

AGCAS Skills Award Case Studies – Queen Mary Students' Union 'QM Skills Award'

Background

QM Skills Award was launched in January 2015 by Queen Mary Students' Union. Skills Award was launched to help students develop transferable skills, recognise their skills and market their skills. Skills Award also serves as a way to reward students that take on a role of responsibility in the Students' Union by giving them access to the exclusive Skills Award training sessions and recognition of their professional and personal development.

Structure

To receive the Skills Award, students are required to meet three criteria:

1. Undertake a role of responsibility in the Students' Union (e.g. Course Rep, Buddy Mentor or Sport Club Leader).
2. Take part in a minimum of three training sessions.
3. Take part in a reflection session.

The requirements must be completed between the beginning of the academic year and the end of March.

Training sessions take place during term 1 and term 2. We aim to organise a varied range of training to accommodate the interests and needs of different students. Training sessions in 2018/2019 included Introduction to Project Management, Equity at Work and Graphic Design. The reflection sessions take place during term 2. The reflection sessions use a range of exercises to help students recognise the skills they have developed and understand how they can present their skills to employers.

Recognition

Skills Award participants receive a certificate to show that they have completed the award. The completers can choose whether they want to receive their certificate in one of the Students' Union award ceremonies (e.g. Education Awards or Societies Awards) or collect the certificate from our reception.

From 2018/2019, completers will also get their Skills Award included on their HEAR.

Size/Engagement

Skills Award is open to students that hold a role of responsibility in the Students' Union. This includes Course Reps, paid Student Staff, Society Committee Members and elected representatives on Student Council. More than 25000 students attend Queen Mary University of London, and of these, approx. 1500 students are eligible to take part in Skills Award.

In 2018/19, 301 students signed up to take part in Skills Award, and 119 of these completed all the requirements. The participants come from all academic schools and include undergraduates, postgraduates on taught programmes and postgraduate research students.

Resourcing

Skills Award is run by the Students' Union Employability Team, which consists of the Student Skills and Development Coordinator (0.5 FTE) and the Student Engagement Administrator (0.2 FTE).

The training sessions are delivered by the Student Skills and Development Coordinator, Students' Union staff and external trainers. The reflection sessions are delivered by the Student Skills and Development Coordinator and the Student Engagement Administrator.

Evaluation and Impact

Skills Award is evaluated in three different ways.

Firstly, participants are asked to complete a short feedback survey after each session. The survey is online, and participants are asked to complete the survey on their phones during the last few minutes of the session. The response rate is usually high (above 50%), and the feedback is used to make improvements to sessions.

Secondly, all participants (including those that haven't completed all the requirements) are asked to complete a feedback survey at the end of the year. This survey is used to improve the structure of Skills Award, the accessibility of sessions and understand the barriers to participation. The feedback is also used to shape the training programme for next year.

Thirdly, all participants are asked to complete a skills audit when they sign up to Skills Award and at the end of the academic year. This data is used to understand how the students perceive their skills improvement. Including students that haven't completed the requirements allow us to compare the perceived skills improvements for students that have completed the requirements and those that have not.

Key Successes and Challenges

One of the most important strengths of Skills Award is its embeddedness in the Students' Union. Because Skills Award is run by the Students' Union, it is possible to make use of the expertise of Students' Union staff to deliver a varied programme of training at a low cost. For example the Graphic Design training was delivered by the Students' Union's Communications and Marketing Team. It also enables us to target our promotions to the eligible students by using existing platforms such as the Societies Newsletter.

The biggest challenge for Skills Award is to ensure students attend the sessions they have signed up to. To reduce the rate of non-attendance, we have implemented a new cancellation policy and sent email reminders before each session.

Our best advice to teams that are setting up a new award, would be to listen to the target group. What do the students want? Which gaps do they see in the current offer? How can you structure the award to make it accessible to students with different needs and interests?

Future Developments

Following feedback from students, the Employability Team is currently considering whether a tiered system could be implemented. A tiered system would help us recognise the additional efforts that some students are currently putting in to Skills Award by attending more than the required training sessions and taking on multiple roles of responsibility.

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