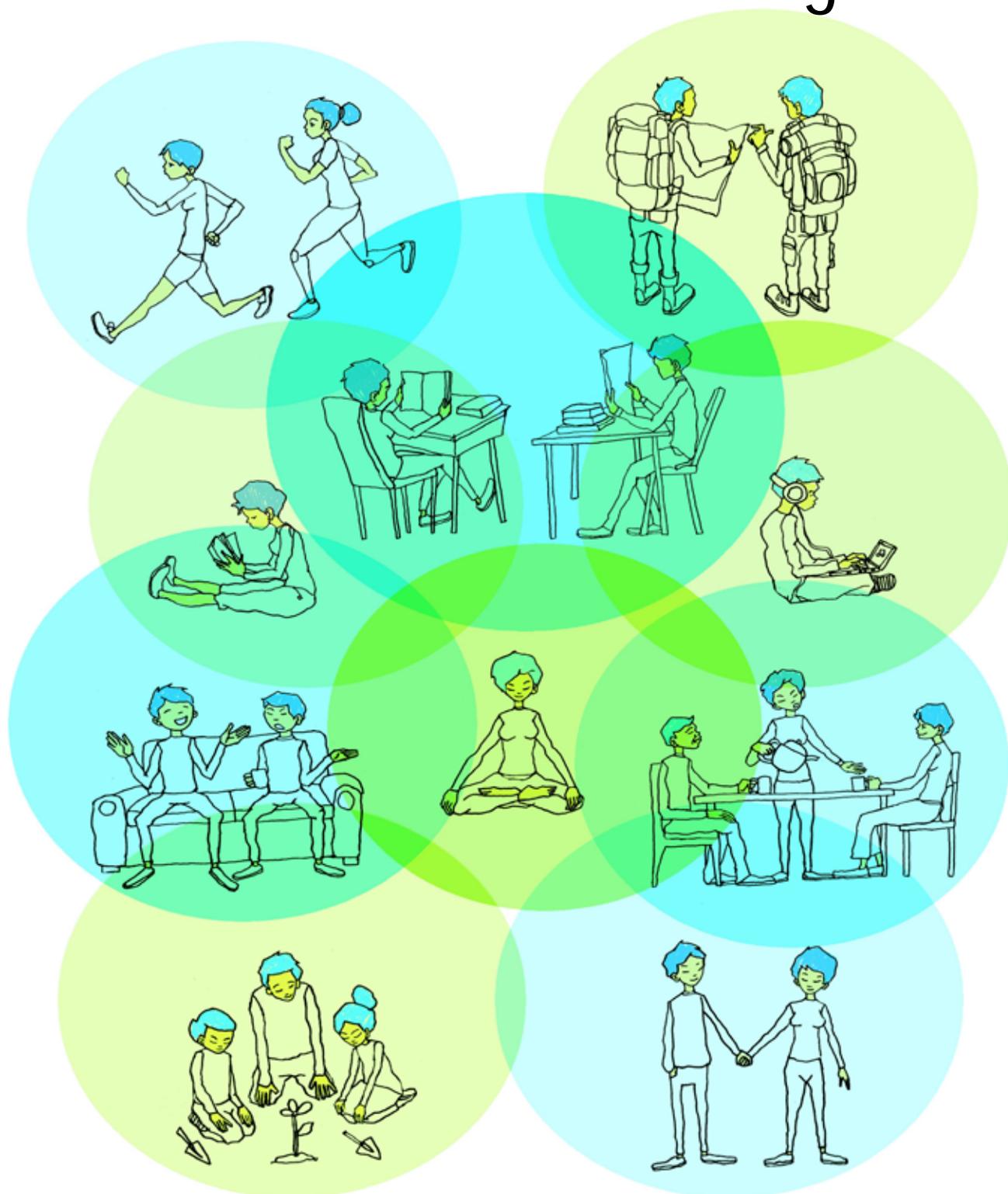


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CHAPTER B3

The 'STAR' Award: Recognising Student Learning & Contribution to University Life

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SUMMARY

The encouragement of the development of a set of graduate attributes to support students' learning in the formal academic curriculum is a common approach in universities. This chapter describes the University of Aberdeen's 'STAR' (Students Taking Active Roles) Award that recognises and rewards students in respect of their development of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes, through informal, co-curricular, lifewide learning activity. The Award recognises three categories of co-curricular activity: Students' Association sports clubs and societies; on-campus peer support roles; and volunteering work affiliated with the University. The following account shares our experience of establishing and running the Award and illustrates the University's reframed approach to promoting and valuing student learning and development gained through experiences outside as well as inside the credit-bearing academic curriculum.

BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Joy Perkins is Educational & Employability Development Adviser at the University of Aberdeen; her post is co-located within the University's Careers Service and the Centre for Academic Development. Her work within the Careers Service is student-facing and focuses on the development of the co-curriculum; this includes leading the development of a range of employability-enhancing initiatives such as the University's Skills Award and the integration of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes in the co-curriculum. In the Centre for Academic Development her work concentrates on developing a more employability-focused approach to the curriculum. Prior to taking up this post in 2007 she held academic positions as a Microbiologist at the University of Huddersfield (1994-2003) and the University of Aberdeen (2003-2007). In both positions she supported students in a range of work-related learning opportunities including work placements, transferable skills development and personal development planning.



Peter Fantom has been Head of the Careers Service at the University of Aberdeen since 2006, during which time he has led the modernisation of the Careers Service as part of the University's Curriculum Reform Project. He played a central role overseeing the establishment of a bespoke co-curricular skills award which encourages students to reflect on their acquisition of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes. His many accomplishments also include launching curriculum-based employability modules, enhancing enterprise and entrepreneurship activities and developing work placement and career mentoring opportunities.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The University of Aberdeen was the first UK University to undertake a comprehensive review to enhance the student learning experience and make deep changes to its entire curriculum. The overhaul of the curriculum commenced with the University undertaking an extensive review and consultation process to modernise Aberdeen degrees to ensure they matched the needs of graduates and employers. After extensive reflection and widespread consultation within and beyond the University, the [Final Report of the Curriculum Commission \(2008\)](#) was published. The Report set out a range of proposals to modify the structure, content, delivery and flexibility of our degrees and other awards to ensure that they addressed the needs of leavers, employers and other stakeholders. The plans the University implemented in 2010 provide students with enhanced opportunities to become academically excellent, more intellectually flexible and more committed to personal development. A key aspect of the reform was the development of a set of [Aberdeen-specific graduate attributes](#) (Figure 1).

The attributes have been developed to encourage students to view university education as a means to develop independent thought and scholarly enquiry, and encourage students to pursue these beyond their university life. Engagement of students through an extended portfolio of co-curricular opportunities is another key feature of our review process to enhance the student learning experience. This approach has helped develop a culture that recognises the potential for enhancing students' learning by valuing learning derived from the entire higher education experience. The University, through its curriculum review, has now created the means to recognise and value students' graduate attribute development and their informal, co-curricular lifewide learning on-campus, through establishing the [STAR \(Students Taking Active Roles\) Award](#).

Figure 1 The four main areas of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes: Academic Excellence, Critical Thinking and Effective Communication, Learning & Personal Development and Active Citizenship

Academic excellence	Critical thinking and effective communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth and extensive knowledge, understanding and skills at internationally-recognised levels in their chosen discipline(s); • A breadth of knowledge, understanding and skills beyond their chosen discipline(s); • An ability to participate in the creation of new knowledge and understanding through research and inquiry; • A contextual understanding of past and present knowledge and ideas; • An intellectual curiosity and a willingness to question accepted wisdom and to be open to new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A capacity for independent, conceptual and creative thinking; • A capacity for problem identification, the collection of evidence, synthesis and dispassionate analysis; • A capacity for attentive exchange, informed argument and reasoning; • An ability to communicate effectively for different purposes and in different contexts; • An ability to work independently and as part of a team; • A diverse set of transferable and generic skills
Learning and personal development	Active citizenship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An openness to, and an interest in, life-long learning through directed and self-directed study; • An awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses; • A capacity for self reflection, self discovery and personal development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An awareness and appreciation of ethical and moral issues; • An awareness and appreciation of social and cultural diversity; • An understanding of social and civic responsibilities, and of the rights of individuals and groups; • An appreciation of the concepts of enterprise and leadership in all aspects of life; • A readiness for citizenship in an inclusive society

The STAR Award supports and values learning and development outside the academic curriculum because it:

- illustrates an aspect of university activity designed to enhance the student experience
- exemplifies effective interaction between the University and the Students' Association
- represents, in its expanded form, an outcome of implementation of an important aspect of our Curriculum Reform Project, including acquisition of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes
- has clear connections with our ongoing work on enhancing the employability of our students
- illustrates how we work with employers and voluntary groups outside the University
- demonstrates how we adapt and adopt good practice actively sought from other institutions
- provides opportunities for students to develop enterprise and entrepreneurship skills and experience
- highlights work in progress from which we continue to learn and develop.

Reframing our co-curricular perceptions

There is a range of stimuli, both internal and external, which have driven the development of the STAR Award. Specifically, these drivers are the:

- *Curriculum Reform Project*: which emphasises the importance of the entire student experience and the enhancement of student employability through the co-curriculum.
- *Scottish Funding Council*: including recent strategic funding to develop graduate employability, and the 'Learning to Work' initiatives.
- *Students*: demand identified through previous Students' Association co-curricular initiatives and the current, competitive *graduate employment market* and *employer needs*.

Our approach to developing the skills and competencies that employers seek in new graduates accords with the outcomes of The Burgess Group Final Report (2007), and the need to do justice to the full range of student experiences by allowing a wider recognition of achievement (Muldoon, 2009). The STAR Award helps recognise and value the wider picture of a student's wider learning and achievements thus both contextualising and taking some of the focus off the degree classification, which is highlighted in the Burgess Report, 2012.

THE 'STAR' AWARD

Developing the Award

Before the University decided to embark upon a scheme to recognise the non-academic contribution of students, it was important to learn about similar developments in other higher education institutions. At the time it was also prudent for the University to consider a number of key issues, such as what type of recognition would the University bestow? What types of activities should be included? What evidence would be required to ensure that students have undertaken the activities and to a reasonable standard? In order to start answering these and other questions, a desk-based study was commissioned. As part of this study, various co-

curricular schemes employed by other UK universities were investigated. A briefing paper was produced to summarise the research. The paper also contained several key recommendations including one for a pilot non-academic recognition scheme for Students' Association post-holders.

Since the initial small-scale pilot, the key strategic driver for our evolving co-curricular award has been the University's Curriculum Reform Project, which places emphasis on the entire student experience and the enhancement of student employability through the co-curriculum. Since 2008 and during the various stages of the Award's development, a systematic review to identify good practice and areas for improvement has been conducted with various stakeholders. Many new ideas have been generated, new directions taken, and refinements made. Focus groups have proved particularly effective to gather stakeholder feedback and have led to a wide range of developments, including establishing an employer-led elective menu of skills development workshops for students, introduced in 2012-3. The current up-scaled and enhanced Aberdeen STAR Award draws upon aspects of interactions with other institutions, but also aims to offer students a co-curricular award which is institutionally distinct (Table 1).

Table 1 Distinctive aspects of the Aberdeen STAR Award framework include:

- Bespoke competency-based interview assessment framework to monitor student achievement of Aberdeen-specific Graduate Attributes.
- Hierarchical assessment framework - Bronze, Silver and Gold Awards, designed to encourage ongoing student engagement with the Award.
- Use of an ePortfolio as both a presentational and reflective tool for students to record their co-curricular learning and development.
- Employer participation throughout the Award.
- Strong partnerships within and beyond the University to enhance the Award.

Organisation and governance

Since 2010, day-to-day support for the Award has been provided by the STAR Award Project Officer who is based within the Careers Service. Support is provided in various ways including: responding to general and specific enquiries by email, telephone or in-person, provision of induction and skills workshops, assessing students, liaising with employers to support the Award and supporting the ongoing development of the Award. Having a dedicated person to keep in touch with 200-300 students each academic year and keep them connected to the Award is an important element in improving student attrition rates.

The STAR Award Steering Group was also established in 2011 and meets regularly to manage the up-scaling, enhancement and evaluation of the co-curricular project, playing a key role in implementing the STAR Award model approved at the Curriculum Reform Implementation Board in March 2009. The Group consists of members from the Careers Service, the Students' Association and Registry, and benefits from the involvement of employer representatives from the Careers Service Employer Board.

Award Framework

The STAR Award is an example of the way the University's Careers Service works with the Students' Association to enhance the student learning experience at Aberdeen. It seeks to engage and support students involved in defined co-curricular activities and to recognise their

achievements in those activities.

The specific objectives of the Award are to:

- Recognise and value the co-curricular contributions of students, both on-campus activities and those externally linked to the University.
- Develop students' self-awareness of their skills and competencies, specifically their achievement of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes.
- Enhance students' understanding of how to effectively present their skills, competencies and experiences to graduate employers.

The Award provides students with a structured framework to understand and identify their skills and attribute development outside the classroom and within the activities that they are already undertaking. A student successfully completing the STAR Award is required to:

- Participate in a specified Students' Association sports club or society, an on-campus peer support role or community/voluntary work affiliated with the University.
- Register for a STAR Award level - Bronze, Silver or Gold.
- Complete two mandatory workshops on skills development and interview techniques.
- Document co-curricular experiences and learning with appropriate evidence.
- Maintain an ePortfolio-based reflective record of activity and a skills audit.
- Participate in at least one elective personal development workshop.
- Undertake an end-of-award assessed competency-based interview to monitor achievement of [Aberdeen Graduate Attributes](#).

The STAR Award provides a foundation for ongoing skills development, enabling students to recognise transferable skills and personal qualities beyond the purely academic curriculum. The scheme also encourages students to articulate their co-curricular, lifewide learning, deepening their reflective learning. Students are required to record and submit evidence of their activities and reflect on their experiences at the end of the academic year, particularly with respect to Aberdeen Graduate Attribute development in their role.

The concept of lifewide learning was originally developed and applied at the University of Surrey by Jackson (2008). It represents the breadth of learning that occurs in a particular timeframe in a range of contexts, both formal and informal, real and virtual, and is not limited to learning through the academic curriculum. Lifewide learning concepts and practices as described by Jackson (2011) which are an integral component of the STAR Award framework include:

- Recognising and valuing learning from co-curricular experiences.
- Students planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating their development and learning.
- Students having freedom to choose their activities through which they will learn and develop.
- Mode and expectations of assessment being decided and communicated to students.
- Tutors being available to provide specialist information, instruction or advice.

STAR Award: co-curricular roles

The [diverse range of roles](#) recognised through the STAR Award (Figure 3) illustrates the many different forms of learning and development, and different spaces for co-curricular learning and development which Jackson (2011) describes as lifewide learning. For example, learning often takes place on different sites (e.g. BP Student Tutor), is unaccredited learning taking place

outside the degree programme (e.g. Sports Club Captain), is personally stretching across social class, ethnicity, language (e.g. Student Residence Assistant), and is demanding, often involving high degrees of responsibility (e.g. Environment & Ethics Officer) (Barnett 2010, 2011).

Figure 2 Co-curricular roles recognised as part of the STAR Award



STAR Award Roles



The STAR (Students Taking Active Roles) Award is an initiative organised jointly by the Careers Service and Students' Association, to help students recognise the skills and attributes they are using and developing through their co-curricular activities. These activities include roles within the Students' Association sports clubs and societies, on-campus peer/support roles, and volunteering activities associated with the University.

The Award is split up into **Bronze**, **Silver** and **Gold** recognition, with each role being recognised at a certain level. The list of current recognised roles:

Category 1: Students' Association roles	Category 2: On-campus peer/support roles	Category 3: Community-based roles and volunteering roles affiliated with the University
Class Representative	Careers Service Subject/School Representative	BP Student Tutor
Niteline volunteer	Non-Medical Personal Assistant	STEM Ambassador
Dirty Weekenders' Committee Member	Students 4 Students Mentor	Student Ambassador
Gaudie Features, Deputy Editor or other committee member	Student Residence Assistant	Techfest Assistant
AUSA Volunteer (includes Bookends, Energy Reps and Carbon School Agents, amongst others)	Peer Assisted Learning Contributor	ASPIRENorth Volunteer
Society or Sports Club Committee Member	Chaplaincy Ambassador	AUOTC Officer Cadet
Aberdeen Student Radio (ASR) Volunteer or Committee Member	Cassus Omisus Volunteer	Community Web Volunteer
All AUSA Standing Committee Members not mentioned in Silver Award	Interfaith Officer	University Museums Volunteer
Gaudie Editor		All Choral Society Committee Members not mentioned in Silver Award
Society President or Sports Club Captain		Choral Society – Stage Manager
Vice-President for Sport (Non-Executive Member)		Choral Society – Assistant Conductor
Vice-President for Societies (Non-Executive Member)		Scottish Institute for Enterprise (SIE) Intern
Vice-President for Welfare		AUOTC Officer Cadet (Military Leadership Development Programme II)
Bookends Administrator		AUOTC Officer Cadet (Military Leadership Development Programme III)
Student Show Administrator		
CCP Intern		
Employability Officer		
Entertainments Officer		
ASR Station & Technical Managers		
Undergraduate/Postgraduate School Convener		
Vice-President for Societies (Executive Member)		
Vice-President for Equal Opportunities		
Vice-President for Charities		
Vice-President for Education & Employability		
Environment & Ethics Officer		
Foresterhill Convener		
Sports Union Treasurer		




Assessment

To complete the STAR Award, students share their STAR Award ePortfolio with a two-person assessment panel which normally comprises a member of University staff and an employer. Depending on the level of Award (Bronze, Silver or Gold) being examined, the assessment panel conducts a 20-30 minute competency-based interview. The multiple award levels and the different classifications are based on the breadth and depth of graduate attribute development opportunities within each role. For example, oral communication skills at a bronze level may focus on conveying information to peers and is less challenging when compared to communication skills at a gold level. At the higher level, it is more skilful, compelling and may involve pitching ideas, persuading different groups and is more demanding for the student to undertake. Irrespective of the Award level a bespoke assessment framework to measure students' achievement of selected Aberdeen Graduate Attributes (Table 2) is central to the process.

Table 2 Aberdeen Graduate Attributes assessed within the STAR Award

- An ability to communicate effectively for different purposes and in different contexts.
- An ability to work independently and as part of a team
- A diverse set of transferable and generic skills
- An awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses
- A capacity for self-reflection, self-discovery and personal development

In reaching an overall judgement as to whether a student warrants the STAR Award, interview assessors focus on the student's ability to communicate self-awareness of their Aberdeen Graduate Attribute development, and personal development using the STAR Award framework. During the interview students are assessed via competency-based questions with each question targeting a specific attribute. Students also need to back up their responses with concrete examples. The questions are designed to help students reflect on their experiences, draw out relevant co-curricular learning, and facilitate students to identify, with evidence, their Aberdeen Graduate Attribute development.

The student experience outside their degree programme is often demanding, and frequently involves a high degree of responsibility such that it leads to many forms of personal development and learning being described by students at the interview. Although not formally assessed, interview discussions and student reflections often reveal how student confidence is developing as a result of encountering and dealing effectively with situations, accomplishing new things and coping with challenges. Based on the interview performance, assessors make one of three decisions ranging from pass, reassessment opportunity to unsuccessful. Carrying out the assessment for the Award is a time-consuming element for the staff involved but clearly adds value to the Award, making it more attractive to employers and recruiters.

In order for students to make the most of their co-curricular learning, and enhance their employability all students receive timely, feedback on their interview performance by email. Feedback provides a focus and a basis for students to think about their strengths and areas for future development throughout their remaining period with the University and/or beyond their studies (Rae and Cochrane, 2008; Marais and Perkins, 2012). Participation in co-curricular actively is widely thought to play a key role in students' academic success and providing constructive, timely feedback is an important component of students' wider learning and

development (Zepke and Leach, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2013).

Recognising and valuing learning and development

Students who successfully complete the STAR Award are invited to attend an end-of-award celebration event, and receive a certificate of recognition from the University. The event provides formal recognition of students' co-curricular achievements. Attainment of the STAR Award is also recognised on the students' leaving transcripts to reflect their wider university co-curricular learning and development. The transcript, which broadly complies with the UK [Higher Education Achievement Record](#) (HEAR), provides students with a comprehensive record of all their University achievements, including approved co-curricular activities. Along with the degree certificate the transcript supports students' applications for employment and further study.

Employers involved in the STAR Award often emphasise the importance of incorporating a wider range of co-curricular, informal learning within the graduate transcript to help them unpack the student experience. Interestingly, the views of employers contributing to the STAR Award are examined in more detail in recent research conducted by Ward and Denholm (2012). Their work focused on looking at stakeholder engagement with HEAR, exploring how different employers and organisations e.g. blue-chip, SMEs might make use of HEAR.

Employers' and students' perspectives

Local employers are involved in developing, assessing and evaluating the STAR Award. Employers are impressed by the scheme, especially as it encourages students to identify and articulate specific skills they have and to provide evidence of their accomplishments. Employers are very positive about the benefits of the STAR Award in providing an opportunity for students to record and reflect on an aspect of their wider university achievement. In the words of one employer:

If you want to improve your employability then taking part in STAR has to be top of your list of things to do.

An important feature of the STAR Award is that local employers deliver skills development workshops within the scheme. The sessions focus on encouraging students to recognise their co-curricular skills as well as provide an opportunity for each student to present key aspects of their activities to an interested employer. The involvement of local employers adds significantly to the relevance of the Award as a means of improving employability skills, and clearly enhances the scheme's credibility to students. Employers are also involved in the end-of-activity interview assessment. Their input at this stage is an important quality assurance mechanism, ensuring the Award's credibility to graduate recruiters.

Recording and reflecting on transferable skills in a logical manner as part of the Award also helps students prepare for future graduate competency-based interviews. Students are increasingly aware of the importance to employers of skills and attributes as expressed by this undergraduate:

By taking an active role in the STAR Award I became more aware of the valuable skills and experience I am gaining from my Students' Association role. I am now also much more confident about marketing my skills to graduate employers.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of increased focus on the quality of the student experience, the STAR Award adds value to students and enables students to recognise that there is more to learning in higher education than academic study. By reframing the University's approach to what counts as learning through the Award and recognising and valuing learning that is not formally assessed within a degree programme, students are provided with an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how they are learning through the different parts of their university experience.

The STAR Award provides students with a structured framework to reflect critically on their informal co-curricular activities, and the key benefits of the initiative are two-fold. First, the Award helps students to appreciate and articulate the learning derived from their informal university experience. Second, the Award also provides an opportunity for students to engage with the Careers Service at an earlier opportunity than has traditionally happened, and in so doing, they increase the time that they spend on actively planning their future. The STAR process supports students with tangible evidence of their Aberdeen Graduate Attribute development, which they can show to prospective employers and recruiters. The HEAR is also a potentially powerful lifewide learning tool as we move forward with STAR. The increasing availability of HEAR over the next few years needs, therefore, to be accompanied by further research into co-curricular learning and development to support effective use for all stakeholders.

Institutionally, the Award is clearly enhancing the student learning experience, by taking into account and recognising the roles and activities that students undertake during their University experience. It is also enhancing the opportunities of the University and students to engage with employers locally and nationally. Finally, for those who deliver and administer the Award, the opportunity to interact with an increasingly wide range of students continues to be a rewarding experience. The challenge now for the University is to sustain and build upon the progress made as we move forward.

Acknowledgment

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contributions to the STAR Award from Careers, Students' Association & Registry staff, and also employers, too numerous to mention individually. Above all, we would like to thank Caroline Singer and Eloise Leeson, the STAR Award Project Officers for their dedication and enthusiasm in contributing to the development and success of the Award.

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