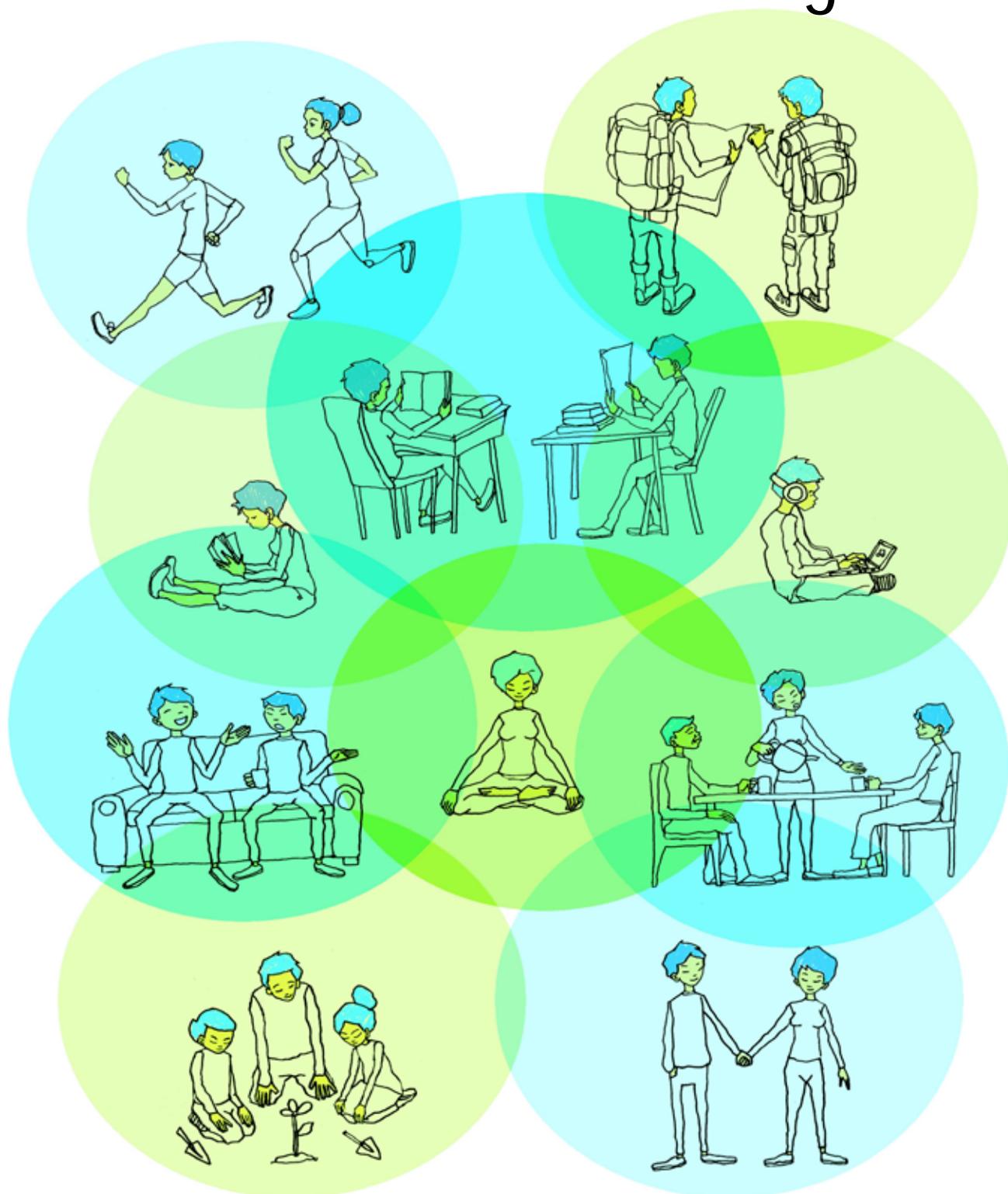


# Lifewide Learning & Education in Universities and Colleges



Edited by  
Norman Jackson & Jenny Willis  
<http://www.learninglives.co.uk/>

# CHAPTER B2

## The Edinburgh Award

*Gavin McCabe and Kirsty Stewart*

### SUMMARY

The Edinburgh Award was established in 2012 to allow the University of Edinburgh to further encourage, support and more formally recognise student achievement and learning from outside the formal curriculum.

The Award embodies a developmental process that supports our students in learning to excel, increasing their positive impact and their personal and professional growth in whatever circumstance or role they find themselves, now and in the future.

As a result, instead of having a set standard for students to achieve, the Award encourages, facilitates and rewards an approach of:

- identifying what it means to excel, both personally and for the student's current role/circumstance;
- working purposefully and strategically towards this, translating and applying learning and abilities between situations; and
- maximising the positive impact on the surrounding context (people/organisation) by encouraging students to consider and work at improving their impact.

Linking each student's Edinburgh Award experience to their interests and motivations is vital in engaging as wide a spectrum of students as possible. Each version of the Award is therefore tailored to one type of student activity, e.g. part-time work, volunteering, peer-assisted learning, sports committees, student representation, or global citizenship. In addition to supporting the resourcing and scalability strategy of the Award, this tailoring also allows the Award to support and grow local communities across the University, bringing together students and relevant staff in collaborative environments focussed on experiential learning.

These communities are co-owned by students and staff, both bringing perspectives and experience that benefit each other's learning and development. Importantly, the Award runs alongside students' activities, supporting them during these experiences, linking their learning and development across all parts of their lives, and enabling them to capitalise on this for their futures.

## BIOGRAPHY



Dr Gavin McCabe is the Employability Consultant for the University of Edinburgh where he has worked on student employability and graduate attributes since 2007. With a background in statistical epidemiology, international development, careers advice and higher education projects, he is now responsible for supporting institutional strategy and initiatives on employability and graduate attributes, as well as the development of associated local-level activities and enhancements. Through this work, he was responsible for managing the original pilot project, design and implementation of the Edinburgh Award and now maintains oversight of the Award and its strategic implementation.



Kirsty Stewart is the Edinburgh Award Coordinator at the University of Edinburgh. Coming from a background in higher education Careers Service work and offshore logistics, in 2013 she joined the University's Employability Consultancy and is now responsible for supporting the expansion, enhancement and day-to-day running of the Edinburgh Award, providing informed advice and support to academic and non-academic staff across the University and facilitating increased student uptake of the Award. As part of her extended work for the Employability Consultancy, Kirsty also supports the University's Employability Strategy Group to which the Edinburgh Award reports.

## BACKGROUND

The Edinburgh Award Project was established in the academic year of 2011/12 (AY11/12) to develop and test an Edinburgh Award that is distinctive to the University of Edinburgh (hereafter called 'the University'), allowing it to further encourage and more formally recognise student achievement and learning from outside the formal curriculum. The outcomes of the project were used to facilitate the University's considerations around full implementation of such an award.

A scalable and distinctive award that offers a quality experience to our students, encouraging and recognising meaningful development, while controlling resource

The project was structured around four main phases: research, design, implementation, and review. Early discussions with key stakeholder groups during the research phase identified a range of parameters for the Edinburgh Award (the Award). Most of these steered the content and focus of the Award such as the desire that it: helped participants to be better off than if they had not taken part, enabled participants to develop a proactive and positive outlook on



tasks and challenges, encouraged “a lifestyle not a diet” and genuinely be only one part of the University’s strategy for work on employability and graduate attributes. This last point was felt to be particularly important; while the Award is an important strand of work in this area it cannot be the only strand given the centrality of students’ academic experiences to their employability and development.

Two of the parameters identified during the research phase impacted significantly on the overall design and structure of the Edinburgh Award, namely that:

- the Award should be scalable to all students who want to pursue it; and
- the Award should only require significant resource to set up each version, and thereafter these should only need routine development and support.

Research into relevant practice elsewhere in the sector surfaced key learning points that were also instrumental in the development of the Edinburgh Award. These included topics such as: administration approaches, award structures and contents, strategies for engaging students during an award process, promotion, accessibility, assessment/validation and the impact of the award leader on overall success.

Outcomes from the design and implementation phases of the original Edinburgh Award Project are covered in subsequent sections. Overlapping with the final review phase of the Edinburgh Award Project was the development and implementation of a new expansion phase for the Award in line with aspirations set in the University’s Strategic Plan 2012-16; (see the ‘Expansion’ section for details).

The original pilot project produced a series of direct, tangible outputs, not least the establishment of the Edinburgh Award as an ongoing part of the University’s provision. In addition to these, the Award itself has provided a mechanism for engaging with new areas and individuals on issues related to the support of students’ employability and graduate attributes. Furthermore, local staff involved in the Award across the University have reported that working on developing a tailored version of the Award for their student activity has enhanced their provision for the underlying activity.

*“Even if the Award did not continue, we would now continue to use the changes we have put in place they’ve been so useful”*  
Local Award leader

## DESIGN AND APPROACH

The key design principle for the Edinburgh Award is for a supported developmental and reflective process of learning to excel, delivered through accredited locally tailored versions that are aligned with institutional frameworks.

The structure of the Edinburgh Award emerged from the original pilot project; while there have been minor revisions and enhancements since this time, evaluation findings continue to support the original design concept. This section provides a summary of the design and approach of the Edinburgh Award, broken into four main areas:

- the aims of the Award and how they links with the University's Graduate Attributes Framework;
- the institutional approach to running the Award;
- the typical journey for a student undertaking a version of the Award; and
- tailoring and accrediting new versions of the Award.

## Award aim and link with institutional graduate attributes

### *Aim*

Instilling a lifewide and lifelong approach to learning in higher education students is essential given the changing landscape facing them. Once in higher education, how do we encourage and enable students to have impact and excel in the situations they find themselves, to be better as a result of being at university? How do we prepare them for the point when they will finish their studies and need to use what they have learned and developed here and excel in new contexts?

At the University of Edinburgh, these challenges and aspirations have fundamentally shaped the aim and focus of the Edinburgh Award. Regardless of their starting point, the Edinburgh Award has been developed with the aim of helping our students learn to excel, increase their impact and stand out from the crowd in whatever circumstance or role they find themselves, now and in the future. Therefore, instead of having a fixed and defined standard for students to achieve, the Award encourages, facilitates and rewards an approach of:

- identifying what it means to excel, both personally and for the current role/circumstance;
- working purposefully and strategically towards this, translating and applying learning and abilities between situations; and
- maximising the positive impact on the surrounding context - people/organisation(s).

In addressing this aim, the Edinburgh Award adopts a tailored approach to produce purposeful and transferable learning that is deeper and stronger, helping our students plan and achieve targeted personal learning and growth as they undertake a particular activity. While the Award is tailored to students' individual experiences, the development of an underlying process of learning to excel is consistent, giving the participants a tool that they can subsequently apply in any circumstance. While all students will be taken through the three aspects outlined above (identifying what it means to excel, working strategically towards this, and maximising impact), those on a peer mentoring version of the Award, for example, will be supported to do this in a way that focuses explicitly on the skills and abilities required as a peer mentor, the challenges encountered in this role and the positive impact that can be achieved.

With its strong emphasis on reflection and learning from experience, the Edinburgh Award seeks to increase the value and impact of any activity that offers student participants the potential for personal and professional development. Students engage in many different activities during their time at university but often fail to fully capitalise on the development opportunity these activities offer; the Award seeks to address this. By enhancing self-



awareness the Award also seeks to increase the impact on the other activities a student is involved in, including their studies, helping them to surface how learning and development achieved in one part of their life relates to other activities in which they are involved. This ability to relate and translate learning between contexts and to synthesise learning across contexts is important to our students' ongoing success, helping produce students with stronger and more flexible attributes.

### *Alignment with the University's Graduate Attributes Framework*

Whatever it means to excel, either in a specific context or for an individual, at its core the Edinburgh Award supports students' approaches to:

- their wider learning while at the University of Edinburgh and integrating this into a cohesive whole;
- their own development and taking control of this, confidently articulating their progress on the Award and through their studies; and
- engaging with and positively impacting on those around them, through the activities they are involved in while on the Award and beyond.

Each of these aligns with the three overarching attributes of the University's Graduate Attributes Framework: *Enquiry and Lifelong Learning, Aspiration and Personal Development, Outlook and Engagement* respectively. Further details are available at: [www.employability.ed.ac.uk/GraduateAttributes.htm](http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/GraduateAttributes.htm).

Within the Edinburgh Award, locally tailored lists of graduate attributes form the basis of discussions around what excellence looks like and act as a catalyst for students' thinking about their own skills development. This link to an institutional framework and associated strategies plays a core role in the approach and principles of the Award.

### Institutional approach and governance

The Edinburgh Award works on something similar to a franchise model - a centralised set of principles and guidelines (the Award Framework) interpreted locally to produce tailored versions of the Award into which students can opt. The Award is designed to be open to all students: undergraduate or postgraduate, taught or research, full-time or part-time.

All locally-tailored versions of the Award are run by relevant academic and non-academic units. Each version is based around a particular student activity or type of activity that generally already exists and is supported by staff. Activities for which students already receive academic credit are excluded but the scope of the Award includes both co- and extra-curricular activities that are paid and unpaid, e.g. being a volunteer in the local community, a peer-assisted learning facilitator for one of the University's academic schools, a Resident Assistant, a student ambassador or gaining work experience. The Award can, however, also be implemented in instances associated with the academic experience where the Award recognises aspects of student learning and development that are not rewarded by academic credit.

The Edinburgh Award is overseen by the Edinburgh Award Advisory Group (EAAG), which reports to the University's Employability Strategy Group, accrediting all local academic or non-academic units that deliver a version of the Award. EAAG is also responsible for ongoing quality assurance and enhancement of the Award, working to ensure commonality across local versions of the Award and consistency with the Award Framework.

Through the Edinburgh Award Manager and the Edinburgh Award Coordinator, EAAG provides consultancy to those wishing to set-up a local version of the Award - helping staff identify how the Award Framework might best be interpreted locally, seeking a solution that minimises any additional work but maximises the benefit to both students and staff. Once initial plans for a local version of the Award have been approved and the local unit/staff member(s) accredited by EAAG, annual reports to EAAG are required, along with periodic reviews in order to ensure and enhance quality.

Feeding into EAAG, the Edinburgh Award Representatives Network (EARN) is a cross-institutional community of practice that discusses practical issues, innovations and challenges. EARN comprises the staff responsible for running the local versions of the Award (Award leaders).

## Student journey

The Award Framework describes a common experience for Award participants structured around a basic reflective cycle, actively engaging participants at the beginning, middle and end of their time of involvement with the Award, each version typically running within an academic year.

The overall student journey during the Edinburgh Award is broken down into three main stages. The initial phase is focussed on setting aspirations - helping students identify and understand what it means to excel in a particular activity or role, what that means for them personally, what their own priorities are and planning for these. During this phase students are helped to consider what excellence looks like for their role/activity, producing a tailored set of graduate attributes relevant to that particular setting. This enables them to formulate plans of how to work towards this excellence through the development of their skills and purposefully increasing their impact, translating learning between the different contexts of their lives.

Towards the middle of the student's time on the Edinburgh Award, the focus shifts to the progress students believe they are making; helping them to identify their development and the progress they are making towards their goals, how this has been achieved, and any alternative approaches that might be used to tackle the challenges faced. The reflective process provides an opportunity to revise initial action plans.

Towards the end of their involvement in the Edinburgh Award, students focus on the progress they have made during the Award and how they have achieved this - appreciating their progress, verbally communicating it and planning how it can be used in the future. Questions



at this stage focus on such matters as:

- 'how has operating in that particular context/activity impacted upon them?'; and
- 'how have they impacted on the context?'

This stage of the process seeks to capture personal growth, consolidate learning and encourage learners to look to the future.

Throughout the Edinburgh Award, students in a particular version of the Award discuss with each other their reflections on their progress and the challenges they face. Students are also supported by staff to develop the necessary tools to actively plan, monitor and articulate their development. Using mechanisms appropriate to each local setting, staff monitor students' engagement and progress during their Award journey. Following these three stages of reflection, students make final submissions that capture their overall development, learning and impact - the format of these is frequently written but in some versions of the Award students are given free rein to choose the format.

### *Formal recognition*

On successful completion of the Edinburgh Award students are presented with a certificate from the University and their achievement is recognised on their HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Record). For most students, their experience of the Edinburgh Award will start and finish within a calendar year. In light of this and the fact that each version of the Award is tailored to a particular student activity, students can and do amass multiple entries of the Edinburgh Award on their HEAR, each entry indicating the academic session and setting in which they achieved it.

## Tailoring and accrediting new versions of the Edinburgh Award

### *The concept of tailoring*

The quality of the student journey is at the heart of any version of the Edinburgh Award. The principles and guidelines in the Award Framework are interpreted locally to produce tailored versions of the Award into which students can opt. Flexibility is permitted in how local units comply with the Award Framework, helping to ensure local relevance while retaining a focus on experiential and constructivist learning, community interactions, and peer-to-peer feedback. Within this environment, participation in a particular activity that is recognised by the Award lays the foundation of a student's Award experience and is the basis for fostering a local community with the associated staff and other students participating in that version of the Award. When participating in the Award, students will engage in a combination of face-to-face group sessions, individual-but-supported reflective exercises, and online community activities. For example, students on the International Work Experience version of the Award take part in face-to-face sessions before and after their time away, and while away engage in a self-directed mid-point reflection and contribute to peer-to-peer online discussions. While flexibility is permitted in how each version of the Award is delivered, an element of group work is mandatory to encourage local communities amongst staff and students.

### *Accrediting new versions of the Award*

The accreditation process for staff wishing to set up a new version of the Edinburgh Award spans the entire first implementation of that Award and concludes with an evaluation period that steers revisions for subsequent implementations.

During this accreditation, staff are required to complete documentation including a locally-tailored version of the Award Framework and session plans which provide detail about exactly how the Award leader intends to run the Edinburgh Award. Staff are supported during this process (primarily through the Edinburgh Award Coordinator), with advice and consultancy given on how best to balance staff resource and quality of the student experience on the Award.

This involvement of the Edinburgh Award Coordinator and the Award Manager in the development and approval of the plans for each version of the Award help ensure the same learning environment principles inform all versions. These principles include the importance of establishing a learning environment with a focus on experiential and constructivist learning, where both successes and 'failures' are viewed as positive learning experiences, where a collaborative and peer-to-peer approach is consistently evident, and where appropriate challenging and encouraging are equally valued.

This documentation detailing plans must be completed before an Award leader is able to begin implementing a version of the Edinburgh Award. Periodic meetings between the Award leader and the Edinburgh Award Coordinator also take place throughout the initial implementation phase of a new version of the Award to ensure staff delivering the Award continue to be on track with their plans and align with the underpinning principles of the Award. Once the initial implementation and evaluation of a new version of the Award has been completed, the frequency of these meetings decreases although periodic contact is maintained and annual evaluation required.

## EVALUATION

The final review phase of the Edinburgh Award Project evaluated the Award in detail, exploring the extent to which the original parameters and expectations of the Award were addressed. While some areas for potential enhancement were surfaced and woven into the next year's implementation plan for the Award, the evaluation did not identify any areas of fundamental concern, reaffirming that the underlying principles, structure and approach of the Award were sound. As a result the Edinburgh Award was mainstreamed within the University's provision.

Student questionnaire responses
· 98.9% would recommend doing the Edinburgh Award to a friend
· 97.2% felt they were better off having done the Edinburgh Award

The process of ongoing evaluation and continuous refinement of both the Edinburgh Award overall and of individual versions of the Award is a requirement of the Award. The annual evaluation addresses multiple aspects of the Award, including the structure of the Award, the

student experience, the impact of the Award on participants and the impact on the underlying provision and activity. Multiple mechanisms are used for the evaluation, depending on the user group involved, including electronic surveys, one-to-one interviews and focus groups. Some of the main findings from evaluation that has occurred over the current lifetime of the Award are given below.

## Award structure

One of the intentions at the outset of designing the Edinburgh Award was that it should align to the University's culture and principles. Feedback from colleagues running versions of the Edinburgh Award and from senior management continue to indicate that the Award is felt to be both distinctive and culturally appropriate to the University, with a focus on learning, excellence and local determinism in delivery.

Furthermore, student and staff evaluation data indicates that students, including those who initially did not feel they particularly needed it, appreciate and value the developmental process offered through the Edinburgh Award; for example, 97.2% of student respondents to an annual evaluation survey felt they were better off as a result of having done the Award.

One concern when the Edinburgh Award was established was that the only students who would participate would be the 'usual suspects'. However, staff continue to report that a significant proportion of students undertaking the Award are not those who would usually engage in activities around employability and personal/professional development.

Additionally, one of the intentions of the Edinburgh Award is that it directly impacts all students, not just those undertaking the Award. This is a challenging aspiration and multiple approaches are used, for example: local staff use language connected to graduate attributes with all of their students, including non-Award students; concepts associated with personal and professional development and employability are used by staff when promoting their student activities (separate to promotion of the Award); and frequently the reflective processes of the Award have been built into the underlying provision offered by staff to all their students. While this is a difficult area to evaluate, evidence to date suggests that collectively these and other strategies appear to be building the impact of the Award beyond only the participants.

One requirement of the Edinburgh Award which was influential in its design is that there is only significant resource required at set up. Almost all versions report that, after initial set-up and some revisions, the Award demands limited staff resource, simply requiring routine development and support, and that the Award has already become an integral part of the local Award leaders' roles. Where more resource is required, this typically is influenced by the level of staff-to-student contact that was already in place locally and partly also by the local Award leader's familiarity with personal and professional development work in general. Continued and new implementations of the Edinburgh Award for AY13/14, and sustained levels of staff interest in implementing the Award elsewhere in the University community, continue to reaffirm the Award's model for scalability. To ensure this continues, work will be

done in AY13/14 to prepare for further increases in scale of the Award, investigating delivery alternatives for larger-scale versions of the Award.

## Student experience and impact on participants

Overall student evaluation has been very positive with 98.9% of student respondents saying they would recommend the Edinburgh Award to a friend and 97.2% feeling they were better off having done the Award. Further detail is provided below on some of the main evaluation outcomes relating to student motivations for taking part, the development the Award provides students, the learning environment and the impact the Award has on the underlying activity.

### *Initial motivations and student development*

As suspected, and hoped for, students cited several motivations for initially taking part in the Edinburgh Award including enhanced CVs, additional recognition of their efforts, opportunity for self-development, and the limited additional work required. However, they also reported growth in confidence, increased self-awareness, social benefits, recruitment preparation, growth in their attributes/role performance, being able to translate learning between the contexts of their lives, and the value of their learning community. This transition from valuing recognition to valuing the process is a vital part of the Award journey.

Award leaders indicate that the Edinburgh Award provides development opportunity for students over and above that gained through the underlying student activity. Students report notable improvements through the Award in their: self-confidence, self-awareness, ability to capitalise on their strengths, ability to identify the attributes required to excel in a role or activity, ability to purposefully work on enhancing these attributes, confidence in tackling new challenges, ability to confidently communicate and provide evidence of their development, and ability to maximise their impact. Overall, 89.4% of student respondents thought they would use some of the reflective and planning approaches developed during the Award in their future life.

*'I was already volunteering, so it seemed like a good way to have this achievement recognised, whilst also allowing me to have a structured way of reflecting on what I was gaining from the experience.'*

*'In the end, the actual Award mattered little in comparison to its journey. The entire self-reflective process helped me learn more about myself as a person, something which is quite hard to get done!'*

*'I learned a lot about my strengths and weaknesses, and really improved in some target areas. I feel I now have a lot more skills, and the ability to explain these to other people.'*

*'The Award greatly helped me to develop and gain skills and confidence in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.'*

*'I got a lot more out of it than I anticipated. The facilitator was great in increasing our confidence with the 3 seminars and encouraging us to reflect on our developments by looking back at the goals we had set and seeing how far we'd come.'*

### *Learning environment*

The Edinburgh Award encourages and facilitates the development of a learning environment which combines practically-based, peer-to-peer sessions and discussions, together with using a discursive approach to learning and helping students see the link between their underlying



activity and their own employability. Evaluation shows that, through strategies relevant to each local setting, staff seek to provide this environment, in addition to one where students feel making mistakes and learning from failure is as equally useful as learning from successes. This links with findings from student evaluation data.

## Impact on the underlying provision and activity

Evaluation has identified that staff running local versions of the Edinburgh Award found that thinking and working through the Award Framework has helped enhance and sometimes formalise their underlying provisions around the student activity. Reasons cited included the opportunity to step back and to discuss and reflect on their whole provision. It also enabled them to explore the purpose of particular student interactions and focus on the benefit to individual students. Furthermore, many staff have reported that as a result of the Edinburgh Award students are more engaged with their own learning, able to recognise the wider context of their development and better able to channel their strengths into their activity.

*'The Edinburgh Award allowed us to engage with students in a way that was truly relevant to them. It had tangible outcomes for both the students and us.'*

Local Award leader

## EXPANSION

The pilot of the Edinburgh Award in AY11/12 saw the Award formed around four different activities evenly split over academic and non-academic settings. Following its initial success, the Award expanded from being available through these four versions to eighteen versions in AY12/13, and then to thirty in AY13/14. This expansion has sought to maintain a balanced spread of activity types around which the Award is wrapped, whilst also taking account of particularly high-volume activities. The number of students completing the Award rose from 127 in the AY11/12 pilots to 411 in AY12/13; the AY13/14 students are yet to complete the Award. The distribution of the AY12/13 students across the University's Colleges almost exactly reflected the distribution total student population for AY12/13.

Growth from 127 recipients through four different versions in AY11/12, to 411 recipients across 18 versions in AY12/13.

Continued expansion into AY13/14 and beyond, with a particular focus on maintaining both breadth of access and overall quality.

Going forward, as well as planning to increase the scale of the Edinburgh Award, particular importance is placed on continuing to ensure a spread of Award activities across academic and non-academic settings with the intention that a broad spectrum of potential interest areas for students are covered. This balance will help reinforce the importance of all parts of student life to students' overall development. Maintaining quality within each version of the Award, and overall, is critical and will continue to be prioritised as the scale of the Award increases.



## FUTURE

The initial expansion of the Edinburgh Award targeted some of the major activities in which University of Edinburgh students engage. Expansion of the Award will continue during AY14/15 but growth will likely slow, at least in the short- to medium-term, as further focus is given to ensuring diversity and equality of access. Evaluation work will continue for all versions of the Award, both new and existing, supplementing reviews of the Award's overall direction of travel and development.

At the same time, effort will be given to ensuring continued quality enhancement as expansion continues and to making links with wider institutional strategies. Areas of focus are likely to include: student and staff publicity, enhanced peer assessment and feedback, staff development opportunities for local Award leaders, and standardisation of core resources and templates.

## CONCLUSIONS

The success of the Edinburgh Award and alignment with institutional strategies mean that it has quickly become a significant and established part of the University of Edinburgh's provision. While this success is not taken for granted, it is proving to have the desired impact on our students. With its focus on reflection, on translating learning between contexts and on purposefully developing participants' skills and impact, the Award supports students to develop and apply tools that achieve a truly lifewide approach (Jackson, this volume) to their learning and development; tools that can be flexibly applied time and again, in a variety of contexts, over their lifetime. Evidence to date shows that the Award is enabling students to integrate their learning across the contexts of their lives and helping them learn to excel, increase their impact and stand out from the crowd in whatever circumstance or role they find themselves, now and in the future.

## REFERENCE

Jackson, N. J. (2014) Lifewide Learning and Education in Universities & Colleges: Concepts and Conceptual Aids, in N.J.Jackson and J. Willis (Eds) *Lifewide Learning and Education in Universities and Colleges*. Chapter A1 Available at: <http://www.learninglives.co.uk/e-book.html>

