

AGCAS Skills Award Case Studies:

BRISTOL PLUS AWARD

Background

As a key commitment of the University of Bristol's Employability Strategy, the Bristol PLUS Award and Outstanding Award piloted in 2009-2010 in order to:

1. Recognise and reward students who have gained significant professional and life skills through involvement in extra-curricular activities.
2. Enable students to reflect on skills they have gained, and learn how to articulate these skills successfully to potential employers.
3. Incentivise students who already engage in some extra-curricular activities, to develop new skills in different areas such as sport, IT, work experience and societies

Structure

Students need to attend an introductory talk in order to register. This talk is for information purposes only, and students decide for themselves if they would like to register after attending the talk. The Award period runs from September to June. (We are no longer having an extended deadline for PGTs).

Students must:

1. Attend an introductory talk to register interest and find out how to get started.
1. Carry out minimum 50h of non-accredited experience, which can be paid, unpaid, internships, voluntary work, caring, coaching etc. All experience is verified through automatic online references.
2. Attend 4 employability-related workshops, one of which must be related to interview skills. Can be at Careers Service, Students' Union, Departmental or externally led.
3. Proven attendance/involvement in an activity putting skills into practice. This must be a minimum of 6h, interactive, and in some form reflective. Typical examples include students union or society involvement, course representative
4. Reflective Report – 400 words detailing how students have developed their professional and life skills as a result of these 3 activities.
5. Attend a Final Review – a concluding interactive group session. These are workshops taking place throughout the year and providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their activity, identify strengths and weaknesses, and plan their development beyond the Award.

Students who have achieved a PLUS Award can put themselves forward for the **Outstanding Award**.

This involves:

1. Attending a compulsory introductory talk, which run from September to February.
2. Carrying out an extra-curricular activity for minimum 20h meeting the skills requirements in one of the following categories: Innovation and Enterprise, Global Citizenship, or Sustainable Futures
3. Applying for the chosen category
4. If successful, attend an interview after completing preparatory tasks online. The final outcome of the Outstanding PLUS Award may be a pass, merit, or distinction.

Recognition

- Students receive a certificate and get invited to the Student Union Awards, where the highest scoring Outstanding Award students are nominated in an employability category.

Size/Engagement

- Open to all students
- In 2010-2011 91% of completers were UG, 71% of them were finalists, 13% were international students
- 2009-2010 450+ registered (160+ completed with 25% successful at Outstanding Award)
- 2010-2011 800+ registered (270+ completed with 19% successful at Outstanding Award)
- Certificates are signed by Director of Student Services & Employability and the Pro VC for Education.
- 43 Endorsing Employers with 6 sponsoring specific activities including Intensive Skills Days and the Outstanding Award Presentation Days
- Became an annual programme in 2014-15. 646 registered, 481 completed
- In 2015-16 – 751 registered, 487 completed.
- In 2016-17 – 1140 registered, 682 completed

Resourcing

Bristol PLUS Award Coordinator 1 full time role, and a term time only 7 hour per week student intern. Other Careers Service staff assist with running the final review workshops.

From Sept 2017 there will be 1 full time Bristol PLUS Manager role and 1 full time Bristol PLUS Officer role, with another full time Officer to begin in February 2018.

Evaluation and Impact

Focus groups and feedback has been very positive from students, university staff and our endorsing employers. 100% of students who completed the Award in 2015/2016 and provided feedback said they would recommend the Award to others.

We produce an annual report evaluating student data on the Award. This report looks at:

- Student demographics on the Award (year group, faculty, gender, WP etc)
- What they do – common types of work experience, workshops & intensive skills activities
- Progress of students on the Award, by analysing the differences in their response to a career readiness question asked upon registration for the year of their course, and again at the conclusion of the Award
- Destinations of past cohorts via DLHE data
- Student feedback

Student feedback:

“The Bristol PLUS Award encouraged me to explore my career options early, think about my employability and gain valuable work experience. I am leaving Bristol a more professional, organised, and confident person and employed!”

“I feel that the Bristol PLUS Award have been a valuable addition to my university education. Not only has it improved my employability but it is nice to know that my extra-curricular achievements will be recognised”

“Completing the PLUS Award has made me aware of my strengths and weaknesses with respect to the skills which employers expect of candidates. I intend to use the knowledge which I've gained to sharpen my strengths and improve my weaknesses as I pursue further education, and ultimately employment.”

“Had I not heard about the Bristol PLUS Award, or indeed taken part in it, I would have missed out on a huge number of potentially career advancing opportunities”

Key Successes and Challenges

- What works well – introductory talks, and final review workshops, online administration and data capture via CareerHub workflows, keeping it simple and uniform for all students – we got rid of all our tailored offerings as we have requirements that are flexible enough for individuals to tailor it to their own needs and interpret it how they see fit.
- In the concluding final review workshop we do some activities getting students to think about how they can personalise their PLUS award to support their future ambitions. In addition, the simplicity of it makes it easier for non-Careers colleagues to remember key information about the Award which helps with promotion, brand recognition, and reputation across the university.
- The biggest challenge is probably drop-out rate, we have around a 60% conversion but would like this to be higher. Linked to this is deciding appropriate penalties for those who do not complete by the deadline but want to continue the following academic year.

What advice would you give to others setting up an Award?

Do not overcomplicate the Award structure or requirements, have clear guidelines and deadlines which are clearly communicated (for us via the intro talk) and adhered to. We do not believe in making it too easy for students. – This ensures fairness, maintains the Awards credibility and gives it more status with employers.

Future Developments

- Further targeting 2nd year students
- Combatting drop-out rate by working on more tangible incentives, such as exclusive employer events
- Re-evaluating employer relationships and benefits

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