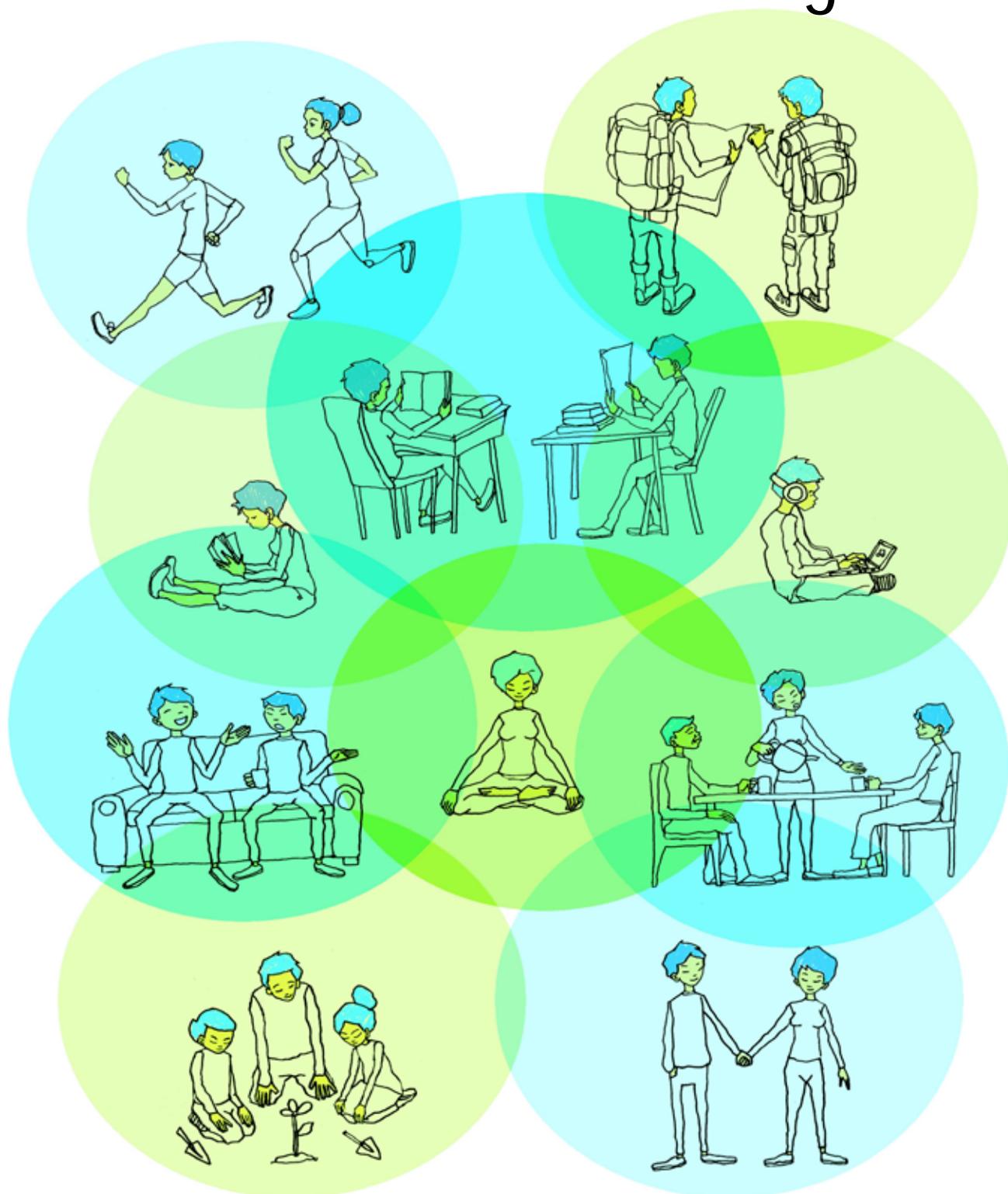


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CHAPTER B4

The Ulster EDGE Award: Supporting the Development of Student Employability

Sharon Milner

SUMMARY

This chapter provides an overview of the Ulster EDGE Award. It discusses how the University of Ulster's vision to *lead in the provision of professional education for professional life*, and its commitment to supporting graduates to gain stimulating and fulfilling employment, led to the creation of the Ulster EDGE Award. The Award offers undergraduate students opportunities to develop employability skills and attributes within a supportive flexible framework throughout their time at Ulster. The chapter outlines how students engage with Award activities to evidence their achievements. These activities are linked explicitly to Ulster's Graduate Qualities Framework thus making more transparent to students how their holistic experience contributes towards their personal and professional development. Students register and once they have completed all requisite activities it is mandatory to apply for the Award. It is in this application that they have to clearly demonstrate how engagement with the Award activities has enhanced their employability and capability as reflective lifewide learners. The first cohorts of graduates to receive Ulster's Edge Award received their certificates at graduation in 2013. Future cohorts will also have the Ulster EDGE included in their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). The chapter considers how the EDGE Award is now an embedded part of Ulster's Learning and Teaching Strategy: Implementation and Review Framework as a performance indicator of employability and the impact that this relationship has on the Award. It deliberates on some of the lessons learnt from piloting the Award and future enhancements for the scheme.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sharon Milner is the Employability Development Manager at the University of Ulster. In her current role she is primarily concerned with supporting staff in evaluating and embedding employability development opportunities across the University using EDORT, the



employability toolkit she developed, and administering the University's employability Award (the Ulster EDGE Award). She also co-ordinates and lectures postgraduate research students and contract researchers on strategic career development. She disseminates employability good practice by hosting an annual national employability conference. Sharon, a Chartered Psychologist continuously employed in the world of academia, is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Fellow of the Centre for Higher Education and Research Practice at Ulster and an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

INTRODUCTION

In an unsettled economic and political climate, the issue of graduate employability has gained increased currency and UK universities are specifically tasked with making explicit how they will help their students to develop the relevant skills and experiences for future employment (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009).

At a regional level the Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) recently introduced the 'Graduating to Success' strategy, providing a vision for the Higher Education sector. The strategy aims to

Equip individuals with the distinctive range and quality of skills and attributes needed for an increasingly competitive international workplace. (DEL 2012a:10)

This will be driven through delivering a higher quality learning experience that will enhance the employability prospects of graduates.

At university level, this is reflected in the University of Ulster's vision to *lead in the provision of professional education for professional life*. The University is committed to supporting graduates to gain stimulating and fulfilling employment by developing

within all our programmes employability, including preparation for self-employment, and personal development opportunities to promote the attributes and qualities of the Ulster graduate. (University of Ulster Corporate Plan 2011/12 to 2015/16:4)

This aim is supported within Ulster's new Learning and Teaching strategy which seeks

To enhance Ulster's role as a sector leader for student employability as an integral part of the wider student experience. (University of Ulster Learning and Teaching Strategy 2013/14-2017/18: 17)

Employability is a contentious concept open to a 'plethora of micro-interpretations' (Harvey, 2003) despite the availability of a wide range of models and burgeoning research purporting to explain it. The issue of how 'employability' is actually defined is a complex one, however at Ulster it is defined as

a set of achievements - skills, understanding and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke 2006: 23)

In this definition, it is important to note that employability implies something about the skills and capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a 'graduate job' or otherwise (Yorke 2006). In order to meet the challenge of enhancing student employability, many universities including Ulster, have developed strategies to embed employability across the whole curriculum. This has included the development of employability and work related modules, employability 'strands' across programmes, problem based, as well as work related learning, skills identification and curriculum audits (Watson 2011). However, by placing such an emphasis on the embedding

of employability skills within the curriculum, it has been argued that universities may be missing the opportunity to draw on the rich experience of learning which occurs outside the curriculum and that may also contribute towards a student's employability (Watson 2011).

Norton and Thomas note that when speaking about enhancing employability beyond the curriculum, we are in essence speaking about enhancing student experience

recognised 'co-curricular' activity, run in parallel to degree programmes, is also, crucially, an extremely effective way of enhancing the experience of students in Higher Education, whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate from the UK or abroad, studying full-time or part-time (Norton and Thomas 2009:1).

In an increasingly competitive employment market, engaging in extra-curricular activities such as sport, the arts, and volunteering can offer students the opportunity to mark themselves out from their peer group (Stevenson and Clegg 2011). Yet although there may be a prima facie case as to why extra-curricular activities should be thought to contribute to graduate outcomes (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott 2008) very few studies have examined student activities beyond the classroom and their role in student experience and subsequent outcome for graduates (Little 2006). Additionally, it has been found that students themselves may not always perceive the value of extra-curricular activities and may downplay the possible contribution of these to their future employability in comparison to activities which were embedded within the university curriculum (Watson 2011). In not recognising how their personal interests and achievements may enhance their employability, students may not document the contribution these make to developing and demonstrating their skills.

Co-curricular awards can provide a 'gateway' to a range of experiences, and can ensure that students recognise even apparently insignificant experiences as potentially useful in an occupational context (Associate of Graduate Careers Advisory Services 2011). Ulster's employability award, the Ulster EDGE Award, provides formal institutional recognition of employability enhancing activities, situated beyond the curriculum. Its aim is to encourage students not only to participate in such activities but also to recognise their value, thus adding to the wider student experience at Ulster and embracing the concept of lifewide education. Many other universities are now also recognising the value of extra-curricular activities and are accrediting the development of employability skills alongside the subject specific and transferrable skills associated with a degree. Currently, there are over 67 institutions that formally accredit employability skills within an award scheme, whilst the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) predicts that by 2015 nearly all universities in the UK will have developed some form of an employability award (AGCAS Award Task Group 2011).

The Ulster EDGE Award will be a part of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) document (Burgess 2012). The HEAR is designed as a record of student achievement which also meets the purposes of the Diploma Supplement. It is within section 6.1 of the HEAR that the totality of the student's performance whilst at university is captured. It provides formal recognition of activities that are both co-curricular and extra-curricular in nature, representing a wider range of achievements to employers and postgraduate tutors.

At a national level, Higher Education (HE) institutions can opt out of providing their students with a HEAR. However at a regional level DEL recently proposed that all third level HE institutions within Northern Ireland have a HEAR.

Extracurricular skills, activities and experiences will be recorded by HEIs as part of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). The Department, in co-operation with the institutions, will support the extension of the HEAR across the higher education sector in Northern Ireland. (DEL 2012a: 38)

The outcome is that by 2014 universities and university colleges within Northern Ireland will have adopted the HEAR.

By 2018, all learners undertaking a higher education course will have a Higher Education Achievement Report. (DEL 2012b: 34)

STRUCTURE OF THE ULSTER EDGE AWARD

The Ulster EDGE Award was launched in 2011 and branded with the strap line ‘sharpen up - give yourself the edge...’ It offers full-time undergraduate students opportunities to develop skills and attributes within a supportive flexible framework throughout their time at Ulster. Students participate in the Award by registering online within the first or second year of their degree and then completing four activities from a range of categories to evidence their achievement (Table 1).

Table 1 Four categories of activity within the Ulster EDGE Award

Category 1	Accredited co-curricular modules
Category 2	Work Experience, Study Abroad and Enterprise
Category 3	Internal & External Opportunities
Category 4	Formal University-wide Opportunities

These activities are linked explicitly to Ulster’s Graduate Qualities Framework (see Table 2 for Ulster Graduate Qualities) thus making it more transparent to students how their holistic experience counts towards personal and professional development. As McCabe (2010) has noted:

graduate attributes in their fullest sense are much broader than just employability-graduate attributes have relevance to all aspects of the student experience and therefore have a range of linked agendas, e.g. curriculum renewal, HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report), work - related learning, PDP (Personal Development Planning) and ePortfolios (McCabe 2010:3)

Table 2 Ulster Graduate Qualities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • subject-specific knowledge and skills informed by current research and professional/ vocational practice • flexibility, creativity and an entrepreneurial approach to problem solving • self-confidence, global citizenship, ethical leadership, and a commitment to life-wide learning, professionalism and employability • effective collaborative working, communication skills and the capacity for reflective practice, including the ability to give and receive feedback
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Within the Award there are a wide range of opportunities available for students including; developing career management skills, digital literacy skills, debating skills, peer mentoring, volunteering, work experience, study abroad and engagement with clubs and societies. The broad range of activities within the EDGE Award provides students with opportunities to develop social responsibility, civic engagement and involvement in the wider community thereby developing the ability of the student to participate in, and contribute to, society in the future (Quinlan 2011). The award also embraces the characteristics of a lifewide curriculum which encourages, supports and recognises students' lifewide learning and development (Jackson this volume).

There is no defined pathway of activities for completion of the Award but not all four activities can be from the same category so as to ensure students engage with a broad range of experiences. None of the activities within the award contributes to the student's 360 credit points for their degree, and they are either co-curricular or extra-curricular in nature. Each of these activities has a minimum of at least 30 hours engagement and for each activity the student has to reflect on that experience via the production of, for example, a log, video diary, poster or PowerPoint presentation. The aim of the output is to encourage students to become more reflective practitioners so that they become more aware and effective lifewide learners (Jackson *ibid*). They are thus equipped with the ability to identify, develop and articulate their abilities and skills.

The Award structure includes activities provided by central departments such as Employability and Marketing as well as Access and Educational Partnerships, the Students Union, academics and employers. This was a deliberate stratagem so that the Award would not be viewed as being solely a careers initiative but rather a university wide initiative in which everyone is a partner. Academic colleagues in particular view the opportunity to provide these activities as a 'win, win' scenario: A number of the activities offered are seen as beneficial to specific academic disciplines, increasing student participation in activities which are not mandatory for their degree but help to increase student employability, for example, the CIMA Sage certificate. Currently there are 68 activities on offer within the EDGE, details of which can be found on the EDGE Award website <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/edge>

A critical part of the Award process is that once students have completed all four activities it is mandatory to apply for the Award. It is in this application that they have to clearly demonstrate how engagement with the Award activities has enhanced their employability and capability as reflective lifewide learners. At graduation, a separate Edge Award ceremony is held to present the certificates. In the past, certificates have been presented by senior academic colleagues such as the PVC (Teaching and Learning) and Deans of Faculties. In addition, all EDGE graduates are listed in the graduation booklet.

MANAGEMENT OF EDGE

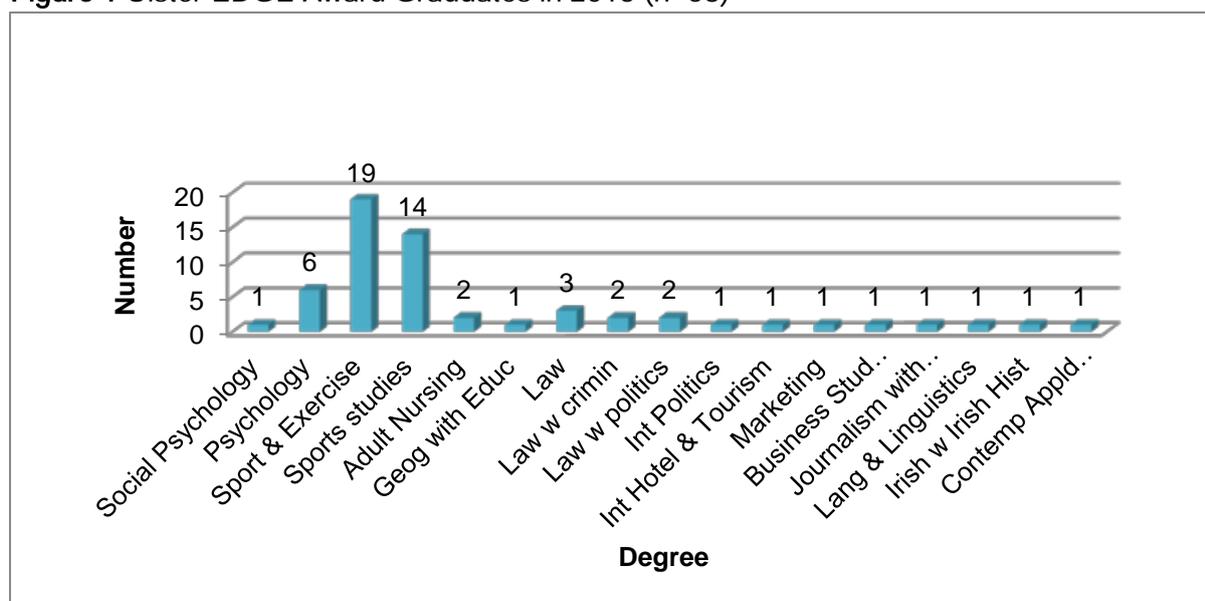
Strategic oversight of the award is provided by the Subcommittee of Employability which reports to the central University's Learning and Teaching Committee. Employability and Marketing administer the Award and approve all activities for inclusion in EDGE. Activity providers provide confirmation of student achievement of their respective activities.

In order to help administer and manage the EDGE Award, EDGE is recorded as a feature within the bespoke Ulster HEAR database. Therefore EDGE activities are validated and managed within the database. This allows the production of detailed management reports in relation to the number of student registrations, activities completed, students eligible to apply for EDGE and students who have successfully completed EDGE. Students can also be emailed en masse. As the Ulster HEAR database is linked to the University student record system it automatically uploads all student record information. This online database is essential in co-ordinating and administering this award particularly as the number of EDGE registrations has increased substantially since the initial launch of the award. The HEAR is visible via the university portal and students are able to view their 6.1 activities including their EDGE activities. Academic staff can also view the HEARs of their individual students.

RESULTS

The first pilot cohort of graduates (n=58) to receive Ulster's EDGE Award were formally presented with their certificates at graduation in 2013 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Ulster EDGE Award Graduates in 2013 (n=58)



Directly after graduation students were surveyed regarding their perception of the value of the EDGE Award to their employability prospects. Responses were received from all 58 students. The students were very positive about the award and the overarching theme to emerge was a substantial increase in students' belief and confidence in their own abilities.

It has helped me to sell myself through the development of activities for my CV. This has given me greater confidence in interviews, approaching people, stating my opinion which will in turn support my future employment. No matter what degree you do, the EDGE Award is for you. (International Politics student)

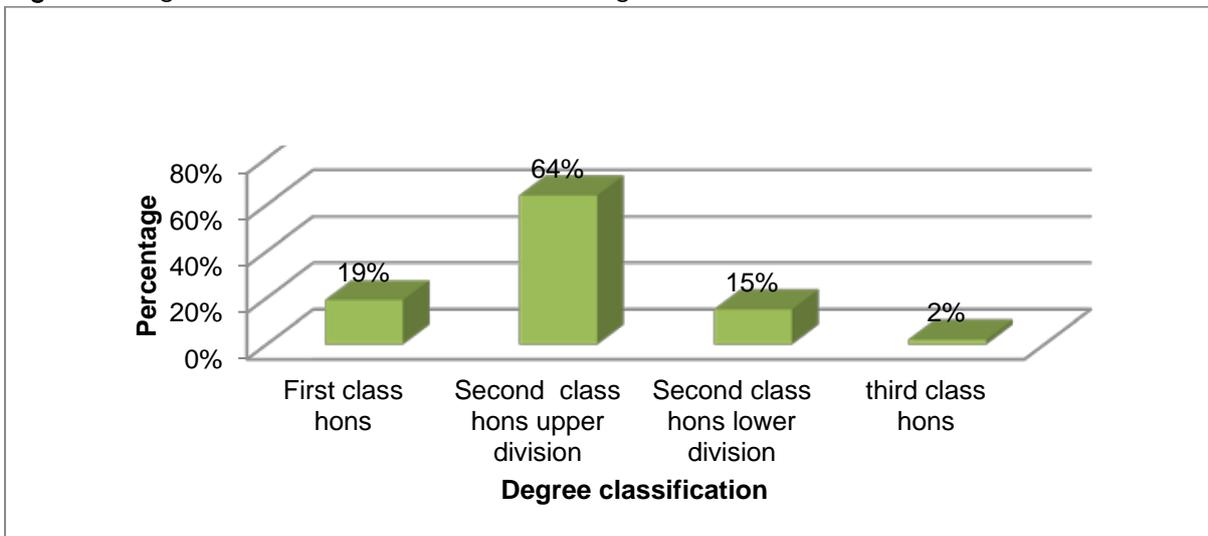
I feel the EDGE makes sure that you can apply what you have learned in theory in university to real life. Moreover, it allows you to get recognition for activities that

employers are looking for that the university does not usually give you credit for. (Psychology student)

I gained valuable confidence and expertise. Now, I am a more outgoing person and I am developing the necessary skills that employers are looking for. (Sport and Exercise Science student)

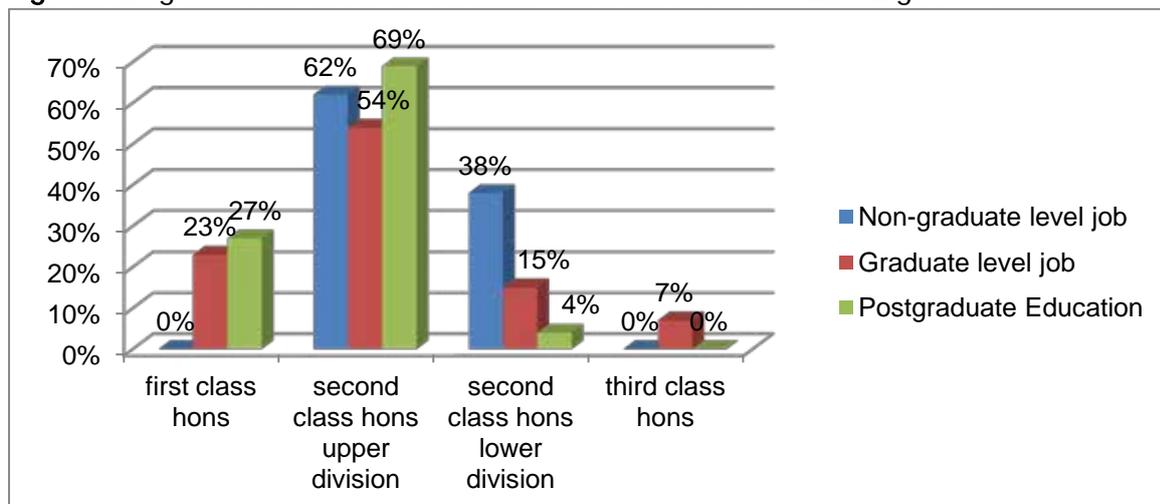
19% (n=11) of EDGE graduates gained a first class honours. The majority 64% (n=37) of the students who graduated with the Ulster EDGE gained a second class upper division. A further 15% (n=9) gained a second class lower division and 2% (n=1) gained a third class honours (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2 Degree classification of students who graduated with Ulster EDGE Award 2013



50% (n=29) of EDGE graduates were in postgraduate education, 26% (n=15) in graduate level jobs and a further 24% (n=14) in non-graduate level jobs 5 months after graduation.

Figure 3 Degree classification and associated destinations of EDGE graduates



All of the graduates who had obtained a first class honours degree were either in postgraduate education or in graduate level positions. Similar percentages of students who

were in non-graduate level jobs (62%) and postgraduate education (69%) and slightly lower percentage in graduate level jobs had obtained a second class honours upper division degree. The majority of graduates who had obtained a second class honours lower division degree were in non-graduate level positions (38%) (see Figure 3).

EDGE graduates were surveyed again 5 months after they graduated to measure the impact of EDGE. The survey was done via email and an online questionnaire. A total of 27 (47%) graduates responded. The first theme to emerge was the stated belief that the Award made a positive contribution to their skills set.

Completing the EDGE Award has given me more confidence going forward. I have gained an experience that I have learned a lot from and a certificate to prove it, it really does feel like I've got an edge and can compete with other graduates for employment. (Psychology student)

I feel that the EDGE award has allowed me to build on my confidence which has reinforced my ability to speak to potential employers, manage and deal with peers' grievances, and enhanced my self esteem. The experience has enabled me to talk about my experiences in partaking in the award at interviews, and how it has helped develop not just mine but my other peers' university experience. It has allowed me to show that I can, and I'm willing to, partake in extra work above and beyond what is expected of me so as to improve on my own personal development and widen my career opportunities. Furthermore, I feel that the award has helped me fill in potential awkward moments of silence that might have arisen in interviews I have attended. Throughout the interviews I have attended I have directly associated the edge activities with my nursing career and talked around and about partaking in the award. (Adult Nursing graduate)

The second theme to emerge was how their current employment/ postgraduate course of study has benefited from the skills gained through engaging with the Award.

The transferable skills I was able to gain during my 4 activities to complete the EDGE Award have been put to good use within my current employment and I have been able to enhance them further through my actions in specific situations. (Sports Studies graduate)

I believe the skills I developed in my Edge modules have and will continue to help me through my current course. The confidence I developed for my ability to speak effectively and coherently to others (I did this during my PASS sessions) has helped me whilst I am presenting arguments and legal points in my Trainee Barrister course. (Law with Politics graduate)

And finally although some students did not feel the Award directly contributed to them gaining their job or postgraduate programme they did feel that the skills learnt would be beneficial in the future.

I believe that even if the EDGE Award does not contribute to obtaining employment or further education it will most definitely help you out when you discover that the

transferable skills that you learned can be used in employment situations and educational courses. (Journalism with English graduate).

My present employment focuses on the research element of my degree, therefore the EDGE Award was not one of the things my employer was looking for. However, he did find it particularly interesting and a positive contribution to my skills when we discussed it. (International Politics graduate)

Forty employers were approached regarding the award and all of them stated that they were in favour of the focus of the award, particularly if students can articulate the skills and benefits gained from engaging with the different activities within the award. Typical quotes include:

It's an excellent idea to further enhance the skills of graduates entering the workplace. It allows them to 'widen' their range of inter-personal/ leadership skills. (Musgrave Retail Partners NI)

It's a brilliant idea! We find lots of grads are not overly commercially aware and I think this Award scheme would assist with this. (Axiom)

Fantastic scheme. We are definitely looking for more than just academic qualifications. Students who have real work/life experiences who understand their own skills/strengths and how to leverage these are definitely more employable. (Dageo)

When employers were asked if they would be willing to sponsor the award 37.5% (n=15) responded that their organisation would be interested in doing so once they have been given more information about the Award.

The majority (95% n=38) felt that having been made aware of the Award they will look for it as a differentiator in the recruitment process. Typical quotes include:

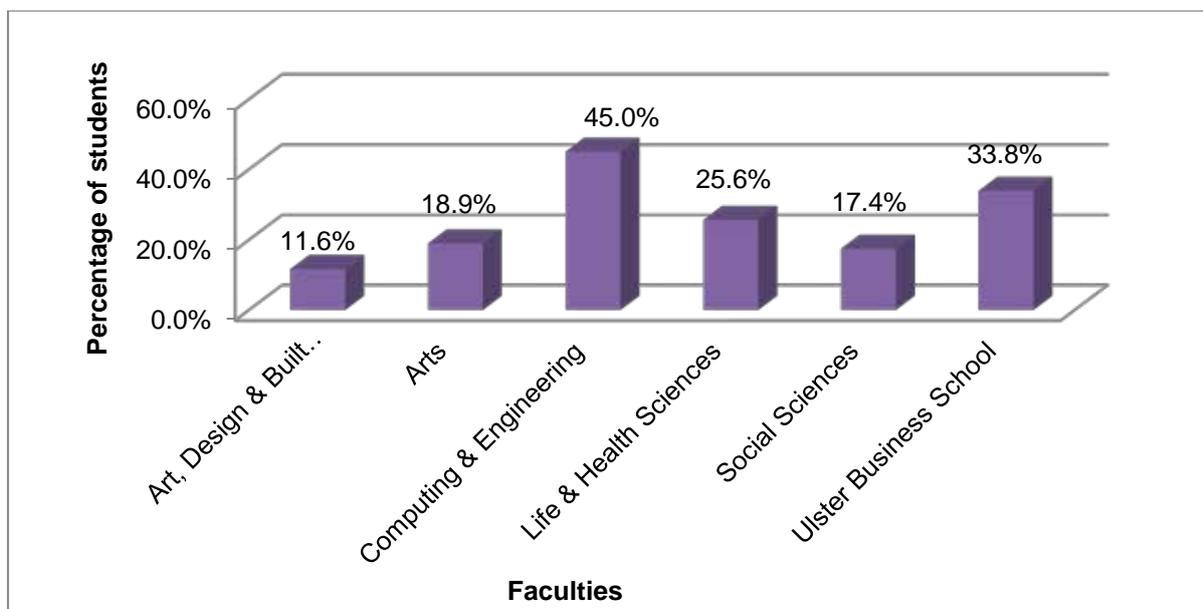
Yes, this could be a good differentiator for us as so many students have good grades. (Asidua Ltd.)

If graduates have it, would see it as an advantage. (Terex)
The experience gained would be excellent - to be demonstrated in application forms and interviews, particularly for competency based questions. (Andor Technology)

I think this would be something that would be displayed during interviews. Helping them with confidence, ability to answer questions, give good examples etc. (Graham Construction).

There are currently 4216 students registered on the EDGE Award across various disciplines (See Figure 4)

Figure 4 Distribution of students registered for the EDGE Award across Faculties



DISCUSSION

It has been argued that the ideals of a well-rounded education require attention to students as whole *people* who learn in and out of the classroom, always and everywhere (Hersh, 2009). Similarly, the idea of lifewide education is proposed to enable learners to prepare themselves for the unknown complexities and challenges of their future lives (Jackson this volume). The results of student feedback for Ulster EDGE graduates demonstrate that they clearly recognise the value of extra-curricular activities within their own lives and for their own futures.

In order to adopt an approach that is holistic and integrative enough to achieve the higher aim of supporting the development of students' full potentials across their entire higher education experience, universities should also recognise the value of these extra-curricular experiences and support students who wish to engage with them. (Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2012)

Ulster fully embraces this holistic and lifewide approach. This is reflected in the embedding of the Ulster EDGE Award as part of 'Ulster's Learning and Teaching: Implementation and Review Framework' as a performance indicator of employability. In addition, the Learning and Teaching Committee recommended that from June 2013 that all Faculties were to aim for 50% of all first and second year full-time students within the University to be registered on EDGE. This has resulted in increased engagement from academic staff in promoting the EDGE to their students and has also increased the number of activities provided by academics for their students to complete within EDGE. Student registrations as a consequence have increased exponentially, May 2013 there were 2667 students registered and this figure has now nearly doubled, currently there are 4216 registrations.

There is little published evaluation on the impact of awards however, the qualitative responses within this study from both EDGE graduates and employers would support research which indicates that there is positive feedback from the universities (and their

respective students) and from employers on the delivery of awards (Edge Foundation and SCRE Centre 2011). Participant responses support the suggestion that involvement in extra-curricular activities is related to successful employment outcomes (Blasko, 2002) with one large UK study (n=5242) finding that 51% of employed graduates felt that their experiences of volunteering helped them to find work (Brewis, Russell and Holdsworth, 2010). There would appear to be a developing case for the recognition of the value of extra-curricular activities in order to support the development of employability in students (Watson, 2011). However, as this EDGE Award study was only a small pilot cohort, it must be considered unrepresentative and exploratory in nature. In particular, more in-depth analysis in relation to graduate destinations and degree classification would yield richer and more complex data regarding the possible impact of the Award.

LESSONS LEARNT

Senior management buy-in has been crucial for the successful implementation of the award and has led to the creation of a 'pro-EDGE' culture within the university. Adequate resourcing for both the HEAR database and the administration of the award has been of paramount importance particularly as student numbers are growing exponentially. This has implications for the assessment application which is central to this award scheme as it can be resource intensive.

Maintaining student interest and momentum to complete all four activities for the award over the length of the degree programme is really important because once you have lost the students' interest it is very hard to get them to re-engage with the award.

Since I registered for EDGE I have only completed two activities, haven't really had any time and I am now in final year and I am under too much pressure with my degree to try to attempt completing EDGE. (Computing student)

I registered for the Edge Award back in second year and was unable to complete due to work commitments, so I would like to deregister from the EDGE. (Politics student)

Research from other award schemes such as the Worcester Award has shown high (just under 50%) non-completion rates with students reporting that this was generally due to time management issues (Watson 2011). It has also been recognised that high levels of part-time employment, particularly among students from less privileged backgrounds, may have a detrimental impact on student capacity to engage in other employability-enhancing activities. As a consequence, within the EDGE Award scheme students have the opportunity to have their part-time jobs recognised as an Award activity.

Achieving employer buy-in for the EDGE Award is also essential as it will contribute to the Award's success. Collaborating with employers is an aspect of the Award which needs further development.

NEXT STEPS

The first cohort of full-time undergraduate students will graduate with HEAR in July 2014 and the Ulster EDGE Award will be included in section 6.1 of a student's HEAR. The HEAR at Ulster will record academic achievement and extra-curricular activities, prizes and awards verified by the university. The Award HEAR descriptor will focus on providing recognition for the additional commitment to personal growth, outlining the four activities students successfully completed for the Award. As a consequence there is a body of work to be carried out with employers in relation to creating an awareness of the HEAR and the EDGE Award.

The aspiration is that the Ulster EDGE Award graduate numbers will substantially grow over time, as the number of activities and pathways within the Award develop. The intention is to give consideration to its future development in the form of an 'Advanced EDGE' Award. This would be open to students who demonstrated exceptional dedication to enhancing their employability by completing a minimum of six activities from across three of the four categories of the Award. The selection process for this Award would include the completion of a detailed application form, a presentation and attendance at an employer led selection interview. If the student does not reach this standard they will still be eligible for the original Award. The expectation would be that a small number of students would apply for the Advanced EDGE Award. Advanced EDGE recipients would also be eligible for the prize of 'Ulster EDGE Award Student of the Year'.

Currently the Ulster EDGE Award is only open to full-time undergraduates. The possibility has also been raised of developing a criterion framework for part-time students. This framework would be more complex because while all EDGE Award activities are currently free to full-time undergraduate students, part-time students would have to pay for a number of the current module activities.

CONCLUSION

Ulster as an institution embraces the concept of lifewide education by providing students with support and opportunities for personal and professional growth. It will continue to promote and expand the Ulster EDGE Award which indicates a belief in the value of the Award in supporting the development of employability in Ulster students and its possible impact on successful employment outcomes.

Therefore the Ulster EDGE Award is not just about articulating and evidencing achievement but has the potential to demonstrate in the longer term that

learning is a lifelong and life wide activity, and that higher education continues to be about more than getting a degree and a 'graduate job'. Engagement with such opportunities, through active participation in less controlled contexts, can help to prepare graduates for a lifetime of uncertainty, change, challenge and emergent or self - created opportunity. (Centre for Recording Achievement Dec 2012: 8).

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