

# CORE GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES:

## Searching for a common language

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### Definition

Graduate Attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings developed at university, which include but go beyond the traditional curriculum.

(Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000)

### Background

With the emergence of an information society in the late 80's and early 90's came a shift of focus in the industry from technical skills to generic skills (Te Wiata, 2009). This shift, as well as pressures from employers and organisations, triggered the introduction of graduate attribute (GAs) frameworks in universities (Bridgstock, 2009; Capelli, 1995). The intended result was to deliver graduates that are better prepared for the workforce.

However, a skills gap is still reported (Benson, Morgan, & Filippaios, 2014) indicating that GAs implementation is not fully successful. Effective communication between key stakeholders could be at the root of this problem (Rigby et al., 2009). Given that each university adopted it's own set of graduate attributes, the variety of definitions and ways to categorise and implement GAs could hinder this communication process.

Thus, we set out to find a set of core graduate attributes shared by all universities in the UK, in an attempt to provide all stakeholders with a common language and framework that they can use to talk about GAs.

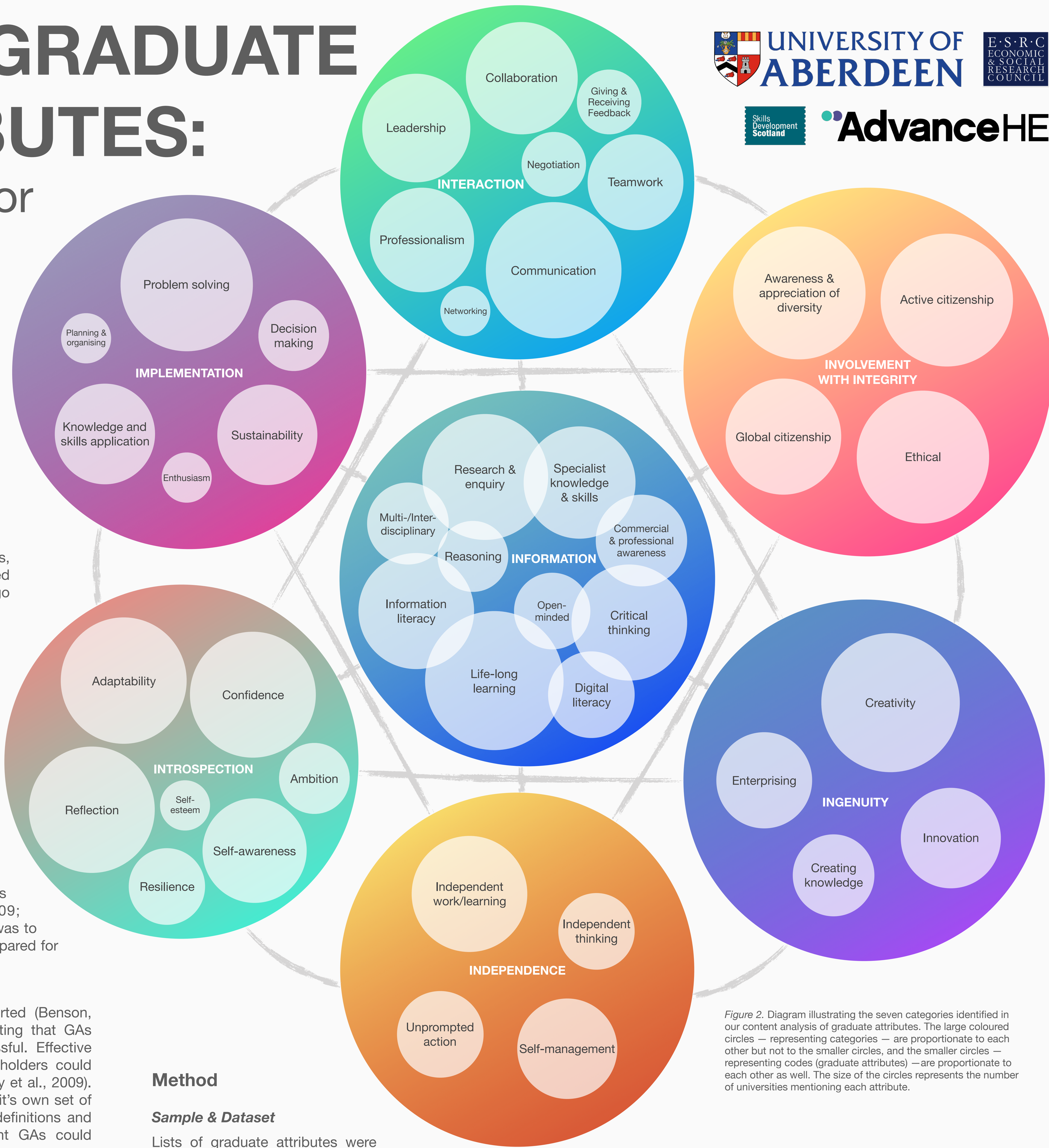
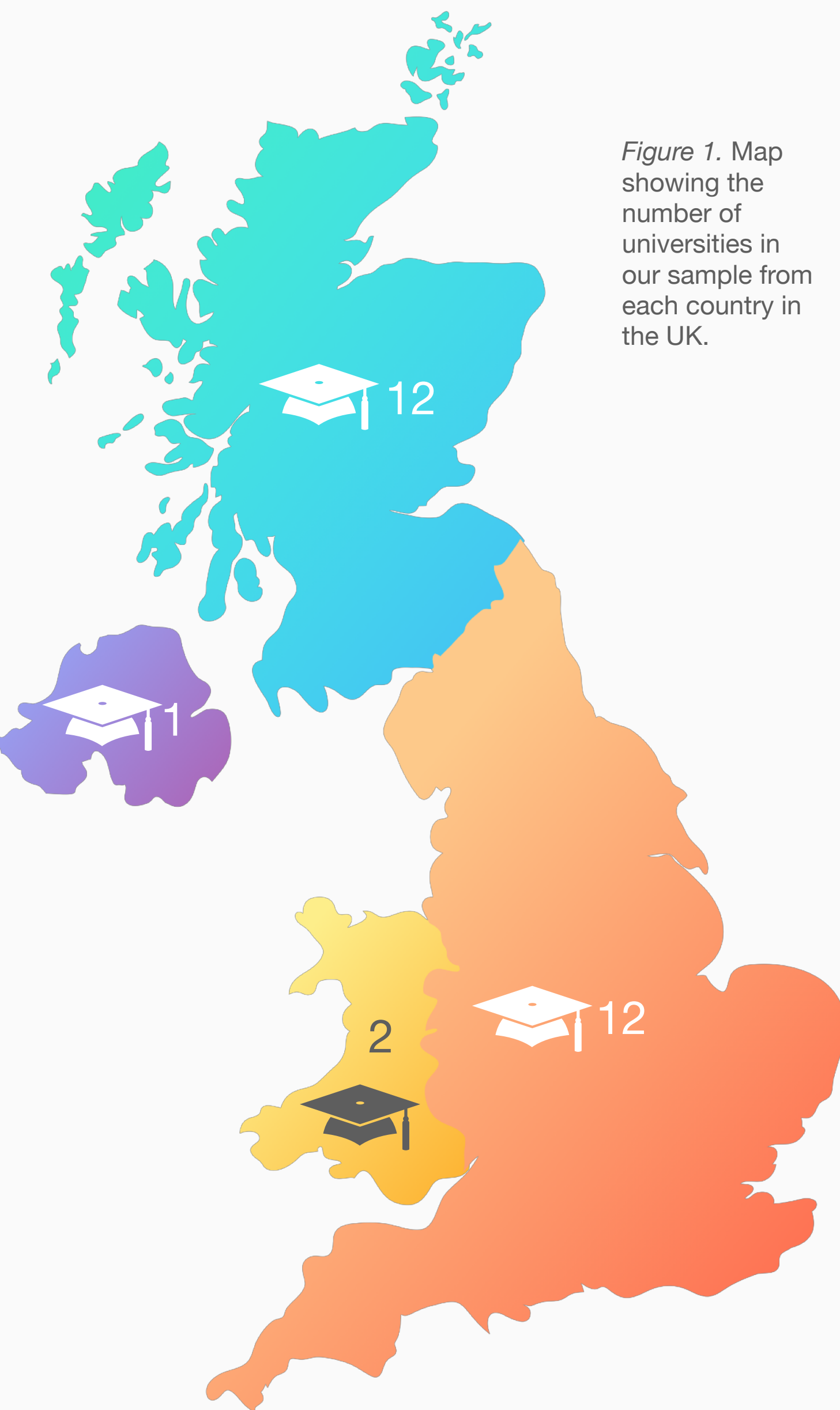


Figure 2. Diagram illustrating the seven categories identified in our content analysis of graduate attributes. The large coloured circles — representing categories — are proportionate to each other but not to the smaller circles, and the smaller circles — representing codes (graduate attributes) — are proportionate to each other as well. The size of the circles represents the number of universities mentioning each attribute.

### Method

#### Sample & Dataset

Lists of graduate attributes were collected from 27 universities in the UK to form our dataset (Figure 1).

The universities in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland were the only ones with publicly available GAs lists.

The English sample was matched to the Scottish on number of students, degree topics, and number of old and new (post-'92) institutions.

#### Content analysis

An inductive content analysis, similar to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed on the resulting dataset. Each graduate attribute was assigned a code, with similar graduate attributes sharing the same code.

**E.g.** “Possesses a breadth and depth of knowledge in their specialist area” and “Understand and respect the values, principles, methods and limitations of their discipline(s). Possess a breadth and depth of knowledge within their disciplinary area(s).” were both coded as **Specialist knowledge & skills**.

The resulting codes were then grouped into overarching themes or categories.

### Results

The content analysis helped identify 43 attributes grouped into 7 categories (Figure 2). **The analysis will be tested for inter-rater reliability.** Figure 3 shows potential differences in the focus of old vs. new universities. These differences have not yet been tested.

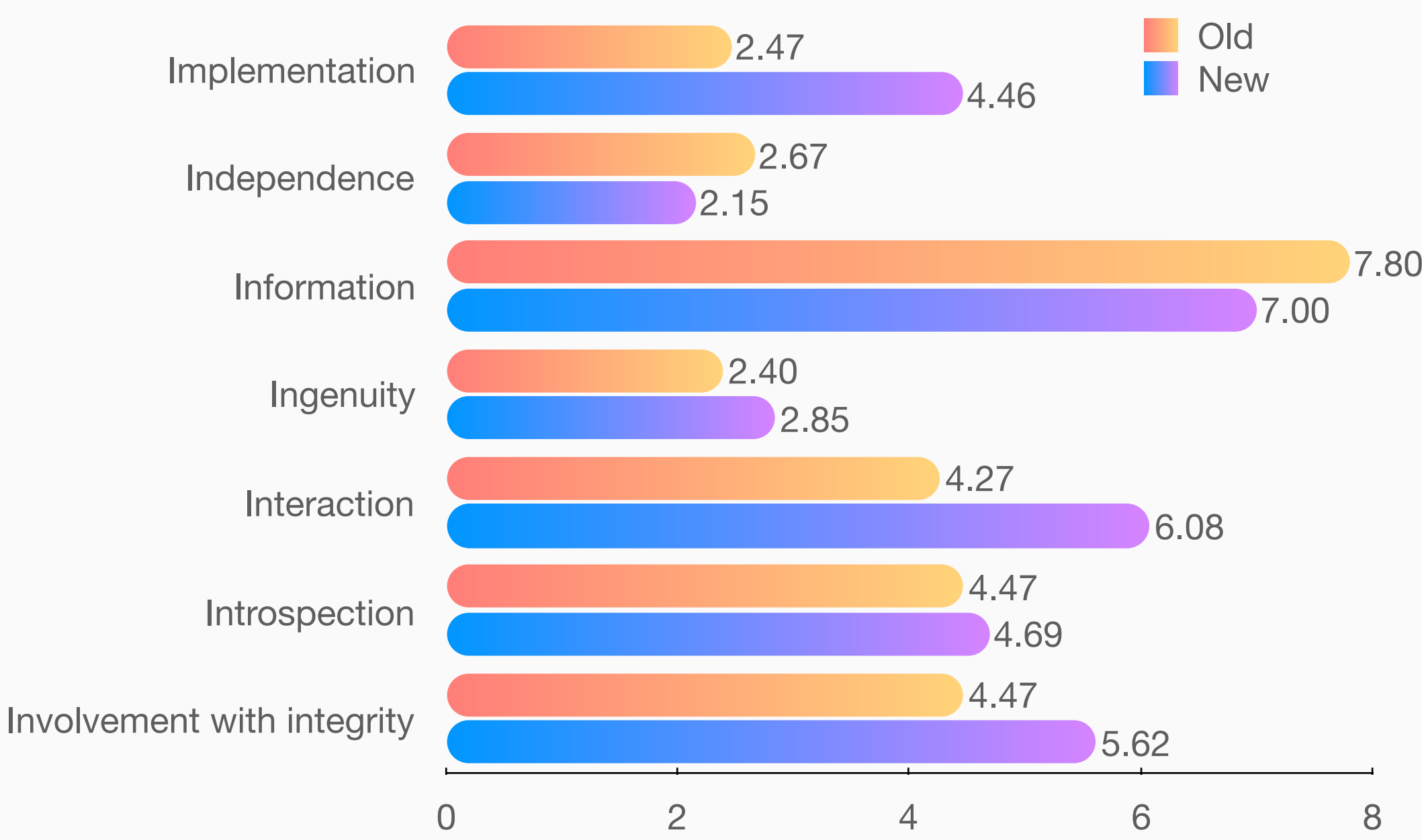


Figure 3. Average number of mentions for each theme per university, split by old and new (post-'92) institutions.

### Next step

Once good inter-rater reliability is established (a kappa coefficient of >0.8), we will conduct a focus-group study with employers, academics, students, and policy makers.

We will use the perspectives of these key stakeholders to refine our descriptions of graduate attributes as well as to check if there are any redundant or missing GAs in our model. This will inform the creation of a final model of GAs which is agreed upon and understood by all key stakeholders.

**References:**  
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