

# Graduate Attributes

## The Rationale for Graduate Attributes

### A move toward institution-level learning outcomes

With a shift from general education to focused and specialized learning, the emerging belief is that colleges and universities must begin to “do more for their students than simply teach disciplinary content” (Green et al., 2009). Supporting arguments point to the changing nature of working in knowledge-based economies, where an individual’s flexibility and adaptability in these new, “get smart fast” environments is often valued above a discipline-specific knowledgebase *per se* (Barnett, 2000). At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the need to ensure that there is a ‘balance’ with the notion of the need for the ‘educated citizen’ as a central tenet for all university graduates.

In a “New Paradigm for Liberal Education”, Thompson (2014) identifies “three formative themes: cultivating inquiry skills and intellectual judgment; personal and social responsibility and civic engagement; and integrative and applied learning” as central to a developmental model approach to higher education. He concludes that a developmental model “makes clear that the goal of higher education is to transform students’ ways of thinking, knowing, and understanding”. Learning outcomes, or in the case of VIU, graduate attributes support such a developmental model.

In light of the above, numerous colleges, universities and jurisdictions have developed learning outcomes for their graduates. These efforts, while they may have different names, are in evidence, at the institutional level, from large public institutions to small private ones.

A statement of learning outcomes answers the question: “*What do we expect our students to acquire from an education at our University?*” In order to ensure that these varied ‘outcomes’ are achieved, Vancouver Island University has determined that learning outcomes (renamed Graduate Attributes by Senate) should be developed so that there is a broad institutional commitment to common aspirations concerning student learning.

### Graduate Attributes

Our graduate attributes are grouped into three “pillars,” which we believe form a solid foundation of citizenship. These pillars are **Literacies** (i.e. the acquisition of knowledge), **Intellectual and Practical Skills** (i.e. understanding the application of gained knowledge), and **Civic Engagement** (i.e. appreciating that knowledge exists in context). As students experience growth in these three areas, they develop maturity and many of the positive traits of engaged citizenship, such as emotional intelligence, perspectives on social justice, and intercultural awareness. VIU entrusts each decanal area to determine how best to meet the graduate attributes that make up each of these three pillars.

At VIU, we believe that, through our graduate attributes we can help students to become valued contributors in their chosen communities, no matter their backgrounds, starting points, how long they are with us, or when they leave. Through VIU’s graduate attributes, we believe that there can and should be common expectations such that students will:

- become independent learners;

- develop intercultural competencies and encourage learning and discovery through awareness of, and engagement with, other cultures;
- develop an appreciation for, and an understanding of, Canada's Aboriginal heritage;
- understand problems and challenges within their immediate, local contexts as well as within larger, global contexts;
- appreciate the aesthetic and inherent value of others' work and contributions;
- make the most of opportunities by drawing on both the depth and the breadth of their learning; and,
- emerge with a life-long love of learning and discovery.

The preceding common expectations should frame internal Faculty and Department conversations about the specific graduate attributes appropriate for their own situation and discipline underpinnings. At the same time, Faculties and Departments should inform their internal discussions by identifying how and the extent to which the elements of the three pillars (Literacies, Intellectual and Practical Skills and Civic Engagement) are reflected in their specific graduate attributes.

## Literacies

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### Reading

Reading engages, situates, and analyzes a text in order to comprehend and make meaning. Readers learn to understand how texts are culturally and historically situated, to interpret using a range of genres, and to appreciate that there are different ways to approach a text.

### Written Communication

Written communication is the use of writing to organize perspectives, knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and information and to present them in a clear and effective manner. Adept writers are able to negotiate different genres and situations.

### Oral Communication

Oral communication is the use of speech to express perspectives, knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and information in a clear and effective manner. It includes the capacity to listen and to comprehend orally-communicated information.

### Information Literacies

Information literacies include the ability to find and critically evaluate relevant information and its sources, and to synthesize the information with existing knowledge.

### Scientific Literacy

Scientific literacy entails an understanding of the scientific method, including the roles of experimentation, numeracy, and reproducibility, sufficient to make evidence-based conclusions and to participate in informed civic debate.

### Technological Literacy

Technological literacy includes an understanding of how technical innovation has influenced societies. Technological literacy involves an openness to new technologies and processes, as well as the ability to critically evaluate their relevance and uses.

# Intellectual and Practical Skills

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## Disciplinary Expertise

Students achieve domain-specific knowledge and competence in their chosen areas of study.

## Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ongoing practice of examining, analyzing, and reflecting on something before developing a position or conclusion.

## Creative Thinking

Creative thinking occurs when established approaches are reimagined in order to arrive at a new way to represent or understand a subject. Creative thinking is characterized by a solid grasp of established practices within a field of study, by use of imagination and synthesis, and through initiative and risk-taking.

## Inquiry and Ways of Knowing

Inquiry is the process of posing questions while trying methodically to answer those questions. Questions arise in relation to past inquiry within a field of study, emerging issues, and individual curiosity. Ways of knowing can be historical, cultural, and disciplinary.

## Historical Understanding

Historical understanding is the capacity to see how texts, ideas, and events are informed by the past and situated in their own contexts. The ability to trace change or continuity over time extends to the historical basis of disciplines and knowledge, including how these relate to other social and cultural developments.

## Safe and Ethical Practices

Students will become aware of, and adhere to, safe and ethical practices in their areas of study or profession. Such practices could relate to work in a lab, a shop, or a classroom, and includes adherence to ethical standards in research involving human participants and ensuring that the safety, health, welfare, and rights of participants are adequately protected.

## Collaboration

Collaboration is the ability to work productively with others, especially within the context of an organization. Effective collaborators understand the processes by which organizations achieve their goals and apply skills and resources to achieve shared objectives.

## Active Learning

Active or deep learning occurs when individuals are able to understand how they learn and how to use appropriate learning strategies given the situation, including planning and re-evaluating their approach.

# Civic Engagement

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## Indigenous Perspective

An awareness of Aboriginal perspectives includes the different ways of knowing by which these perspectives enrich university life. Indigenous Perspective relates not only to the objective of exploring what Indigenous knowledge is but also to devising ways of integrating such knowledge into our learning.

## Local Knowledge in a Global Context

A world view informed by geography, sustainability, culture, history, and current events is an important facet of citizenship in an era of mass culture and communication.

## Intercultural Perspective

Intercultural perspectives comprise awareness and appreciation of different ways of knowing and being which encompass diverse peoples, cultures, and lifestyles.

## Capacity to Engage in Respectful Relationships

Respectful relationships involve trust, acceptance, inclusion, and emotional intelligence. Graduates of VIU have the capacity to develop meaningful relationships and demonstrate respectful and genuine interest in all people, particularly when interacting with others who have different abilities or backgrounds.

## Foundations for Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learners are self-motivated learners. They have the knowledge, skills, and attitude to engage in continuous learning; they are characterized by independence of thought, curiosity, and initiative. Lifelong learning is important for personal and professional development as well as for civic engagement.

## Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning is the application of a moral framework to a given situation or issue.

## Integrative Learning

Integrative learning is the ability to make connections, synthesize and apply learning in new situations, and bridge theory and practice across disciplinary boundaries.