Finding Room for Personal Integrity in Postgraduate Research in Business

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The conceptions of what constitutes quality in postgraduate education have changed over the past decade, but not all aspects of the ‘new’ conceptions are indeed new. We will argue that alongside the trend to coursework components in research higher degrees and to greater formalization of the supervision process which are apparent in many universities, there is in some institutions a move to give greater weight to intangible aspects of the learning which occurs in a research degree. Some institutions have adopted sets or lists of graduate qualities or generic capabilities and made these, rather than content, the aim their educational programs. Some explicitly include capabilities for research education, and some of those lists contain references to personal integrity. Whilst we agree that personal integrity is essential for full participation in professional practice – a view which some institutions have always held – this can lead to competing and conflicting views of quality. Coursework and lists suggest a more quantitative approach to assessment, seemingly open and transparent, while the assessment of integrity and commitment to ethical behaviour present quite different challenges to the assessors. It is to these challenges that we address our attention.

The paper has four sections. The first outlines the moves in some Australian universities to establish sets of graduate qualities or generic capabilities, placing it in the context of wider changes in the nature of research degrees and the growing recognition of the importance of intellectual capital. The second section shows how some United Kingdom universities have responded to similar trends and to the 2003 White Paper on Higher Education. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of intellectual capital, focusing particularly on the work of the Hungarian economist Sandor Kopatsy and on the important place which it gives to morality. Taken together, these three sections show that some universities consider moral or ethical capacity to be an element of postgraduate education, and that Kopatsy’s view of intellectual capital can provide a justification for that view, even within a business-oriented culture. The fourth section considers how such an ethical quality might be assessed within a postgraduate research degree.