

AGCAS Skills Award Case Study: Degree Plus Award Queen's University Belfast

Background

The Degree Plus Award was launched at Queen's University Belfast in 2008 as an employability initiative within the University's Education Strategy. It was established as a vehicle to drive greater student participation in a broad range of relevant and valuable extra-curricular activities, as a means encouraging them to reflect on their personal employability profile, gaps and opportunities for development. Through the activities that comprise Degree Plus, students are also provided with an opportunity to gain practice in articulating their skills, achievements and experience to others (e.g. careers consultants and employers).

Structure

Degree Plus is a non-compulsory Award that encourages students to develop skills and experience through extra-curricular work-related learning. In order to complete the Award, students must engage in at least one substantial approved "activity". Each activity goes through a formal review process where the provider must complete a written application for review by a panel before being published to students on the Degree Plus website. Each provider is required to formally demonstrate to a panel how their activity meets the requirements for Degree Plus. Each approved activity is extra-curricular, requires significant; intense and active engagement on the part of a student to complete (typically 35-100 hours) and provides clear opportunity for the development of a set of Degree Plus skills as part of their personal career development plan. These Degree Plus Skills have been informed by research and are drawn up in consultation with employers and other relevant bodies (e.g. World Economic Forum).

The provider must also provide details of monitoring processes to ensure completion of the activity, including the assessed element. Assessments must be in a format that provides the student will practice in typical recruitment selection processes e.g. it consists of a formal application form, oral presentation, interview, reflective report or employability portfolio.

Students may complete Degree Plus at any stage, including during summer vacations, from first enrolling at Queen's through to 1st of November or 1st of April in their Final year (depending on whether they are graduating in Winter or Summer).

The Award is differentiated into Degree Plus for Undergraduates, Graduate Plus for Post Graduate Taught students and Researcher Plus for Post Graduate Research students. This has been done to recognise achievement alongside the different levels of study and acts as an incentive for students who may have already gained an Award during previous study at Queen's, to continue to engage, develop, learn and enhance their employability through Degree Plus. It is also one of several initiatives that is helping to encourage all PG student to engage with extra-curricular development courses and opportunities that are specifically provided for them alongside their studies.

Recognition

All students who successfully complete Degree Plus:

- receive a Degree Plus, Graduate Plus or Researcher Plus certificate from the Vice Chancellor at their Graduation Ceremony
- have the details of their Award formally recorded on their Student Information Systems Record and in their HEAR.
- The Award is sponsored by employers (currently there are 3 corporate partners). In addition, some employers have sought accreditation for extra-curricular internships that they offer e.g. for students from specific degree pathways to apply to.

Size/Engagement

Degree Plus is open to any student of any discipline or level, including PGT and PGR (i.e. 21000+ students). When it was first established in 2008, 341 students successfully completed the Award. Around 2000 of Queen's current students had gained the Degree Plus Award by Summer 2019. Of these, around 1100+ students were in Final Years (the remainder have "banked" their Award in advance of their Final Year). Degree Plus also facilitates students who wish to complete the Award on more than one occasion via different experiential activities. Around 20% of students elect to do this at present.

The table in Appendix to show total number of Awards achieved by Degree Level.

Resourcing

As Degree Plus has grown, it has required more staff and IT resource. The Award is a University-wide initiative that is led by a Senior Careers Consultant and supported by the wider careers team (including clerical admin staff at peak points in the year). There are also over 150 providers who deliver the Degree Plus activities. In addition, there is broad buy in from academics and other student support service staff across the University. This includes the Student Information Support Team, Language Centre, University Graduation Team and Students Union). Degree Plus is very much a University-wide initiative. No specific calculation has been made of the precise FTE figure for the staff resource involved in delivering and managing Degree Plus, but it is significant.

Evaluation and Impact

An annual evaluation of Degree Plus is undertaken each year and shared for comment with sponsoring employers, academics and other Award partners. This includes reviewing the levels of student participation in, and currency of, approved activities. It also analyses the numbers of students participating by School plus feedback comments from providers. In terms of student feedback, providers (including the Careers Service) carry out evaluations with students who participate in their activity. Students also have opportunity to provide feedback via our First and Second Year annual surveys. In addition, the Careers Service very recently completed student focus group and an employer focus group of the Award. These were discussed, evaluated and were used to inform a Design Thinking exercise for Degree Plus in 2018-19.

Key Successes and Challenges

Overall, Degree Plus has proven to be a very successful vehicle for encouraging:

- students to consider their employability from an early stage in their course and get involved and get involved in the career and personal development opportunities that are right for them.
- The development of new, work experience and sector relevant activities to help students gain better insights into the graduate workplace
- helping to raise the profile and understanding to the need to provide support and opportunity for the enhancement of skill and employability development across the University (Degree Plus is a very well recognised brand at Queen's).
- a process through which areas of the University and wider community, beyond the careers service, to provide activities or gain recognition for their employability enhancement initiatives e.g. Estates Service Green Impact initiative for students.
- A means through which employers can check for validation of extra-curricular activity which students refer to at interview selection processes.

In terms of challenges, there appears to be a general view in the sector that University Skills Award are not yet broadly understood by employers. However, we continue to emphasis to students that enabling students to articulate their personal strengths, achievements and experiences to others is one of the key learning objectives of the Award.

Effectively communicating the benefits and processes associated with the Award is an ongoing challenge. In working to provide a rigorous and demanding Skills Award, Degree Plus can, at times, be a large and complex Award to explain quickly to students and employers.

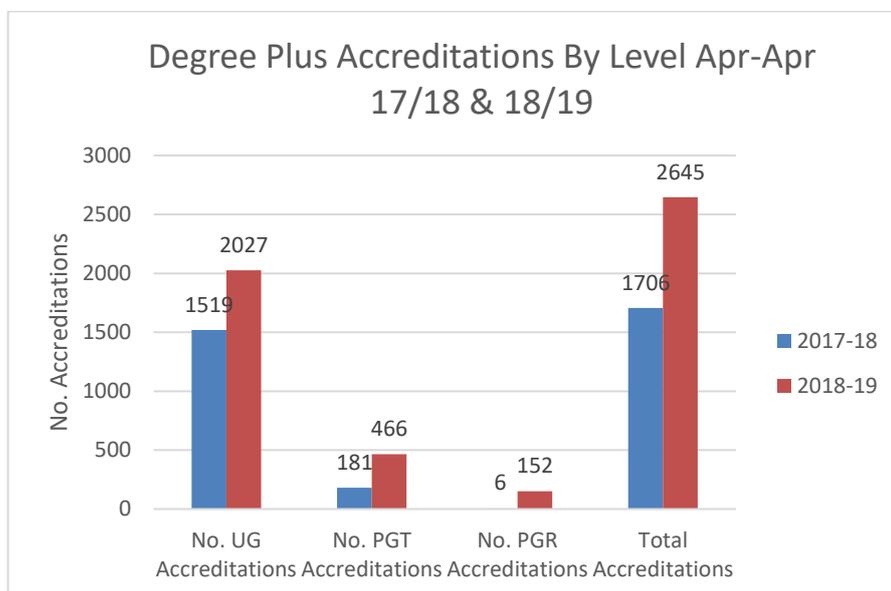
Monitoring and communicating with providers to ensure that they keep to the commitments that they make in the initial application is important but time-consuming process that requires effective record keeping, sample audit checks and other quality management processes.

The success of Degree Plus means that both the number of students seeking to achieve the Award and the number of providers wishing to have their activities approved continues to grow. This has implications for the demand on staff resource and the need regular website maintenance and design update, training processes for colleagues and other management activity.

Future Developments

In the immediate future, we plan to use the findings from our recent student and employer feedback exercises plus the design thinking exercise to help us to address the two key challenges listed above.

APPENDIX



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