



Institutional Toolkit for Engaging with Graduate Outcomes

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Introduction

This toolkit should be read in conjunction with our Guide “[How to engage with graduate outcomes’ agenda: A guide for tertiary education institutions.](#)” (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013a; see also full report in Spronken-Smith et al., 2013b). The Guide gives definitions of graduate outcomes (GOs), as well as reasons why institutions should be engaged with such a GO agenda. It provides a list of indicators of good practice for engagement with GOs, and a set of enablers for promoting engagement with GOs. In addition, some strategies to better embed GOs in institutions, programmes and teaching are provided.

In this toolkit we first recap from the Guide some important points, pertinent for senior managers with oversight for teaching and learning across the institution. Then we address key steps that senior managers should take if instigating curriculum renewal for better engagement with GOs.

Recap of Key Points in the Guide

Graduate outcomes: Definitions

Graduate outcomes (GOs) encompass graduate profiles (GPs), which may be at the institutional (GPI) and/or programme (GPP) levels (see Figure 1). The GPs consist of sets of graduate attributes (GAs) that typically include knowledge, skills and values. Graduate outcomes that are required by the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) must include a GP as well as educational and employment pathways for graduates (NZQA 2011, 2013). Graduate outcomes should not be viewed in an atomised way, but rather as interrelated and holistic. To promote engagement with a graduate outcome agenda, lecturers should hold a ‘translation’ or ‘enabling’ conception of graduate attributes (Barrie, 2006), which means they will purposefully try to foster them in their students.

Why should institutions engage with graduate outcomes?

While a focus on learning objectives began early last century in the United States, the global groundswell of neo-liberalism and related political/economic agendas with a concern for quality in the 1990s led to a focus on educational outcomes beyond the classroom. Since the early 1990s the consideration of graduate outcomes has gained momentum throughout higher education systems in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and Australia.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the move to legislate the specification of graduate outcomes has been more recent, with the enactment in 2011 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. This framework requires all quality-assured qualifications to specify graduate outcomes that include a graduate profile, and education and employment pathways for graduates.

As well as the specification of graduate outcomes constituting good teaching practice, there is a body of evidence that there are benefits for both students and staff when graduate outcomes are well embedded in curricula. Staff report that the curriculum renewal process fosters collegiality, increases efficiency and importantly, often transforms their thinking about teaching to take a more student-centred approach. Many students report a lack of knowledge about graduate outcomes, yet they want to know about them to inform their choice of courses, their study and future opportunities.

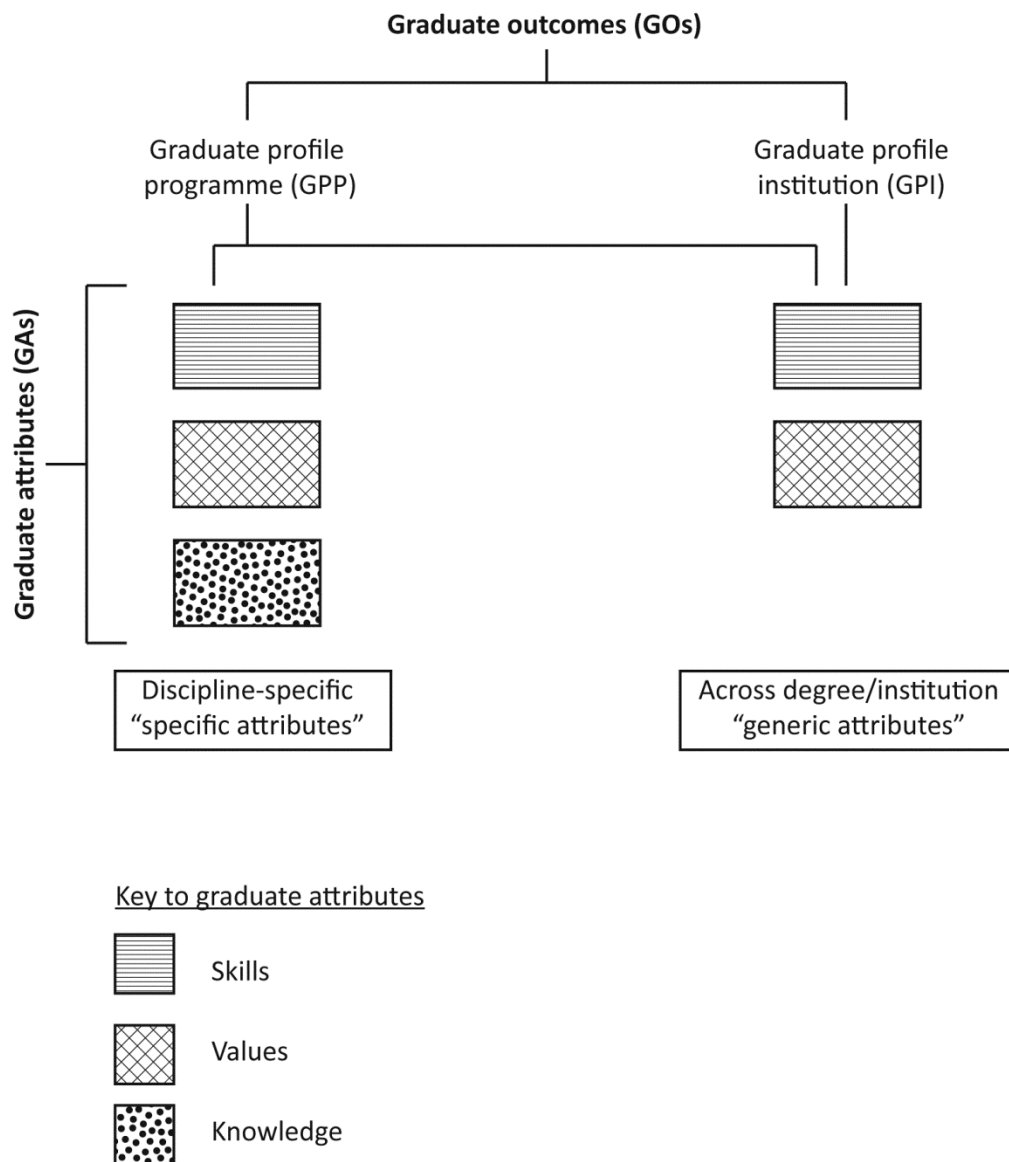


Figure 1: Definitions of graduate outcomes, profiles and attributes that we adopt in this report (Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2013b).

Note: ‘Graduate outcomes’ (GOs) is used as an umbrella term to encompass graduate profiles (GPs), which in turn encompass sets of graduate attributes (GAs), consisting of knowledge, skills and values. The number and nature of GAs will vary between institutions and programmes.

What are institutional indicators of engagement with graduate outcomes?

There are six indicators for engagement with GOs at the institutional level:

- **Planning for GOs.** This involves having high-level strategies for GOs, such as in institutional teaching and learning plans.
- **Systems to embed GOs.** Considerations here include appointments, committees, roles and responsibilities (of staff and committees) for initiatives including GOs, and institutional processes such as those for course and programme approval.
- **Delivery of GOs.** Encouragement of lecturers to teach explicitly towards achievement of GOs.
- **Assessment of GOs.** Encouragement of lecturers to assess development of GOs.
- **Evaluation of attainment of GOs.** Ensuring that monitoring of attainment of GOs occurs across the institution. This may include institutional or programme-level surveys, alumni surveys, periodic review, and employer feedback on graduates.
- **Professional development support for GOs.** Providing academic staff development support to assist lecturers to engage with a GO agenda.

How would you rate your institution using these indicators?

We found engagement with GOs is patchy across the polytechnic and university sector. In general, polytechnics were more engaged in this agenda than the universities. The main reasons for the stronger engagement in the polytechnics may have been due to the influence of the NZQA and the teaching-focused culture. Institutions with strong engagement with GOs demonstrated strong senior leadership in the area and the necessary enabling structures. Institutions with a less well-developed GO agenda tended to lack central leadership, focused resources, and appropriate supporting structures in the GO area. Instead, they often relied on individuals as champions.

There is better engagement by higher education institutions with the planning, systems and delivery of GOs, but much weaker engagement with assessment and evaluation of GOs and professional development support for GOs. Thus institutions need to ensure that relevant GOs are assessed (not all may be assessable, particularly more affective attributes¹) and provide professional development support for embedding GOs.

What can enable engagement with graduate outcomes?

Five enablers for engagement with GOs were identified:

- A) *External drivers* – forces to which institutions were required to respond or that they perceived they were responding, or should respond
- B) *Structural and procedural enablers* – those that facilitated or engaged staff and communities within the institution to become aware of or work towards change in practice in regard to GOs
- C) *Developmental enablers* – those that assisted staff/groups/departments to introduce and develop GOs and embed them in curricula, or undertake some curriculum development
- D) *Achievement enablers* – those that were concerned with how students are assisted to achieve a GP

¹ Affective attributes include values and attitudes.

- E) *Contextual enablers* – generic institutional and/or individual cultural/affective qualities that crossed the four forms described above and made them more or less effective.

A framework showing the relation between the enablers is given in Figure 2 and a range of strategies for each enabler is given in Table 1. External drivers are powerful enablers and should be utilised where possible. Whilst structural enablers are often apparent in institutions, what are often missing are procedural enablers, yet these are crucial to embedding GOs in curricula. Moreover, there should be strong links between the structural and procedural enablers and the developmental enablers. To promote engagement with GOs, consideration must be given to each enabler and how this can be enacted at all levels throughout the institution. More thought needs to be given to achievement enablers as these were less well developed within institutions.

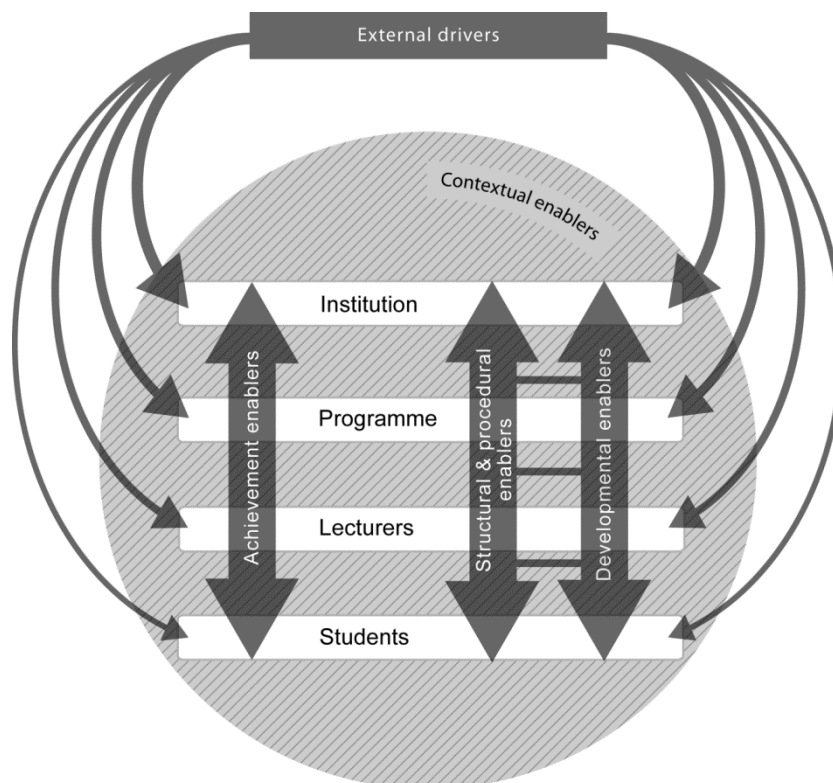


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of enablers for engagement with a graduate outcome agenda (Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2013b).

Table 1: Strategies to promote embedding GOs in curricula at the institutional level (Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2013b). Note that these strategies for each enabler are discussed in detail in the next section.

Enablers	Institutional – what helps embed GOs at the institutional level?
<p>External – forces to which institutions were required to respond or that they perceived they were responding, or should respond</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influence of statutory accreditation bodies (NZQA, CUAP) • The need for institutional branding and responding to the educational market • The need to keep abreast of international education trends
<p>Structural and procedural – those that facilitated or engaged staff and communities within the institution to become aware of or work towards change in practice in regard to GOs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having strong proactive senior leadership for GO initiatives • Appointing key senior managers supportive of GO initiatives • Promoting a senior management team focus on GOs • Requiring curriculum renewal with a focus on GOs • Changing roles of committees to ensure oversight and promotion of GOs • Instigating policies and plans that include GPs • Giving staff designated authority to implement policy • Allowing time for curriculum renewal • Having oversight of monitoring process
<p>Developmental – those that assisted staff/groups/departments to introduce and develop GOs and embed them in curricula, or undertake some curriculum development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being clear about the institutional role and relation to the GP(s) • Translation and enabling beliefs about the role of GOs and teaching and learning • Providing academic development support through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Facilitating curriculum meetings ○ Workshops on GOs ○ Providing exemplars of embedding of GOs ○ Providing tools to assist in curriculum renewal • Identifying champions • Implementing institutional projects • Recognising the time required for change
<p>Achievement – those that were concerned with how students are assisted to achieve a GP</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing an institutionally supported ePortfolio framework • Providing advising and mentoring of students • Providing signature learning experiences (Smith 2011; Spronken-Smith, 2013)
<p>Contextual – generic institutional and/or individual cultural/affective qualities that crossed the four forms described above and made them more or less effective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A positive emotional health of the institution • Good communication • An institutional culture that focuses on student learning • Giving GOs a high profile • Having an alertness to the context of programmes and programme coordinators • Creating space for discussions on GOs and how to embed them

Key Steps for Institutions to Engage with Graduate Outcomes

The key steps we identified on the pathway to a high level of engagement with GOs are:

1. Deciding who is going to be responsible for driving curriculum renewal around GOs
2. Determining whether your institution should have an institutional graduate profile (*i.e.* a set of generic attributes that all graduates will have), programme-specific ones or both
3. Developing contextualised graduate profiles for programmes
4. Gaining leverage from enablers of engagement with GOs
 - a. Drawing on external drivers
 - b. Creating the context for curriculum renewal
 - c. Ensuring enabling structures and processes are in place
 - d. Ensuring developmental enablers are in operation
 - e. Activating achievement enablers
5. Monitoring progress of embedding GOs and using feedback to improve the learning experiences for students.

Each step is considered in turn below.

1. Deciding who is responsible for curriculum renewal

Key Points:

- *Leadership for curriculum renewal for a GO agenda should come from senior management.*
- *A steering group should be formed to oversee curriculum renewal with membership from senior management, academic developers and respected teachers.*

It is important that any institution-wide curriculum renewal processes are instigated from the top with strong support from senior management. Often steering groups or committees are delegated the responsibility for oversight of curriculum renewal, and ideally some members of senior management should sit on this committee. If your institution has an academic development unit, then members of this unit should also be on the group or committee, since they will have a key role in implementation; indeed, directors of such units often chair the steering group. Try to get representation from across the institution and use respected teachers where possible. At this stage it will be important to develop terms of reference for the steering group. For example, this group could be tasked with:

- doing a stocktake of engagement with GOs across the institution. This will be important to provide exemplars of good practice as well as determining which parts of the institution need particular support
- providing open forums for staff and students to discuss GOs – what GOs are, why they should be embedded, how they can be embedded and the benefits of doing so
- liaising with key representatives and champions across the institution to progress and monitor implementation of curriculum renewal.

2. Graduate profiles: Institutional, programme-specific or both?

Key points:

- *Senior managers in institutions should think carefully about whether an institutional graduate profile is desirable.*

- *If the decision is to have a GPI, it should be a broad statement that encapsulates key characteristics of graduates, rather than a long list of graduate attributes. If applicable, the GPI should also portray the point of difference of the institution.*

One of the most fundamental issues in advancing a GO agenda is to decide whether there will be an institutional graduate profile (GPI). Certainly the NZQF requires programme-specific graduate profiles (GPP), but should institutions also have a GPI? And if they do, how does the GPI articulate to the GPPs?

It is apparent that in recent years many institutions (particularly universities) have developed a set of attributes for all their graduates to attain, that is, a graduate profile for the institution (GPI). For some institutions, a GPI may be used as a marketing tool, but in reality researchers (for example, Pitman and Broomhall, 2009) have found that there is a commonality amongst such generic attributes across a range of institutions. This is not surprising as one would expect higher education institutions to be developing similar generic attributes such as critical thinking, communication and problem solving in their students. However, there are some risks associated with GPIs. There is the danger that institutions may think they have engaged with a GO agenda if in fact they have a GPI. In reality, this is just a first step and indeed, we would argue it may not be wise to even have this step as really GPPs are more important.

If the institution does have a GPI, leaders need ensure it is not a long list of graduate attributes. The longer the list of graduate attributes, the harder it will be for programmes to contextualise these and indeed some may not be particularly relevant to some disciplines. For example, one New Zealand university has a GPI that includes 13 graduate attributes. This presents a real challenge to programme coordinators, who are trying to contextualise these for their degrees. In contrast another university has only four graduate attributes in its GPI: leadership, creative thinking, critical thinking, and effective communication. Most of the polytechnical institutes that responded to our survey did not have a GPI, although some had had one in the past. For them, having contextualised outcomes at the programme level was the key factor to embedding GOs.

With a long list of graduate attributes in a GPI, another problem may be that lecturers are more likely to view graduate attributes as “discrete or atomic entities” (Hager, 2006, p. 18) that stand alone so they can be acquired and transferred as single entities; as in the metaphor of mind, a container that can be filled up. This is a very impoverished view of graduate attributes and one which we would not like to perpetuate. Hager argues that learning is a process, but thinking of graduate attributes in terms of acquisition suggests learning has a product, that is, the learner acquires the “right characteristics” (p. 22). He proposes that generic attributes tend to be inter-related and holistic, and given that they are situated in a particular context, the idea of generic may be redundant.

Given the foregoing discussion, our preference for a GPI is more of a statement that encompasses the notion of ‘graduateness’. For example, we liked AUT University’s institutional graduate outcomes statement, which said that it will produce graduates who are:

“distinguished by their professionalism, their commitment to ongoing learning and personal development, their confidence and adaptability, their ability to communicate and cooperate, and their appreciation of the wider contexts in which they live and work” (AUT University, 2012).

Moreover, such succinct graduate outcome statements could be used as a way to brand core values or points of difference for the institution.

3. Developing graduate outcomes for programmes

Key points:

- *Graduate profiles must be contextualised for programmes and should consider the attributes desired by any external agencies as well as any generic and programme-specific attributes.*
- *Graduate outcomes for NZQF must include a graduate profile, and educational and employment pathways.*

Irrespective of whether the institution has a GPI, there must be contextualised graduate profile (*i.e.* a GPP) for every degree programme. Such profiles are required under the New Zealand Qualification Framework (NZQF) and indeed as well as programmes having a GPP, educational and employment pathways must also be articulated.

The development of GPPs should not be done by the steering group, but rather delegated to heads of departments and programme directors, since they need to be specific to the programme. However, what is critical is the involvement by all relevant teaching staff in the development of the GPP and ideally, stakeholders such as students, alumni and employers.

The contextualised graduate profiles should take account of any institutional graduate attributes (if there are any) as well as external accreditation or professional body requirements and discipline-specific knowledge, skills and values.

4. Gaining leverage from enablers of engagement with GOs

Key point:

- *There are five categories of enablers: external drivers, contextual, structural and procedural, developmental, and achievement. A range of strategies should be adopted to ensure each of these is enabling the process of curriculum change to embed graduate outcomes.*

As noted above, there are five categories of enablers for engagement with graduate outcomes. We consider each in turn below, discussing possible strategies.

Drawing on external drivers

Take advantage of external drivers where possible, as these are a powerful enabler. While NZQA will continue to be a powerful driver for non-university parts of the sector, the recently legislated NZQF means that universities now also have to provide graduate outcomes statements for all degrees (there are some exceptions). The educational market is another driver and institutions can use GOs to brand themselves, particularly if they have unique aspects of their degree offerings or student experience.

Creating the context for curriculum renewal

It is clear that lecturers will devote more time and energy to teaching if they perceive that teaching is valued within the institution. Senior managers should endeavour to promote a culture within the institution that values teaching. Aspects of a vibrant teaching culture include an institutional focus on student learning, the promotion and recognition of courses that provide high-impact educational experiences (see Kuh, 2008), giving GOs a high profile, and being aware and supportive of the context of programmes and programme coordinators. Moreover, space should be made available to have institution-wide discussions about GOs and how to embed them.

Ensuring enabling structures and processes are in place

These are very important in the embedding of GOs and these enablers should also have strong links to developmental enablers. The institution should have policies and plans that include GOs. Ideally the institution will have an overarching teaching and learning strategic plan, and in this should be a goal for embedding GOs across the institution. This plan should cascade through the appropriate levels to ensure that departments and programmes also have in place policies for embedding GOs. As well as policy, the institution needs to have committee structures and procedures in place to ensure implementation of policy. To advance a GO agenda may mean changing the roles and/or procedures of committees. Staff need to be clear about who has designated authority to implement GO policy. Importantly, there needs to be monitoring of attainment of GOs; this is discussed in more detail in step 5.

Ensuring developmental enablers are in operation

Institutions that have strongly embedded GOs report the importance of academic developers in achieving this high-level engagement. Undertaking major curriculum renewal can be very unsettling for lecturers, particularly if their conceptions about teaching are being challenged. Having academic developers to facilitate conversations about curriculum renewal becomes very important and they can help guide programme teams through the process. Table 1 provides some activities that academic developers can facilitate to help with curriculum renewal. Another major developmental enabler is that of time. It is vital to allow two to three years for curriculum renewal to occur, particularly if programmes are undertaking major revisions to courses.

Activating achievement enablers

The achievement enablers have been less evident in institutions. These are the enablers that help students achieve the desired GOs. Some institutions help students to track their attainment of GOs through an institutionally supported ePortfolio framework or by personal advising and mentoring of students. Another strategy is to promote 'signature learning experiences', which involve students across the institution and may extend into the wider community (such as community-learning initiatives) (Smith, 2011). A recent example is the Student Army at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, which involved thousands of students in a series of community initiatives in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes. Such experiences can also include the development of mentoring and leadership skills by senior students (Spronken-Smith, 2013), and as Smith (2011) noted, while these are often adopted as a point of difference for marketing, these signature learning experiences are well placed to develop generic attributes.

5. Monitoring of attainment of GOs

Key points:

- *Monitoring is a critical part of the process of embedding GOs and should not be neglected. A range of strategies are available to evaluate attainment of GOs.*
- *Importantly, data gained through evaluation should be used to inform the on-going enhancement of curriculum initiatives.*

It is apparent that while many institutions plan for GOs and ensure they are taught and assessed in their programmes, the monitoring of GOs is given less consideration. Yet, with any curriculum initiative, monitoring is critical to ensure that the desired change is in fact occurring. Thus monitoring of student development is critical to see if graduates are in fact achieving the desired graduate profile. Monitoring may be via periodic review, graduate opinion surveys, and alumni and employer surveys. As with any evaluative process, the results of the surveys should be fed back to staff and students, and used to improve the learning experiences for the students.

Conclusion

The process of embedding graduate outcomes in degree programmes is a major undertaking since it typically involves considerable curriculum renewal. This toolkit has outlined some considerations in the process. The focus of curriculum renewal should be seen as a means to improve student learning, not driven by compliance. Any curriculum renewal processes to embed graduate outcomes should include:

- strong leadership from above, *i.e.* senior management must be seen to be supporting and promoting this renewal
- strong leadership at the departmental and programme levels
- the assistance of academic developers in facilitating conversations about graduate outcomes and teaching towards them
- ownership of the process by the teaching staff, *i.e.* as many teaching staff as possible should be directly involved in curriculum renewal
- the development of a contextualised graduate profile for the programme. Ideally students and other stakeholders should be involved in developing this profile
- a focus on generating learning outcomes and assessment well aligned with the graduate profile. Curriculum mapping tools provide a useful resource for this, especially under the guidance of an academic developer
- the collection of, and action on, evaluative data to inform the continual enhancement of the curriculum
- allowing at least a couple of years for curriculum renewal to occur.

Other toolkits are available to assist in the process of curriculum renewal: [a toolkit for heads of department and programme directors](#) (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013c) and one for [lecturers](#) (Spronken-Smith et al., 2013d).

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