Inquiry into Graduate Attributes was designed as a conversational approach involving participants

from all of our stakeholder groups in one full-day workshop, with a subsequent half-day workshop attended by employers and graduate recruitment specialists in future-facing conversations.

Our full-day workshop event was held at a business conference location which was new to most participants, and used a *café* approach whereby participants discussed their ideas in groups of four or five before moving on to form new groups in four successive iterations. The *café* approach is considered by Lewis et al. (2008, p. 120) to be appropriate when:

- *You want to encourage the sharing of knowledge and an in-depth exploration of key challenges and opportunities;*
- *People need encouragement to engage in meaningful conversation with one another for the first time;*
- *It is important to build mutual ownership of outcomes.*

The event consisted of four consecutive conversations (Table 2), loosely designed around the 4D approach of Appreciative Inquiry: *Discovery* (appreciate what is), *Dream* (imagine what might be), *Design* (determine what should be) and *Destiny* (create what will be) (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

**Table 2: First Workshop Plan**

Conversation	Groups	Outcome of discussion
<i>1: Discovery</i>	Separate	5 or 6 Graduate Attributes (GAs) agreed by each stakeholder group
<i>2: Dream</i>	Mixed	Between 6 and 9 GAs agreed by integrated stakeholder groups
Interval		GAs merged into a single list of 8 based on the priorities of all groups
<i>3: Design</i>	Mixed	Summary statements for each GA
<i>4: Destiny</i>	Mixed	Specific recommendations for the 2020 BM Curriculum including content, assessment, work-based learning opportunities and co-curricular activities

This approach produced about 24 hours of parallel conversations, 30 completed templates and a further 25 pages of unstructured notes from the four groups. Each conversation was designed to encourage all representatives of the various stakeholder groups to contribute fully and listen carefully to each other, and the templates enabled us to keep a written record of the outcomes from each of the parallel conversations.

## ***Discovery***

In the first conversation (*Discovery*) participants were grouped with members of their own stakeholder group (students, academics, employers and graduate employment consultants) and asked to discuss what they considered to be the most important attributes of Business Management students graduating in the year 2020. In an appreciative (strengths-based) manner, participants identified those Graduate Attributes which they felt were well served by the program, as well as thinking about other important attributes which were currently under-represented. Each group took notes on discussion templates and in this way we were able to keep a record of the evolution of each group's discussions throughout the day. Figure 2 is based on each group's notes from the *Discovery* session and is a summary illustration of some of the commonality as well as the differences in emphasis between each group's priorities.

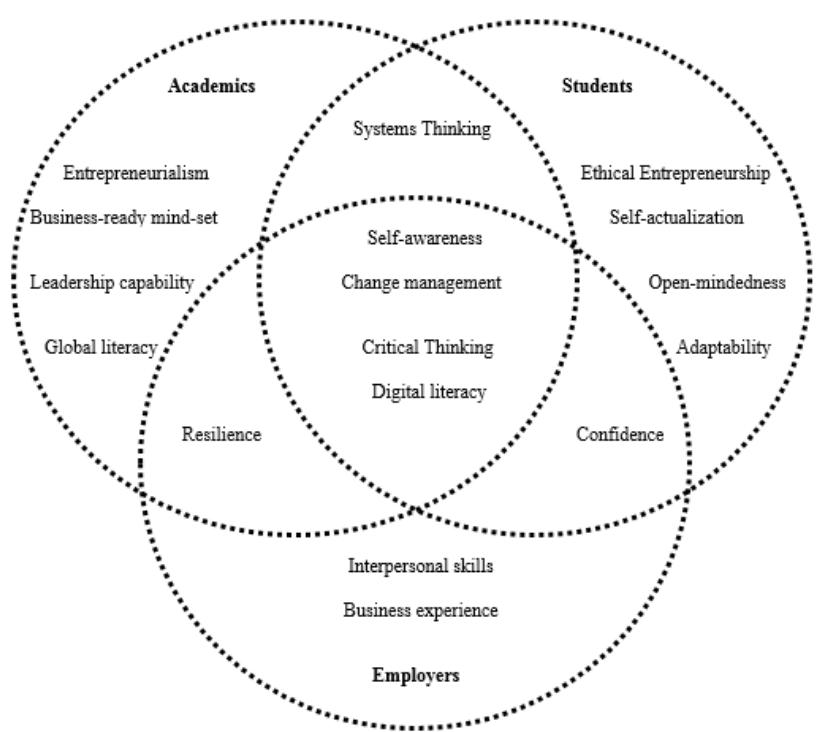


Figure 2 2020 BM Graduate Attributes according to Academics, Students and Employers

Although all stakeholder groups agreed on the usefulness of discussing the program in terms of Graduate Attributes, i.e. those dispositions which could be seen as the final aims of the course, different priorities were evident, as might be expected given the range of stakeholder interests. Employer participants promoted employability-related attributes such as business experience, resilience and confidence, whereas student participants emphasized ethical approaches to business and individual dispositions such as open-mindedness and adaptability. Academic participants promoted certain work-related skills sets such as entrepreneurialism and leadership capability, but they also had strong views about the importance for BM graduates of possessing a global outlook and certain types of thinking skills (holistic and critical thinking). The notes taken by each group also revealed some interesting differences in emphasis between the stakeholder groups even where they agreed on the importance of a particular attribute. For example, whilst discussing *Self-Awareness*, the student group emphasized the individual aspects of self-confidence and critical reflection, whereas the employer group stressed awareness of others' perspectives and the ability to adapt whilst working in teams. The value of putting participants into separate stakeholder groups for the *Discovery* discussions was that these differences of emphasis could be surfaced and explored before participants met in mixed groups later on. Had the *Discovery* discussions been held in mixed stakeholder groups, it is possible that power differences between the participants (e.g. deference on the part of student participants toward employer participants with more experience and/or higher socio-economic status) would have prevented the views of the least powerful from being given equal consideration. Treating students' and employers' perspectives as equally valid in this way enabled us to produce a balanced summary statement for *Self-Awareness* (Table 3), which encompasses both the confidence conferred by self-awareness and the individual's ability to recognize the value of others' contributions to the development of common goals.

**Table 3: Business Management 2020 Graduate Attributes**

<b>Graduate Attributes</b>	<b>Summary statements</b>
<b><i>Self-Awareness</i></b>	Emotional intelligence, confidence in the authentic self and the ability to recognize and value individual and collaborative contributions to the achievement of common goals.
<b><i>Systems Thinking</i></b>	The ability to see organizations as complex and integrated wholes and to recognize the cross-functional and departmental processes which are needed to achieve designated organizational goals.
<b><i>Global Literacy</i></b>	An understanding of the effects of globalization at the local, national and international levels, and the ability to value and integrate contributions from different cultural perspectives.
<b><i>Change Capability</i></b>	The ability to remain both resilient and open-minded in the face of uncertainty, to appreciate change as a positive process and to value feedback from working in different group and team scenarios.
<b><i>Digital Literacy</i></b>	The ability to understand, evaluate and apply technologies to support effective organizational strategies.
<b><i>Ethical Entrepreneurship</i></b>	A deep understanding of the value of personal integrity, trustworthiness and transparency as well as corporate social responsibility, bearing in mind the triple bottom line of profit, and social and environmental impact.
<b><i>Critical Thinking</i></b>	The ability to use a range of techniques to enable deep analysis, critical evaluation and reflective thinking to support effective problem-solving and decision-making.
<b><i>Business-ready Mind-set</i></b>	Commercial awareness and the confidence to drive organizations forward, as well as an understanding of the requirements and responsibilities of both leadership and followership.

The discussion around *Change Capability* is another example which highlights the value of holding the *Discovery* discussions in separate stakeholder groups, where each group's perspective can be consolidated before moving into mixed groups to explore divergent views. In this discussion, student participants emphasized open-mindedness and flexibility, whilst employer participants focussed on resilience and the ability to cope with uncertainty. Offering a different perspective, academic participants saw this attribute as the ability to see beyond current scenarios using non-linear thinking. Later conversations in mixed groups resulted in agreement to combine both resilience and open-mindedness since all groups felt that this attribute reflected the ability to see change as a positive process. This combination of concepts is therefore reflected in the summary statement for *Change Capability* (Table 3).

### ***Dream***

“The dreaming phase [the second of the 4 Ds of Appreciative Inquiry] involves building on what people have discovered about the organization at its best and projecting this into their wishes, hopes and aspirations for the organization’s future” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 55). In the second stage of our workshop (*Dream*), participants discussed the proposed Graduate

Attributes in new, mixed groups in which each participant acted as expert representative of their respective stakeholder group. One of the rules of engagement for these conversations was that each participant should listen carefully to others' views and respond to these before presenting the opinions of their respective stakeholder group. In this way, we attempted to reduce the possibility of certain stakeholder groups dominating the conversation, e.g. student participants being over-deferential to academics, or employers claiming that their specific expertise was more valid than that of the rest of the group. The result was a conversation which aimed to produce a broad consensus within each group around the ultimate purpose of the future Business Management curriculum. In the *Dream* session, there were lively discussions on the proposed attribute of *ethical entrepreneurship*. The student participants recommended that this attribute should be promoted and embedded in the Business Management curriculum to encourage the development of entrepreneurial education that supports the triple bottom line of profit, people and planet. Students also felt that BM graduates should be able to assess businesses against ethical frameworks. This attribute was considered a *dream* which could be made into reality in the curriculum, using the university's Sustainability Unit to support its implementation.

The production of our initial list of Graduate Attributes following the *Dream* Session was a subjective and interpretive process based on our listening to four parallel group conversations lasting about three hours each and about an hour of plenary conversation. We were also able to refer to eight completed templates outlining the preferred Graduate Attributes of both the separate and mixed groups, along with 25 pages of notes. There was some variation among the groups at the end of the *Dream* session, with one group submitting a list of six Graduate Attributes, two groups a list of seven each, and the fourth group a list of nine. *Systems Thinking, Change Capability* and *Business-ready mind-set* were submitted by three of the groups with the other five Graduate Attributes in Table 3 agreed by all four groups. Some

overlap was disguised by differing terminology e.g. Digital Literacy was variously referred to as “tech savvy,” “tech capability” and “knowledge of current and future technologies” and Global Literacy as “intercultural competence,” “global perspective” etc. We also eliminated outliers such as “open-mindedness,” “can-do attitude” and “corporate citizenship” where these concepts could be understood as subordinate themes of broader categories.

### ***Design***

The aim of the third conversation (*Design*), also in mixed groups, was to reflect on how each of the eight Graduate Attributes could be defined in order to produce a plan for our curriculum review. The final summary statements in Table 3 were produced subsequently by combining elements from these discussions. The notes taken by each group demonstrate that this conversation generated a significant approximation of original positions, e.g. the emphasis on common goals and collaboration related to *Self-Awareness*. In some cases, the discussions led to clarification of terminology and conceptual refinement, e.g. the term *Digital Literacy*, where the summary statement makes it clear that this kind of literacy goes beyond familiarity with current technologies and includes the ability to rethink organizational strategies in view of emerging technologies. Our final definitions (summary statements) for each Graduate Attribute (Table 3) were arrived at by combining the notes from these *Design* conversations along with results from a follow-up workshop with employers and graduate employment consultants (see below).

### ***Destiny***

In the final conversation (*Destiny*), each mixed group was asked to make specific recommendations for changes to the formal and informal curriculum which would enable students to develop each of the Graduate Attributes. These ideas were grouped into four separate aspects of the program: curricular content; assessment formats; work-based activities

(work placements and projects); and co-curricular activities. In this final conversation participants recognized that there were many opportunities in the informal curriculum, such as work projects and volunteering, where students already engaged in learning activities in line with our eight Graduate Attributes, but these were not currently recognized or accredited by the program. Academics particularly felt that the formal curriculum was already rather crowded and some creative thinking was required to enhance the formal recognition of these activities, which would support the development of the full range of Graduate Attributes.

### ***Follow-up workshop***

Two months later, we held a follow-up workshop with employers and graduate employment consultants. The purpose of this workshop was to ascertain the degree of confidence our Graduate Attributes would have among this stakeholder group and to identify any important omissions. Much of the discussion in this workshop was centred on terminology and conceptual definitions. For example, our employer participants initially wondered whether the term *Systems Thinking* was an effective way to describe taking a holistic approach to business problems and questioned how widely this term would be understood by other stakeholders. After an inconclusive exchange of views on the alternative terms *holistic* and *systemic thinking*, participants agreed that *systems thinking* should be used, but that this attribute would require careful explanation when presented in open days or in discussions with prospective work placement providers.

Beyond the terminology, the conceptual breadth of some of the terms provoked lively discussion among our participants. For example, a superficial understanding of the term *Digital Literacy* appeared to suggest that it referred to a basic knowledge of software and technologies commonly used in business environments. After further discussion participants agreed that this attribute went beyond the acquisition of skills in digital technologies and

should be interpreted as covering an understanding of current and impending technologies. The significance of this broader definition is that *Digital Literacy* should enable graduates to participate in strategic discussions about potential reconfigurations of current business operations and customer experiences based on future technological changes.

Our employer participants welcomed the way our summary statement for *Business-ready Mind-set* indicated the development of forward-looking intellectual capacities beyond the specific skills sets of “oven-ready” managers. They suggested that the curriculum needed to provide opportunities for students to develop this broader disposition by including projects dealing with a wide range of current and potential issues in the international business environment. Participants also supported the idea of providing shorter work-based and volunteering placements and projects to whet our students’ appetite for longer-term (e.g. 12 months) work placements. This suggestion prompted us to think carefully about how these shorter work-based learning experiences could be integrated into the formal curriculum, and provided the initial basis for the creation of a new double module (*Personal and Professional Portfolio* or *PPP*) as the anchor for an employability strand embedded at each level of the program.

Two years on, using data from student feedback and discussions with the various stakeholder groups (students, academics and employers), we are moving into a second Action-Reflection Cycle. This involves appraisal of progress to date and consideration of any emergent issues which require further attention.

### ***Managing the Inquiry Process***

For optimum results from the IGA approach, we suggest that course reviewers should take note of the following comments regarding the management of the inquiry process. Firstly, timing is extremely important, both in terms of when to carry out the inquiry and what to do

with the data collected. Workshops need to be held well in advance of any deadlines for validation procedures since you will need plenty of time to analyse the notes taken and reflect on how to deal with overlaps of content or ambiguous terminology. Secondly, an unfamiliar but appropriate location is really helpful in facilitating the discussions and we suggest that formal conference rooms in a business environment would be more suitable than teaching rooms. Since some epistemological disagreements between stakeholder groups can be anticipated, it is important to give all participants the sense of a professional, but safe environment in which to explore each other's perspectives. Thirdly, rules of engagement such as responding to the views of previous speakers before giving one's own should be explicit. These kinds of rules are designed to create a sense of respect and equal status between all groups and reduce excessive deference to or undervaluing of alternative perspectives. Fourthly, and in relation to this, it is useful to require participants to join new groups for each conversation. This provides participants with the opportunity to explore the priorities of their own stakeholder groups before moving into various mixed groups where they act as expert representatives of their group's views. We found the *café* approach suitable for our purposes, although other configurations are possible for larger groups or conferences held over several days (see Lewis et al., 2008 for further options).

### **Evaluation: the impact of IGA on the curriculum review**

IGA enabled us to explore a range of ideas from our major stakeholder groups and agree on a number of generic attributes which could be used as guidelines for our own and subsequent curriculum reviews. Mapping the Graduate Attributes against our current program highlighted a number of deficiencies which we addressed either through major changes such as the creation of new modules or by shifting a number of learning activities into the formal program with explicit learning outcomes, delivery and assessment. Since an in-depth presentation of all of the changes resulting from this curriculum review would be beyond the

scope of this article, in the following section we present an overview of the impact of our IGA on our curriculum. This is followed by a more detailed reflection of one particular first-year module (*Personal and Professional Portfolio or PPP*) which illustrates how the curriculum is both underpinned by and explicitly incorporates opportunities for the development of our eight Business Management Graduate Attributes.

**Table 4: BM Graduate Attributes across all undergraduate degree levels**

GA	Level 4 BM module examples	Level 5 BM modules	Level 6 BM modules
<b>Self-Awareness</b>	New “PPP” module with self-assessment, psychometric tests Reflective thinking and writing encouraged across the curriculum	New Level 5 self -assessment tests Reflective thinking and writing encouraged across the curriculum	New Level 6 self -assessment tests Reflective thinking and writing encouraged across the curriculum
<b>Systems Thinking</b>	Modified “Understanding Organizations” module New “Introduction to Business Law” module with workshops and assessments on business organizations as systems, and configurations of operations, resources and law.	New “Accounting for Decision Makers” module with group tests and simulations to promote systems thinking New “Managing Business Operations” module- using Inquiry-based projects and presentations	Modified “Business Strategy” module with simulations designed to foster systems thinking- using Inquiry-based projects and presentations
<b>Global Literacy</b>	New “Global Business Environment” module including globalization topics and PESTLE analysis within an international context	Modified “International Field Trip” module with formal learning outcomes and assessment	Modified “Cultural Issues in Management” module with emphasis on culture from organizational, national and international perspectives
<b>Change Capability</b>	New “Understanding Business Information” module with group tests and simulation activities to tackle operational and financial challenges	New “Business Research in Practice” module using case studies and scenarios designed to test knowledge of change management	Modified “Managing Change” module using case studies and scenarios to test change management skills
<b>Digital Literacy</b>	New “PPP” module with on-line tutorials and assessment of digital skills	New “E-commerce” module to study digitalized systems in real-world settings	New “Management Consultancy” module with online and face to face training workshops New Innovation competition
<b>Ethical Entrepreneurship</b>	New “PPP” module to foster entrepreneurial mind-set and Enterprise skills sessions	New Level 5 “Entrepreneurship” module designed to encourage entrepreneurial practice and use of ethical frameworks	New Level 6 “Entrepreneurship” module covering “intrapreneurship” and entrepreneurship within a sustainability framework
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	New “PPP” module with critical thinking and writing workshops and embedded across all modules	New “Business Research in Practice” module using real research case studies and scenarios to encourage critical thinking and writing.	Modified “Research Dissertation” module promoting individual research, critical thinking and academic writing
<b>Business-ready Mind-set</b>	New “PPP” module with learning outcomes and formal assessment of short work placement opportunities	New “Entrepreneurship” module with practical entrepreneurial activities Modified year-long “Business Placement” module	New “Management Consultancy” module. New “University in Business” Challenge

We were able to incorporate the eight Graduate Attributes into the program review document completed in July 2015 and made several changes to the curriculum for the following academic year (see Table 4). At each level, some new modules were introduced and some

existing modules were modified to reflect the eight Graduate Attributes: *self-awareness, systems thinking, global literacy, change capability, digital literacy, ethical entrepreneurship, critical thinking and business-ready mind-set*. In the design and development of the new modules, we paid attention to the constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) of *learning outcomes, learning activities and learning assessments* to ensure deep engagement with the learning activities and tasks. In the design of the learning outcomes for the new modules, we ensured these were student-focussed, based on the Graduate Attributes, mapped across the business management degree program specification and in accordance with the QAA benchmark statements (QAA, 2015). This ensured that the curriculum changes were aligned to the internal and external standards expected in higher education.

Major changes affect over 50% of the formal curriculum, with new modules (in bold on Table 4) either introducing new content for the first time (e.g. “Introduction to Business Law” at Level 4) or modifying learning outcomes, content or assessment. Minor modifications include changes to learning outcomes or assessment criteria designed to provide clearer opportunities to develop specific Graduate Attributes, e.g. the inclusion of formal learning outcomes and assessment on the international field trip module to promote *global literacy*. Conducting a holistic curriculum review in this way provided the opportunity to re-examine the ways in which certain Graduate Attributes such as *critical thinking* and *self-awareness* are embedded across the curriculum, and to assess the nature and degree of progression between the program levels.

### **The impact of IGA on a new module**

*Personal and Professional Portfolio (PPP)* is a new first-year compulsory module created by the Business Management team in response to previous evaluations by tutors and students which had indicated a lack of opportunities for experiential learning and poor student

engagement with certain activities on the informal curriculum. This new module was designed to embrace an andragogic approach (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005) with an emphasis on self-directed and experiential learning within a tighter formal structure aimed at developing personal and professional skills. The learning outcomes of this module include *critical thinking, reflection, communication, personal and professional development*, which align with the Graduate Attributes as illustrated in Table 4.

The module is delivered by a multi-departmental team, including academic faculty, personal tutors, university support staff (Library staff, academic skills tutors, work placement managers and careers advisors) and employers and mentors from a range of business and voluntary organizations. In addition to an academic skills block delivered by Business Management academics, a *Digital Literacy* element of the program is provided by teachers from the Computing department (the module was also made compulsory for their Business Information Technology students), and an assessment centre simulation is delivered by guest facilitators from one of the big four UK supermarket chains. The university's careers team present an electronic self-branding tool to help students match their skills with specific career opportunities, and the work placement managers facilitate a compulsory 30 hour placement with a business or voluntary organization to provide early direct real-world experience.

Assessment is carried out using a portfolio of assignments negotiated and agreed by the module team, former students and support tutors, and includes essays, group projects, reflective reports, videos, work placements and presentations on work experience/ enterprise activities including feedback from employers. Knowles et al. (2005) indicate the importance of self-directed learning as necessary in effective learning and as such we also made it a requirement for students on this module to complete a *Digi know* (digital literacy skills) online tutorial and self-assessment questionnaires on employability provided by the placements team with the process being managed by their seminar tutors.

Over the last two years, we have received mostly positive and constructive feedback from academic peers, employer organizations and students, with very useful suggestions for improving the experiences and planning of the learning/seminar sessions for the *PPP* module.

Feedback included the following:

- Some students have found it difficult to adjust to the delivery of the module by a combination of academic faculty, professional departments and employers.
- Some seminar tutors and students have indicated that the module is very complex and could require fewer assessment activities.
- Some students have questioned the balance of self-access and face to face digital skills activities and suggest that there is a clear preference for asynchronous online tutorials which students can access according to individual need.
- Some students have indicated a preference for developing enterprise skills to help them create a new business rather than gain work experience with an employer.
- Student feedback on the practical simulation and experiential activities has been very positive.
- Employer feedback on work placements in 2017 ( $n = 98$ ) has been very positive (excellent or good) regarding: students' work-related and/or technical skills (95%); communication and interpersonal skills (98%); enthusiasm (97%); team working (97%) and commitment and reliability (98%).
- Student feedback on work placements in 2017 ( $n = 119$ ) has been very positive (excellent or good) regarding: training given at the start of the work placement by employer (78%); support provided by academic tutors (79%); information and support from the university placement team (62%); opportunities for development of skills and knowledge (78%); and overall assessment of the placement (84%).

Since this article is focussed on the method by which we conducted our curriculum review, a detailed evaluation of our curricular changes lies beyond our current intentions. However, from the two years' worth of student module evaluations, we have selected comments from two which underline the extent to which the students perceive that the course is achieving its intended outcomes.

*Both the University of Gloucestershire and the PPP module provide a huge selection of opportunities to help me to develop my personal and professional skills while studying for my degree... The four blocks selected by the module target four different skills needed to be a great manager and an asset to any organization as the skills learnt are easily transferable. (Student 1)*

*The employment opportunity offered by the University has proven to be beneficial in improving a number of skills, for example my communication skills as I had to talk to customers on the phone to get their information and then make a quote package for them. The guest speaker [from a large multi-national clothes retailer] also proved helpful as it showed me how it would be to work for a large multinational corporation and how much businesses value social media such as LinkedIn. Finally, the most important aspect of the PPP module other than the placement was the assessment centre as almost all graduates will have to go through an assessment centre when applying for a job, however, these centres will vary depending on the business and job description, having experienced an assessment centre already I will be more confident when going to one in the future. (Student 2)*

These comments appear to justify the method by which we designed our curriculum review since they make indirect, but clear references to the Graduate Attributes underpinning the *PPP module: self-awareness, systems thinking, digital literacy and business-ready mind-set.*

This evidence confirms the overall success of this particular module, and we feel that our IGA approach was decisive in ensuring this success. Bringing together our main stakeholder groups in focussed conversations resulted in heightened willingness of faculty and external providers to collaborate in the delivery of the module and in a deeper understanding of how this module relates to the overall aims of the program. Some of the feedback from this module has also prompted us to re-examine the degree of formalization of individual elements such as work-based learning and the balance between face to face and asynchronous activities provided remotely through the university's virtual learning environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Inquiry into Graduate Attributes (IGA) is a structured conversational approach which draws on the views of a wide range of stakeholders to identify graduate attributes and use these as overarching principles for a future-facing, holistic curriculum review. The account presented here indicates how this approach enabled a large number of major and minor modifications to be made within a coherent framework of longer-term curricular aims while avoiding the piecemeal approaches observed elsewhere. Our review therefore produced useful suggestions

for immediate actions whilst at the same time providing durable guidelines for subsequent changes to the curriculum even where responsibility for making these changes will be passed on to other colleagues.

However, given the limited scope of this article a detailed account of other aspects of the curriculum design process has not been given here. This might have included precise curriculum mapping and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) of outcomes, learning activities and assessments. Furthermore, since our IGA was aimed at producing a set of overarching aims within the particular disciplinary context of a specific university, it does not seek to challenge the generic principles of instructional design (Gagné & Briggs 1974; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Rothwell, Benscoter, King & King, 2015) Nevertheless we hope we have provided a useful method for the production of overarching frameworks within local contexts in which more generic design principles can be effectively implemented.

Our initial focus groups suggested that students' engagement with certain informal curricular activities, such as international field trips or presentations by invited speakers, would increase if these were incorporated within the formal program. Our review therefore resulted in the greater formalization of certain co-curricular activities which had belonged to hidden, espoused or neglected areas of the informal curriculum (Caza & Brower, 2015). However, whilst this shift of content towards the formal end of the curricular spectrum is a notable outcome of this review, it is clear that further research is needed to increase our understanding of the precise relationship between student engagement and the informal curriculum. For example, it is possible that co-curricular activities might be adversely affected by excessively formal learning outcomes, activities and assessment e.g. volunteering activities, where highly structured formal assessment procedures might result in more instrumental approaches or reduce students' intrinsic motivation. A thorough examination of content and delivery of both formal and informal curricula at a range of institutions would

enable course designers to ascertain the optimum balance of formalization for each activity.

There is clearly a need for further research in this area.

Compelling evidence of differing disciplinary conceptualizations of graduate attributes (Jones, 2009) and divergent interest group expectations (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, 2011; Shuayto, 2013) also convinces us that further clarification is needed regarding the factors and relevancy criteria influencing various stakeholder groups' views of the intended outcomes of management programs. Of particular significance here might be certain external factors such as commercial pressures in highly marketized Higher Education systems and internal factors which are considered by local stakeholders as emblematic of an institution's identity. A clearer understanding of the nature of the environmental and institutional factors which act as barriers to longer-term and holistic approaches to curriculum review might help to avoid the all too common piecemeal changes noted by Green et al. (2009) and lead to more consistent and sustainable approaches to curriculum review.

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