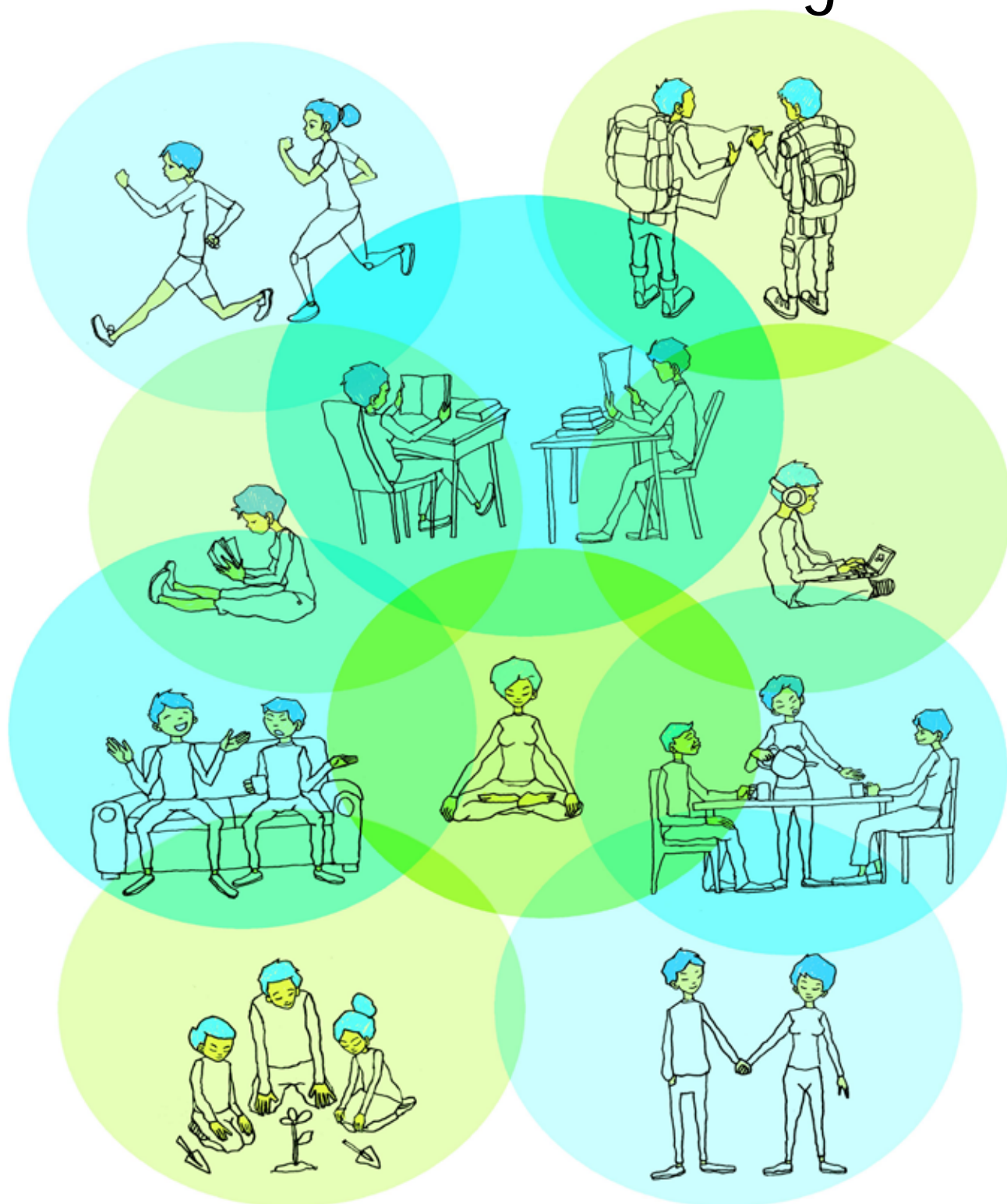


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CHAPTER D2

Defining the Success of Extracurricular Awards

Joanna (Asia) Alder

SUMMARY

Extracurricular / employability / skills awards aim to develop students' skills and prepare them for graduate employment. The awards are usually connected to achievement hence earned rather than given to students. Students earn awards by engaging in extracurricular activities, training and fulfilling some sort of assessment. Successful completion of the award and its requirements is recognised with, for example, a certificate. Achieving the award can be included in section 6.1 of the HEAR and on students' CV or social media profile.

Research on the University of Derby Award confirms that only half the registered students complete the institution's extracurricular award. So what happens to those students who engage but do not necessarily complete the award? This research uncovers the significance of engagement in activities relating to the achievement of an award beyond the value of the final completion certificate. It analyses the benefits gained by students and the way students make them applicable to future employment. The findings show that engaging in some aspects of the award is valuable even if students do not complete the award. Taking part in workshops, engaging in activities or aspects of assessment develops students' skills, understanding of graduate employer requirements and opens students to engagement with careers services which would not happen otherwise. Registering for the award acts as a 'net' to capture students' interest. It motivates students to think about their employability, encourages them to participate in relevant 'lifewide' training, activities and events, and brings them closer to engaging with employers and valuable expertise and advice from careers advisers and other professionals. The study explores the reasons why students were unable to complete the award. The research informed the creation of a new Futures Award that is more responsive to students' needs.

BIOGRAPHY



Dr Joanna (Asia) Alder is the Futures Award Coordinator at the University of Derby. She was responsible for the development of the institution's first extracurricular award in 2007 - The Derby Award. Joanna developed and managed the Award until 2013. In 2013 she managed a major restructure of the award which resulted in the development of a new, much wider award - The Futures Award. She has also been responsible for developing and managing the

volunteering structure at the University of Derby. Joanna is also a leisure industries lecturer and keen to encourage the development of the 'whole student'. Having worked in academia and career development Joanna has witnessed many examples of the value of 'lifewide' learning and is a keen advocate of employability development in Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research identified that both the process of undertaking an extracurricular award and the final certificate are valuable to students' employability (Watson, 2011). The research described in this chapter focuses on the former benefit namely that of student engagement in the processes that underlie an extracurricular award. The research was undertaken at the University of Derby which used to offer an extracurricular award known as the Derby Award which was supported and delivered by the Careers and Employment Service. The research study explored in depth the reasons why some students did not complete the Derby Award. The knowledge gained from the study enabled the university to re-design the Award so that it is better able to meet the needs and profile of the students.

THE DERBY AWARD

The University of Derby Award Programme (for Employability, Leadership and Management), known as the Derby Award, was established at the University of Derby in 2007. The award was created to recognise students' achievements outside their academic curriculum therefore contributing to their 'lifewide' development and learning during their time at the university (Jackson, 2011). It provided an opportunity to recognise the development and achievement of students who were already engaged in various employability-related activities, such as volunteering, paid work or running one's own business. But the award also encouraged those who were not involved in any extracurricular experiences to get involved. The award encouraged students to use extracurricular activities as a source of rich learning and graduate skills development. Like other Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the UK a number of academic programmes at Derby, but not all, offer an opportunity for employability development within the curriculum (Harvey et al., 2002). The award gave students an opportunity to acquire graduate skills regardless of their programme of study. Therefore the aims of the award were to encourage and support students to:

- Engage in activities that enhance employability, leadership and management
- Raise awareness of wider employment opportunities and career choices
- Identify and articulate achievements, skills and personal attributes gained through experience outside the formal curriculum
- Recognise the contribution made to the local community and the wider society through employment and active citizenship.

As part of undertaking the award students had to:

- Undertake a leadership and management project of a minimum of 70 hours
- Attend a series of workshops linked to the main themes of the award (employability, leadership and management)
- Create a professional portfolio on leadership, management and employability
- Present experiences of the project to a panel of employers.

The focus of the Derby Award was extra- rather than co-curricular and was positioned clearly outside of the formal curriculum. One way of distinguishing the award from the formal curriculum was the choice of language used in communication with students. For example, the use of the word 'workshops' instead of 'lectures' or 'evidence' instead of

'assessment'. Students who completed the award received a certificate from the University of Derby. The Award attracted one hundred students every year with around half the students completing the award. In addition, the award was endorsed by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), one of the major training organisations in leadership and management, to provide external recognition, credibility and value to the award. At first the university funded students' registration with the ILM. In 2010 registration became optional and paid for by the student (£68 in 2013/2014). Registration with the ILM gave students access to the ILM services and academic resources, publications and a final certificate confirming completion of the award.

To date measurement of success of the award has been based on completion rates. Therefore the drive for those delivering the award has been to encourage and support students to complete the award. Failure for students to complete the award has been seen as a need for improving support and every effort was undertaken to help students complete and achieve the final certification. However, the research described below shows that there are a number of positive outcomes emerge from engaging in various activities of the award even if the student does not complete the award. Although the drive will always be to encourage students to achieve full recognition by completing the requirements for the award the findings show the process of engaging in the award may have positive outcomes and be very valuable to students. This is discussed in more detail below.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was initially undertaken to inform practice rather than as an academic exercise. In August 2013 thirteen interviews were carried out with students and graduates who had enrolled on the Derby Award but had not completed it. These respondents self-selected to take part in the research. The interviews took place over the phone. Individuals were asked six questions about their experience of the award, their reasons for non-completion and the impact of the award on their employability. Details relating to respondents' engagement and reasons for withdrawal from the award are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of respondents' engagement in the award and reasons for non-completion

Number	Workshops (5)	Project	Evidence	Reason
1 graduate	All	Nearly all	Portfolio	Time
2 student	3	No	No	Time
3 graduate	All	All	No	Time
4 student	All	All	No	Personal problems
5 graduate	1	All	No	Time
6 graduate	All	None	No	On placement
7 student	4	Some	No	Time
8 graduate	All	None	No	Time
9 graduate	1	None	No	Time
10 student	4	Some	No	No project
11 student	None	None	No	Time
12 student	2	None	No	Time
13 graduate	All	All	Both	Time

The table shows that out of thirteen participants six completed all the workshops, five completed all or nearly all of their project but eleven did not complete the portfolio and provide the evidence necessary to gain the award. Ten of those surveyed stated that lack of time was the most important factor in not completing the requirements for the award. It is worth noting that despite not completing the award none of the respondents complained about the award or felt it was not worth their time. The research data are consistent with anecdotal evidence gained from encounters with students about their experience of the award, reasons for dropping out or not completing.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Benefits

Previous research on the subject has shown that students see the benefits of both the process and the product of engaging in extracurricular awards and employers value the process over the product (Watson, 2011). The research at Derby found that even students who did not complete the award gained from engaging in the process.

The Derby Award non-completers reported the benefits of engaging in the real life experience (the project) to be similar to those gained on other paid or voluntary industry placements namely, confidence (Archer and Davison 2008; Stuart et al., 2008), greater civic responsibility, improved life and academic skills (Astin and Sax, 1998) and improved communication skills (Stuart et al., 2008).

Other benefits of engaging in the process of the award included the opportunity for skills development, gaining confidence in networking and opportunities to network with employers. Students had an opportunity to meet employers either by undertaking a real-life project for an organisation or through workshops and talks delivered by employers as part of the award. An underpinning workshop, delivered as part of the award, outlined a basic introduction to networking. As a result of engaging in the taught and experiential part of the award students gained an understanding of the value and importance of business networking. One participant (9) said:

I regret I never completed the award. However, it inspired me to start my own social enterprise. I started questioning my choices and potential careers. I started a company which provides therapy workshops for children. It was as a result of the award I got to know professionals I could turn to help me along the way and make my idea possible. It got me thinking in a completely different way. (Graduate, Creative expressive therapies)

The opportunity to develop their own networks can be invaluable to students (Stuart et al., 2011), especially those at widening participation institutions (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Students who are the first in their families to enter higher education are more likely to lack professional connections through their family, which can be invaluable in gaining access to employment opportunities. This highlights the importance of social capital (Bourdieu 1986) where students from higher ranking universities may be more likely to gain extracurricular experience and have better access to opportunities (Holdsworth, 2010).

There is no doubt about the value of curricular and extracurricular experience for students and their employability (Watson, 2011). However, equally important is the learning experience and raising awareness in students about the value of their experiences. This goes in hand with teaching students to reflect on the relevance of their experiences and the ability to recognise and articulate skills and experiences. Reflection is said to be one of the key graduate skills (Moon, 2004). Hence one of the aims of the Derby Award was to help students reflect on and articulate their skills. Each student was supported by a mentor who could help them learn how to be reflective and to practise reflection. Mentors were members of staff from across the institution who had relevant skills and experience. Findings indicate that respondents who engaged in some reflective activities were able to use the skill of reflection in other aspects of their lives, such as work.

The experience of working with the Derby Award students showed that even some of the most involved students who engage in a number of activities, such as volunteering, part-time work or taking an active part in the Students' Union often have difficulty identifying relevant skills gained from those experiences. This conclusion was also reached by other researchers regarding undergraduate students (Houghton and Bagley, 2000). For those students the value of the award lies not so much in engaging in activities but in learning to recognise their value and ability to articulate them with relevance to future employment. Sometimes students undervalue their experiences saying they 'only' volunteer or 'just' have a part-time job. Students who volunteer for the Students' Union often do not regard it to be valuable experience from an employability perspective and perceive it as a social activity they do in their spare time. The Derby Award has helped students identify what transferable skills their experiences have given them and how they can make the most of them in the context of future employability. This is where the concept of 'lifewideness' allows us to recognise and articulate the value of learning gained during every day activities which can but do not have to be a part of formal learning (Jackson, 2014).

Through the assessment process the award requires students to undertake a skills gap analysis and think about their current skills set and those required by their chosen professions. This then helps students plan their future personal development either at the university or outside it. Undertaking a skills gap analysis during the award encourages students to evaluate their abilities in more depth. However, the analysis is part of the assessment which findings show the majority of the non-completers do not attempt.

Valuable work-relevant experience

For many students the award provided their first opportunity to gain work-relevant experience and in the majority of cases this experience was directly linked to their degree or chosen career. Opportunities for such experience were highly valued by the students and were often the first chance students had to practise their chosen profession.

Project was great. I was able to do accounts in real life! (6)

The experience of working with older kids was brilliant. (10)

This gave students a great opportunity to 'test the water', find out what they like and enjoy doing or conversely, discover what they do not like doing. Some students entered projects they felt reflected their career aspirations. However, after completing the project they

changed their mind and identified a different course of action for the future. One such student (respondent 2, geography) considered town planning or tourism as potential careers. She undertook a placement in town planning which showed her the reality of that profession. She changed her career planning to tourism and undertook a new project (outside of the award) with a local town's tourism marketing office. In a similar way the award has helped with students' retention at the university. One respondent (7) came to the award stating she hated the university. Having taken part in the award workshops, reflected on her personality and previous choices she came to the conclusion she did not hate the university but was studying a subject she did not like. She worked with careers advisers who helped her make a smooth transition to another degree programme. She was grateful as the award helped her understand her own needs and contributed to her finishing her degree as she was planning to leave after the second year.

Benefits to the careers service

Students self-select to take part in the award. The award can be seen as a 'net' for the careers department to capture potential students who can be targeted with other services on offer. It was an opportunity to communicate with those students who could be seen as 'interested in developing employability skills' with other employability related opportunities, such as events, graduate fairs or jobs and expand their employability knowledge and skills. This proved to be a good marketing/ promotional opportunity to cross-promote other employability related services. Cross-promotion of services was identified by the respondents as a benefit of being part of the award process. Those additional benefits included: getting to know the link careers adviser, getting to know careers advisers with relevant specialism, networking with new people they wouldn't otherwise work with, graduate fairs, volunteering opportunity, graduate jobs, having a contact to ask for help, learning about business competitions and funding, help with self-employment, part-time work.

Value of assessment

The research has also shown the value of the final assessment and evidence of learning produced by students. The assessment encourages students to reflect on their experience of the award, their future career plans and personal development. Often students' focus is on completing academic assessments and part-time jobs to fund their degree. There are also many misconceptions amongst students about graduate jobs requirements leading some students to believe they can start working on their employability later on in their degree or at the end of their third year. The award assessment guides students to undertake a structured, in-depth self-analysis of skills and an exploration of the needs of their future careers. Just like with other aspects of the award some students do not engage in the assessment or complete aspects of it. For example, some students complete the presentation but not the portfolio and vice versa. It could be argued that the final assessment is the most in-depth reflection and skills assessment of the whole process. Experiences from other awards, such as the Worcester Award, also identified the assessment to be one of the most helpful parts of the process which allowed students to make sense of their involvement (Watson, 2011). One Derby hospitality graduate (respondent 9) reflected on his learning gained from the assessment:

Like any other student I hated the thought of writing assessment. However, I wanted to let

you know I consider this to be the most valuable learning from the award. To this date I use the techniques and ideas when managing my staff and business. I think it was the most eye-opening part of the award even though I did not want to do it.

Some respondents identified the impact of the award activities on their employment. Skills learnt from attending workshops and engaging in the project were a useful addition to CVs, application forms and a subject of discussion at interviews. The project provided an opportunity to add real life experience to their portfolio of achievements. Students reported that when asked to give an example of leadership and management or a project they were in charge of or an achievement they were proud of they were able to draw on the experience of the award project. As the projects students managed delivered positive change and contribution to community organisations it also gave students a great sense of pride. As a result they were able to communicate their leadership achievements with enthusiasm and passion, which was picked up by employers. One respondent said she used her experiences of the project in an interview to secure a professional summer placement. Graduates mirrored that by saying they talked about their award participation during interviews for graduate roles. The award is also an opportunity to frame extracurricular activities when 'selling' oneself to an employer. It provides a structure which can also act as a reflective tool for other extracurricular activities. Despite not completing the award respondents were able to draw on aspects of the award they took part in and make it a positive and interesting talking point.

Some students who only attended the workshops identified a number of benefits which included confidence, teambuilding, making presentations. These were tools they viewed as helpful to their personal development.

Reasons for not completing the award

All the respondents indicated that they would have liked to have completed the award. There are a number of reasons why students dropped out of the award, which predominantly centre around time and commitments, followed by less common issues of personal problems, being on placement or not agreeing a project. A small number of students showed they were unable to manage their award experience. Faced with a difficulty, concern or a problem, such as a missed workshop or hand in date, students discontinued the award rather than ask for help or negotiate a solution. Failure in Higher Education means different things to different students (Brown, 2002) and for some of the students simply failing to engage in one event meant they could no longer continue with the process. Students had access to the award manager and a personal mentor who could provide guidance and help. In hindsight they reflected they should have got help - 'I could have asked for extension - up to me to ask'.

RE-DESIGNING THE AWARD

After six years of delivering the Derby Award a decision was made to evaluate the programme and look at new ways of working. The main aim was to appeal to a greater number of students. Taking into account previous experience, internal research of completers and non-completers, research of other awards and institutional priorities a new

structure of the award was proposed. It was also renamed as the Futures Award. The award can be completed within six to twelve months although there is flexibility for students to extend it. The new award is managed by the Careers and Employability Service. It has the support of the Students' Union which is using the award to recognise in excess of eighty paid and voluntary roles it offers to students.

The Futures Award is an umbrella name for an award which is being developed to encompass all extracurricular activities offered to students at the University of Derby. These activities form different themes of the award, for example, volunteering, paid work, mentoring or the Students' Union roles. Students can engage in different themes and levels of the award at the same time. All the activities recognised by the award will be added to a student's Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) to form a record of a graduate's achievements while at the university.

As a direct response to students' needs and previous experience of the award the new award consists of three levels of engagement. The lowest level is called Recognition, the middle level is Plus and the highest level is Leadership. The Recognition and Plus levels are distinguished by the number of hours of engagement in an activity, for example, volunteering. The Leadership level has the highest number of hours of engagement and also requires students to use their leadership and management skills. The old Derby Award has become the Futures Award in Leadership.

Each level of the award requires students to engage in an activity, undertake relevant training or workshops and complete assessment. The weight of engagement is appropriate to the level and is more demanding as the levels get higher. This approach is a direct response to our students' experience of the Derby Award. It became evident that students were able to engage in some activities, but the highest and demanding leadership level was too challenging for some. At the same time there was a need to recognise activities of all levels and not just the leadership level. The number of applications in the first academic term the Futures Award was offered (2013/ 2014) confirmed the need for and suitability of the new award. 160 students registered for the three levels of the Volunteering theme of the award. This is compared to 50 who would sign up to the old award at leadership level only. The high growth in interest suggests students' readiness to invest time in their employability and interest in having activities of varying levels recognised on their HEAR.

The new structure is not progressive, it allows students to enter at any chosen level, which suits their abilities and time commitments. As was the case with the previous award, students interested in gaining leadership skills can directly enter the highest level of the award. The new structure provides an opportunity for those less able to commit the time or those who may lack confidence to enter the scheme at the lower levels. The Recognition level of the award is a gentle introduction to extracurricular activities. It gives students who would not consider the old award an opportunity to try the award with minimum involvement (25 hours total). It is hoped it will act as a springboard for students to move on to higher levels or other themes of the award. It also allows students to try activities and skills at various levels. Assessment at these levels is intended to be valuable and useful to students avoiding assessment for assessment's sake. Therefore the assessment aimed to practise and demonstrate skills likely to be required in a graduate role. These were for example

presentations, business reports, social media profiles and CVs.

CONCLUSIONS

Practice and research based findings indicate the value of engaging in the process part of the award to develop and learn 'lifewide' skills as part of formal Higher Education experience. This research study, involving a small sample of thirteen students who engaged in the Derby Award but who did not complete it, identified some benefits of engagement in the process. Perceived benefits included: gaining an understanding of the value of networking, opportunities to network with employers and university staff, development of a variety of practical employability skills, gaining real life experience, learning to reflect on, self-assess and articulate one's employability skills. Students reported that engaging with employers through the award had a positive impact on employment. The findings suggest that even with short or fragmented engagement students can gain some valuable informal learning out of the process which may be beneficial to their employability. At the very least it may raise their awareness of the careers service.

From the point of view of the careers department the award acts as a 'net' to capture students interested in employability. It gives the department an opportunity to help students engage, inspire, build internal and external networks, find sources of information and help. It helps involved students gain recognition for their work and recognise their skills, a task they often find difficult to do. It also encourages students who are less involved to begin thinking about their employability and find relevant experiences. For the careers department the award allows positive relationship development with previously unengaged students. At an institutional level the award may also provide a strategy for student retention.

This chapter provides an example of how an institution engaged in an extracurricular/ skills/ employability award and learnt from its experiences to evolve with its students' needs to create an improved and more sustainable award. The University of Derby created its first award and successfully ran it for six years. The award was at a high level of engagement. It was demanding in terms of time and effort and it was regarded as challenging. These were positive features which stretched students to think about developing graduate skills. Its main disadvantage was the small number of students it engaged. Hence the new award - the Futures Award - was developed.

There is no doubt that completing the whole award is what students should be aiming for in order to take full advantage of what is on offer and demonstrate what they have learnt and how they have developed. This is particularly evident with regard to the assessment which is one of the most valuable aspects of the award. Findings indicated that the non-completers rarely engaged in the assessment. Therefore the important aspect of the award which focuses students on reflection and articulation of skills was omitted. Those who engaged in the assessment reported it to be one of the most valuable aspects of the award.

There is no doubt further research is needed to learn more about the process and product of extracurricular awards. In particular there is a clear need for award providers to suggest creative ways of helping students reflect and articulate their skills. One suggestion may be to design more ongoing formative reflection and assessment into the award rather than

focus on reflection and assessment only at the end of an award. Further research is also needed to establish ways to help students succeed in completing the award.

Learning from research and experience the new Futures Award provides a response to students' needs. There is evidence to suggest that to be useful and successful an award needs to be compatible with an institution, its aims and its students' requirements. It has to evolve with time and emerging students' and employers' needs.

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