

The Chester Difference Award

Background

The Chester Difference Award (CDA) was established in 2014-15 as a pilot project with 40 students. At that time Careers and Employability (C&E) were offering a range of initiatives in order to enhance students' employability. We were also aware that many students volunteered and worked part-time alongside their studies and wanted to provide an opportunity for students to gain recognition for all their extra-curricular activities.

The aim of introducing the CDA, was to encourage student's engagement in the wide variety of extra-curricular activities available at the University of Chester and within the local community to make them more employable, whilst creating a mechanism to help collaborate effectively with partners across the wider University, voluntary agencies and local employers. The CDA also acted as a vehicle to enable us to promote C&E's services and initiatives

During 2020, we adapted the CDA quite significantly as we felt that the original points-based system did not fully reflect the purpose of the award and, although students were gaining recognition for a range of extra-curricular activities, some found it a challenge to articulate the skills they had developed. We also wanted to open the process up for recent graduates to access and a change was needed to the structure to enable this to happen. Therefore, we decided to move away from a points-based system to a new pathway-based structure linked to the Career Readiness Survey. The CDA continues to have the aim of providing participants with recognition for extra-curricular activities that enhance employability. The redevelopment aims help participants to decide on activities to complete, reflect on their experience and articulate skills to employers.

Structure

Participants start their CDA journey by completing a registration form where they can identify which pathways they wish to take part in. The pathways relate to areas of career discovery, skill development and understanding the steps involved in securing employment or starting a business. The pathways can be completed in any order and multiple pathways can be worked on at the same time. Participants are required to log their involvement in activities and at the end of each pathway, they are required to complete a form with questions encouraging reflection and/ or articulation of skills. Staff review the submissions and provide feedback.

There are three levels to the CDA:

- The Chester Difference Award – 2 pathways
- The Chester Difference Plus Award – 4 pathways
- The Chester Difference Excellence Award – 6 pathways

Recognition

The CDA is included on a student's HEAR record, as a method of recording their individual achievements. We also host an annual celebration event where certificates are formally presented to participants. Representatives from the local business community, including the voluntary sector, are invited to attend, along with members of the University's Senior Management Team and academic colleagues; this is an opportunity for them to celebrate the achievements of individuals receiving a level of the CDA and to contribute congratulatory speeches. We also nominate one student for a Valedictory Award each year. During the academic year 2019-20, we adapted the celebration event to a virtual event which received over 400 views.

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Size/Engagement

All students on foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are eligible to register on the CDA. This year we opened up the CDA for graduates from the University of up to two years. Currently we have in excess of 1,000 participants.

The number of award recipients for each year is:

- 2015-2016 – 68 award recipients
- 2016-2017 – 104 award recipients
- 2017- 2018 – 121 award recipients
- 2018-2019 – 171 award recipients
- 2019-2020 - 151 award recipients

Platform/IT System

The delivery, monitoring and administration of the CDA is currently undertaken using CareerHub.

Reporting

We currently report on key statistics using CareerHub, as well as using Excel to provide annual reporting. We primarily look at participants' progression through the different award stages, completion rates and also the diversity breakdown of the participants engaged with the CDA in line with the requirements of The Office for Students (OfS).

Resourcing

Responsibility for delivering the CDA lies within the work of The Guidance and Training Team within Careers and Employability. It forms part of the role of a full-time Training and Events Coordinator, full-time Training Assistant and a part-time Career Consultant.

Evaluation and Impact

Award recipients are asked to complete an online feedback questionnaire at the end of the academic year. The team gather case studies from participants who successfully complete a level of the CDA, to encourage future participants to engage. We also meet annually with all CDA partners to review the continuing effectiveness of the CDA. Now the process is closely aligned with the Career Readiness survey we intend to track progress made in relation to Career Readiness. We also review Graduate Outcomes data.

Key Successes and Challenges

Successes:

- Introducing the use of a CareerHub workflow has streamlined the administrative processes and has enabled participants to self-manage their own progress through their award
- Most recent figures show that 78.2% of graduates completing the CDA are in high skilled employment or graduate level further study 15 months after their course. This compares to 73.9% for all graduates in the same population (UK-domiciled full-time first-degree leavers, Graduate Outcomes 17/18).
- The CDA brand is well-recognised by colleagues and students across the University. We are always striving for new ways of raising awareness of the CDA.

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- Creating a process that is flexible and tailored to individual participants based on their interests, goals and circumstances ensures that each participant has a unique journey through the CDA
- Many of our award recipients are enthusiastic champions of the CDA and it is inspiring to see and hear about their experiences through the process.
- The CDA team has successfully adapted the process and activities to ensure that participants could complete the award in a virtual setting in March 2020.

Challenges:

- Effectively resourcing and having the staff time to support the expansion of the CDA
- Encouraging participants to progress through to completion.
- Moving the service entirely online due to COVID-19 in March 2020 when the CDA has traditionally focused on face-to-face activities. See more about how we did this in the October 2020 edition of Phoenix:
https://issuu.com/agcas_00/docs/phenix_issue_161_october_2020/?ff (pages 69-70)

Advice:

- Ensure you have enough staff time allocated to work on the award and perhaps begin with a pilot project
- Structure the award according to your institution and be prepared to be flexible in order to make changes
- Ensure you have clarity regarding the purpose of the award. At Chester the purpose is for participants to gain recognition for extra-curricular activity in order to enhance their employability

Future Developments

We are developing a range of case studies and will be using alumni of the CDA to work with and inspire current participants. We hope to increase the number of participants each year by increasing student engagement and awareness of the CDA across the wider university. We are planning ways to make the CDA more approachable to graduates before doing additional promotion to graduates in September 2021.

We are responding and adapting the new structure based on feedback and will consider additional pathways as the CDA develops.

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