Beyond conventional competence
a study of capable people

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While the idea of 'capability' has a connotation of being more than basically competent (Gardner et al 2008), it is difficult to identify exactly what is involved in being capable. This small-scale study of people who were selected by peers as being capable highlights a number of characteristics which appear to be broadly common, including creating, innovating, or working effectively with change; taking the lead in one form or another; practical intelligence and the ability to get things done; being able to work effectively with other people; and having a sense of purpose or focus.   It also illustrates the importance of learning from experience and, in many cases, from critical experiences or turning-points in participants' lives.   There are implications for educational processes which aspire to assist people to develop their capability, including the need to engage fully with learners' experience and aspirations or interests.

Introduction

The notion of 'capability,' as taken forward by Higher Education for Capability (e.g. Stephenson 1998) and in the idea of the 'capable practitioner' (O'Reilly *et al* 1999) appears to be a useful one both for describing capacity for effective and appropriate action, and for informing education, training and other developmental interventions. While 'capability' can be theorised as an abstract concept, it is likely to be more useful if it is also grounded in practice, i.e. in studies of people who can be considered as capable.

Many studies of capability or competence focus on people who are conventionally successful, often in particular roles or contexts; for instance, the "capability personified" series in the former *Capability* journal (e.g. Cantell 1996, 1999) concentrated chiefly on people who are relatively well-known in business, public administration or academia, while a study contemporary with the one described here (Doncaster & Lester 2002) was based on candidates in senior professional roles undertaking a work-based doctorate. By contrast, our small-scale study deliberately set out to draw on the experiences of people from a diverse range of backgrounds and who were not necessarily well-known; we also sought to avoid the assumption that 'capability' needed to be expressed through conventional economic activity.

The study was based on minimally structured interviews with a small group of participants, all of whom had been identified by ourselves or other informants as being 'capable.' In talking to informants

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and selecting participants for interview we used a fairly loose notion of capability in which the main criteria were that the potential candidate was competent in their role or sphere of action, as well as going beyond this in a way which demonstrated for instance an uncommon ability, new or surprising ways of doing things, innovation or the creation of new practice, or sound value-judgement in difficult circumstances. The study was carried out in 2000, but the findings and learning-points that emerged from it are unlikely to be any less relevant today.

The idea of capability

The notion of capability has been discussed extensively in the journal *Capability* (e.g. Stephenson 1994, Newby 2000) and in other publications produced under the aegis of Higher Education for Capability (e.g. Stephenson & Weil 1992, Stephenson & Yorke 1998, O'Reilly *et al* 1999), as well as in subsequent discussions by authors influenced by this movement (e.g. Gardner *et al* 2008). The discussion here will therefore focus on how the idea of capability was employed in the study.

The idea of capability is used here in the sense of the 'capable practitioner' (O'Reilly *et al* 1999), with its implication not only of competence but, as suggested above, the ability to go beyond what would normally be considered competent into excellence, creativity or wisdom. The difference between this notion and the more normative approaches which are frequently used to describe competence is acknowledged, so that the study has aimed to illustrate rather than define what is meant by capability. As a starting-point, the capable person might innovate and be an 'author' of their own practice or an 'autonomous self' (Tennant 2004); take an enquiring approach and work their way around problems, rather than accept practices and assumptions as given; develop new skills and abilities in response to new demands or to improve practice, rather than waiting to be prompted and trained; and make sound judgements in the face of incomplete information and divergent problems (Schumacher 1977). Whereas competence is typically concerned with fitness for purpose (or getting the job right), capability infers concern also with fitness *of* purpose (or making judgements about the right job to do).

The participants

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Box 1 **Research participants**

Adrian   - chief librarian, president of professional association
Brian   - sales agent
Chris - project manager; national secretary of trade union
Declan - managing partner, accountancy practice; regional president of professional association
Elaine - nurse / care worker; spiritualist
Frank   - local government manager (retired)
Gavin - aircraft engineer; artist
Julia - purchaser; home-maker
Karen   - farmer; regional representative of association
Laura - former sportswoman, home-maker
Mary   - founder of counselling service; foster parent
Mike   - design engineer / engineering manager; skilled amateur craftsman
Neil - senior policy and PR role in a trade association
Peter   - founder and chairman of research company; visiting professor
Sue   - senior manager, health service

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Fifteen people, six women and nine men, were interviewed for the study, with the majority of interviews (all face-to-face) taking place in Somerset and Devon between June and August 2000. Brief details of the current roles of participants are given in box 1 (for reasons of confidentiality, all names have been changed). Eleven participants had qualifications at higher education level, although only four had first degrees and five more had early-career higher education diplomas.

Being capable

In a study of candidates on a work-based doctoral programme (Doncaster & Lester 2002), most participants included in their written reviews discussions of both the external or outer dimensions of being capable (achievements, impacts and activities) as well as inner dimensions (abilities, skills, dispositions and other attributes). The present study follows this distinction in guiding participants' discussions of their capability.

Outer dimensions

Participants' comments about their achievements could be grouped under six areas within perhaps three main themes: recognition and position; creating and innovating; and practical action and taking the lead.

Two-thirds of participants mentioned achieving a position or mark of recognition of some form, either as a planned aspiration or less deliberately as acknowledging their achievement. These included job roles such as senior partner (Declan), "a senior management position" (Mike) or "the youngest branch manager" (Chris), but more often they concerned honorary or voluntary positions: club secretary, chair, and member of the county committee (Karen), "president of my professional association, the highest I can go in my profession" (Adrian), Sportswoman of the Year (Laura), and being appointed to a visiting professorship (Peter). One mentioned achieving qualifications part-time while busy with work, family and personal interests (Mike), and another achieving a position of financial security (Declan).

For some participants there was also a sense in which achievements had, as one put it, "broken the script." For three this involved moving from a working-class or relatively poor background to a professional job and financial security (as Sue put it, "from… peasant to department manager"), while Julia saw herself as gaining promotion on her own merits rather than through qualifications. Rather different moulds had been broken by Peter and Karen; Peter established a successful business, determined not to follow his father into bankruptcy, while Karen, as the eldest child in a farming family, had had to prove herself to her father as able to take on a traditionally male-dominated role.

The second most widely discussed area, mentioned by eight participants, involved creating, innovating, or initiating and taking forward change. Actual activities varied widely, from creating and setting up new services (Sue, Mary), through developing successful business ideas (Brian, Peter), creating a successful and widely-used system (Peter), implementing and involving community support for new developments (Frank), livening up and rejuvenating a professional conference circuit (Adrian), to "creating a lovely environment" (Laura). In all cases participants had a sense of conviction and commitment to carry forward the change, as well as effective ideas for creating or implementing it. A

closely related theme involved managing change in the face of adversity: for instance both Brian and Chris had turned struggling operations around to become successful, and Sue had successfully reorganised units in a "turbulent" public-sector environment.

For six participants, a key aspect of their capability was reflected in practical, 'hands-on' achievements. These included effective achievement of practical results with limited resources (Karen, Mike, Laura), gaining popularity and respect as a competent care worker (Elaine), and successfully managing a diverse and potentially difficult group of staff (Frank). In all these cases there was a sense of mastery or intuitive grasp of the work involved, which translated into excellence in practice.

Box 2 **Frank**

Before his retirement Frank worked as a manager in local government, in charge of one of London's largest public parks and a complement of 70 staff.

Frank left school at the age of 15 to start an engineering apprenticeship, but illness quickly forced him to rethink his plans. On recovering he started a career in horticulture, soon moving into local government where he progressed through craft and supervisory grades to become the most senior operational manager in his department. He describes his progression as due among other things to his ability to think ahead clearly and being able to take the lead, "seeing what needs doing and taking responsibility where others might back off," which from early in his career brought him acknowledgement as a practical leader with sound judgement. He was also proactive in moving around in the organisation, seeking to gain a diverse range of experience and learn as much as possible from it.

Initially Frank's only formal training was through technical evening classes, which he sought out himself; after some time in supervisory and management positions he took a certificate and diploma in management, which were being promoted by his organisation. However, he feels that much of his management success was based on intuitive ability and learning through his own experience.

Other than his strengths as a practical leader and manager, Frank points particularly to his constructive attitude to people and ability to manage staff successfully. He sees this as having been critical in being able to run an effective operation, manage public events successfully, and gain support for new developments and change.

Finally, a theme of taking the lead in some form or another was expressed by some participants, although only one (Frank) discussed leadership in anything approaching a formal sense, and then principally in the sense of seeing what needed to be done and taking the initiative in getting on with it. Not dissimilarly, Sue and Adrian both discussed initiating changes which others then took up and followed, while Karen commented about taking on the role of 'second-in-command' in her family business. Different examples of leading were provided by Neil, in the form of acting as a spokesman for his industry and preparing a policy "blueprint" to resolve a long-standing conflict, Peter, who had developed and gained recognition for a particular diagnostic approach within his sector, and Gavin, who was involved in setting engineering standards for his organisation. Mike and Brian also commented on leading from behind the scenes, by influencing or setting up systems. These discussions suggest that taking the lead is much wider than what is generally termed leadership, and capability is perhaps more widely found in informal and systems leadership than the classic styles described in management literature.

Inner dimensions

What might be termed the inner dimensions of capability span skills, dispositions and other personal attributes. The inner dimensions discussed by the participants fall into four main areas: practical management abilities, abilities relating to working with people (both discussed by all but two), intellectual or related attributes (discussed by nine out of 15), and personal motivations and dispositions (again discussed by all but two). In addition, three participants discussed technical expertise as contributing significantly to their capability.

Practical management abilities were concerned with planning and organising, assessing and taking risks, organisational and political skills, leading, managing change, and getting things done. Even where participants were not responsible for managing people or significant resources, practical management skills appeared a central part of being capable. Although a common pattern emerged to what might be termed the functions of managing, the actual skills and approaches emphasised varied between participants: so that while for instance Karen emphasised multitasking and having "lots of little goals," and Mike aimed for "achievable targets" and "fielding lots of balls in the air at the same time," Gavin placed more emphasis on "systematic planning and problem-solving" and Declan a structured but flexible approach and a preference for finishing and "closing down tasks, stopping problems building up." In most cases there appeared to be a good match between the type of abilities emphasised and participants' contexts or working environments (or the way in which they had moulded their roles). As an example, Sue and Mary had both developed highly aware organisational and political skills critical to being effective in their respective public and voluntary sector roles, while Karen and Frank, while not politically unaware, emphasised skills relevant to thinking ahead and getting things done in their largely hands-on environments.

Although not all participants were most strongly motivated by the interpersonal aspects of their activities, virtually all saw the ability to get on and work effectively with people as an essential part of their capability. Empathy and sensitivity were most strongly emphasised by participants working in the health and care fields, but the ability to relate effectively was also valued highly by several of those working in business: so for instance Brian (the sales agent) commented on having "an innate feeling for others' needs," and Peter (a business owner) recognised one of his strengths was being "outgoing, popular and finding it easy to work with others." For Frank, a positive attitude to people in the face of sometimes trying situations was central to his success as a manager, while Karen (the farmer) saw "getting on with people" as a valuable asset.

In terms of intellectual or thinking abilities, participants tended to emphasise practical intelligence and creativity rather than specifically academic abilities. At the more formal end of the spectrum, Peter, Sue and Gavin commented on having "sharp" or "above average" intelligence along with a good memory for detail, while Neil mentioned the value of being a clear, logical thinker. Elaine, Karen and Peter valued their practical common sense or what Peter described as a "this will work" type of intelligence. Lateral and creative thinking, being able to "think your way around" problems were seen as critical by four participants, while Sue added the value of having the intuition and insight needed to "cut through issues." While intellectual styles varied between participants other than possibly that all had a fair measure of practical, 'get-things-done' intelligence, there was again a clear indication that the way intellect was used was well-matched to participants' contexts.

The motivations and values discussed by participants were also varied, although some common themes emerged. Six participants saw themselves as having a strong sense of purpose, focus or vocation, and another (Peter) described having an absorbing interest in his work. Although discussed explicitly only by Sue, most also displayed a strongly positive attitude including in the face of difficulties or setbacks. Energy, determination and faith featured centrally for Sue and Mary, while Sue and Gavin also referred to a love of challenge. Reflecting the differences in management style previously discussed, some participants had a preference for working in a style which was structured, single-minded or stubborn, while others emphasised a more intuitive, creative or lateral bent. Several discussed or inferred the importance of a sense of balance, particularly between work and family or personal life; for instance Sue, despite being in a senior management role in a pressured organisation, assessed her priorities as "45% work and 55% family and social." Finally, several participants expressed a strong sense of ethics or fairness which ran through their lives and work, whether in terms of commitment to a particular stance (Mary, Chris) or honesty and integrity as central to their work (Peter, Frank).

Box 3 **Karen**

Karen is the eldest daughter in a farming family. She runs the farm and an associated food processing and distribution business as deputy to her father, with the help of four regular staff. Now in her early 20s, she left school at 16 and took an apprenticeship based on her home farm, achieving NVQ levels 2 and 3 along with industry certification. She also made a start on level 4 in farm management, but gave it up due to pressure of work.

Most of Karen's development has been practical, on-the job, based on needing to get things done sometimes with limited time and resources and isolated from sources of advice or help. She sees this as contributing to her self-reliance and her abilities as a creative and lateral thinker and problem-solver, able to think her way around things and come up with practical solutions and new ideas. Another key theme in her development has been being a girl growing up with the expectation of taking over the farm; as well as lacking an obvious peer group, she feels that she has been under pressure to prove herself as a worthy heir to a greater extent than would have been the case for a boy.

Along with practical common sense and an ability to get things done, Karen sees her critical abilities as including getting on with people, an affinity for animals, forward planning, multitasking ("usually six or seven jobs in mind while doing one"), and openness to new ideas as well as being prepared to take calculated risks.

Constructing capability

Participants' accounts of being capable suggested perhaps three outer dimensions which may be representative, along with a similar number of inner dimensions. For the majority of people interviewed, capability encompasses working towards valued goals or directions; innovating or implementing change; and in some cases taking the lead (although this last is less conclusive than in Doncaster and Lester's study of doctoral candidates). It also appears to involve the application of practical management abilities or the skills to 'get things done,' including for most an aptitude for working with people, a measure of practical intelligence, and for many a sense of focus.

At a level of detail however, the actual skills and attributes of capable people appear to vary considerably, with different balances of strengths. The idea of capability as a unique personal 'envelope' of abilities appears to be supported by the study: what Doncaster & Lester (2002) have termed "a complex bundle of abilities and attributes which is personal to individual(s)… and which is exercised in equally personal ways in relevant contexts." Most though not all participants appeared to

have at least a reasonable match between this envelope and the niches they had found or developed for themselves, with evidence of both personal learning and adaptation into the work, social or domestic context, and adaptation of the context to the strengths and preferences of the individual. This points to an ecological view of capability, where there is a dynamic which involves both personal adaptation and adaptation of the environment to create a niche in which the individual is able both to contribute effectively and to self-actualise. It also suggests that the ability to engage in this dynamic and find and create appropriate niches is an important meta-ability connected with being capable.

Becoming capable

Participants' discussions of how they developed their capability varied widely, and while there were no common patterns two major themes emerged. In all cases participants discussed the value of learning from experience, whether they saw their development as relatively smooth and progressive or whether part of their experience resulted in major changes of direction. Secondly, most mentioned landmark experiences in their development which led in the short or longer term to raised awareness, increased confidence or a change of direction, and which played a major role in enhancing their capability.

Learning from experience

All the people interviewed in the study related career paths or life histories which suggested that they were effective learners from experience; even if for some this learning was not a particularly deliberate process, none were content to sit on their competence and react to events. It was not entirely clear how this propensity for experiential or self-directed learning was developed, but for some participants it appeared to be partly bound up with a need or it followed from a particular experience. In some cases an early disappointment or negative experience appears to have prompted a more active approach to learning, for instance through failing exams or "being let down by formal education" and needing to build on personal strengths (Laura, Adrian), or through an unplanned change into an occupation where active self-improvement was needed to progress (Frank). On the other hand Karen had grown up in an environment where it was necessary to think on her feet and work her way around problems, while for others such as Peter and Elaine a venture or ambition created a need for proactive learning in order to make it succeed.

Many participants emphasised the development of particular skills or areas of expertise, either as foundations for later development or as critical to being a capable practitioner. Of the first type were the technical skills and expertise mentioned by Gavin, Chris and Frank, and for Karen, learning to drive. The second included developing management skills (Peter and Chris), learning 'mind mapping' (Chris), and humorous conference speaking (Adrian). Several participants talked about gaining skills that put them "ahead of the game," ranging from Elaine learning to "deal with fear," to Chris's "self taught computer skills" in the early days of computers.

Several participants saw reflection and self- awareness as important in becoming capable. This included reflection on and learning from both mistakes and successes, as well as recognition of personal strengths and weaknesses or dislikes. In some cases these reflections allowed participants to move beyond self-limiting ways of working and start to create niches which matched their strengths, or deliberately overcome areas of weakness or doubt.

Other people were important in helping develop competence and confidence for a number of participants. For some this involved a mentor or counsellor, for example Julia's boss, an understanding GP (Sue) or a "mentor to unravel experiences" (Mary). Role models both positive and negative were also mentioned as being critical; for instance, Chris learned a lot from two managers, one a very hard but fair task manager and the other a bad staff manager, while Mary talked about meeting people of "a different design" to the one she was used to.

Box 4 **Sue**

Sue is a mother, grandmother and great grandmother; she also holds responsible positions as a director and policymaker within the health service. Her career has spanned secretarial work, nursing, midwifery, health visiting, teaching, curriculum development and health promotion. She initially qualified as a nurse, later gaining a teaching qualification, social science degree, psychology diploma and more recently a master's degree in health promotion.

Sue attributes her development, amongst other things, to a positive attitude, 'grey matter' including a photographic memory, abundant energy, excellent people skills, lateral thinking and the ability to rise to a challenge, as well as recognising and using opportunities, taking calculated risks and making use of her experience and common sense. Her career has reflected and accommodated her domestic circumstances; for example she embarked on a career change and postgraduate studies when her children were "old enough to deal with it." At times it has also been driven by crisis in her personal life. Sue states that she is "very passionate" about her job, has "great commitment" and loves to see other people develop. She attributes these traits, along with "insight into the way things work" and a belief in fairness and social justice, in part to some of the sadder realisations and experiences that life has brought to her.

Sue thinks that her career happened more by accident than design. She has been helped along the way by being in the "right place at the right time" and meeting some interesting and supportive people, including a mentor who encouraged her to refocus in mid-career. She says she would rather "wear out than rust out" and sees herself developing new skills and contributing to something she believes in well into the future.

Learning from experiences

The majority of participants identified one or more turning-points or experiences that was central to developing their capability. Two-thirds referred to experiences which involved a major challenge, hardship or learning 'the hard way'. For six participants, their maturity was underscored by loss, bereavement or personal trauma at various points in their lives; these included a speech impediment at the age of 5 (Adrian), an unplanned teenage pregnancy followed closely by the loss of her father (Sue), and developing cancer at the height of his career (Gavin). These difficult experiences appeared to be significant to the development of self-awareness for these participants (though not necessarily in their area of work) and the need to institute change for the better in their work or careers.

For other participants crisis or need in their work or personal sphere led to the development of new skills; for instance, Neil responded to growing crisis and desperation in his industry by developing essential media skills and Julia who after being made redundant learnt to communicate with a very different set of people in her new job.

Over half of the participants mentioned experiences that reinforced a growing perception of themselves as being competent, which contributed to their wider capability. Some had overcome a challenge or achieved a personal goal, for example Julia making a success of working in a "man's field" and Elaine achieving her intention of "not moving back to her country of origin" before gaining

confidence in their own abilities. Others were delighted and inspired by public acknowledgement through for example educational recognition (Sue, Gavin), increased management responsibilities (Brian, Frank) or an offer of partnership (Declan). A key for a few was to have overcome an irrational fear or other personal issues, and have their ability reinforced through continued success.

It would seem that a central part of the process of becoming capable for most participants was engagement with critical experiences which had a lasting effect on decisions and development. For some these resulted in what one described as "the lights coming on," while for others they provided a starting-point, sometimes unrecognised at the time, for more gradual change. In particular, these turning-points appeared to be associated with the growth of a more reflective and learningful approach to experience, as well as with development towards a more congruent fit between the person and their environment.

Becoming capable

The various paths taken by participants in their development suggests a common route where people first develop a measure of conventional competence, and then go on - immediately or later in their careers or lives - to develop beyond this to become more broadly capable and self-directed, moving from accepting other people's models of the world to creating their own. This accords with the idea of movement from 'map-reading' to 'map-making' discussed by Lester (1999), as well as with growth from accommodating environmental demands to changing environmental factors for a better individual fit (Hesketh & Dawes 1991). It suggests that as well as developing (and developing beyond) conventional competence, becoming capable is also concerned with learning to create a good fit between the environment and the personal capability envelope.

This may help to explain the importance of learning from experience and from *experiences*, for while formal education and training can assist in developing understanding and competence, experience is needed to enhance and extend competence and more critically to develop the kind of mature realisations which assist individuals in achieving a good fit between envelope and environment.

Issues for higher education

Although the study was not specifically concerned with participants' educational experiences, it does suggest pointers for any educational process which seeks to develop or enhance capability. The study indicates areas which might be given particular attention in seeking to develop capability, as well as process issues which can be related to the design of programmes.

Much of higher education, particularly at undergraduate level, is concerned with developing what we have termed conventional competence - academic ability, discipline-based knowledge, and where appropriate occupational or professional competence. Although this may provide a foundation on which many people develop capability, it is not in itself capability: mature capability also includes the ability to engage with and shape contexts so that competence is exercised effectively and ecologically.

The findings discussed above under 'Being capable' indicate a number of abilities which seem to be associated with capability. These include creating, innovating, or working effectively with change;

taking the lead in one form or another (not necessarily up-front or formal leadership); practical intelligence and the ability to get things done; being able to work effectively with other people; and having a sense of purpose or focus. Providing conditions which support the enhancement of these and similar abilities might be considered a first step in assisting the development of mature capability, although by itself it is probably not enough. Although it may be appropriate to consider them as an underlying curriculum, for reasons outlined below it is unlikely to be productive to treat them as a set of key skills to be 'developed' or assessed in students. On the other hand, encouraging reflection on them is likely to enhance the kind of self-awareness which appears critical to developing and exercising a mature capability 'envelope.'

Moving beyond the content of the capability envelope, the study also indicated that mature capability concerns the ability to use the envelope effectively through both adapting to the context and adapting the context. Learning to do this effectively appears to come from experience, self-awareness and engagement with issues in which there is a high personal stake. For higher education programmes to contribute to this critical area of capability development, they need to enable and assist learners to engage with past and current experiences and with aspirations and possibilities, where possible in ways which go beyond reflection and discussion into action.

While many of the experiences discussed in the interviews were serendipitous and in no way amenable to being recreated through a higher education programme, it should be reasonable to expect that post-experience programmes at least should be able to provide a trigger for self-reflection, developing a more learningful approach, and where it is appropriate, stepping back and rethinking directions. To enable this is likely to require engaging the learner in personally meaningful activity, i.e. that which engages with experience, aspirations and values. It is also likely to involve encouraging him or her to get beyond the surface of situations, question basic assumptions, and apply a critical and creative level of thought to practical situations (cf Cox 1980), as well as perhaps to see the situation from the perspective of a "stranger" (Schutz 1971). It also suggests a need for a vehicle for self-reflection and self-awareness, particularly in how the learner's envelope of abilities, strengths and preferences can be exercised and further developed.

Although certain kinds of programmes are moving in this direction, particularly those grounded in negotiated work-based learning (e.g. Doncaster 2000), action learning (Reeve 1999) and reflective practice (Brown & McCartney 1994), further movement is still needed in some of the underlying principles used in higher education if a genuine 'higher education for capability' is to emerge. These include formulating academic level and robustness in a way that is equally reflective of experiential learning as well as 'study,' and moving from 'delivery systems' (Schiff 1970) owned by the institution and designed to develop conventional competence, to 'realisation systems' (ibid) based on a partnership between institution and learner and designed to facilitate the growth and exercise of a personal envelope of capability (Lester 2002). Work-based programmes of the kind described by Stephenson & Saxton (2005), Zuber-Skerritt (2005) and Costley & Armsby (2007), where the programme takes the individual learner and his or her context as the starting-point and the 'curriculum' is essentially driven by the learner's agenda, are currently among the closest to these ideals.

Clearly, higher education at all levels has an important role to play in developing and enhancing conventional competence. However, there is also room for it to assist in the development of mature

capability, though doing so will require a slightly different way of thinking about programmes and curricula, and a willingness to consider how capable people become capable outside of the university.

About this paper

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