AGCAS Skills Award Case Studies:

THE ULSTER EDGE AWARD

Background

- The Ulster EDGE Award was launched in 2011, it is free to participate and open to full-time and part-time undergraduates.
- The Award has 2 levels: The Ulster EDGE Award and the Ulster EDGE Excel Award.
- The Award provides formal institutional recognition and evidence of student engagement of activities beyond formal study. It focuses on the development of students' personal and professional skills that will equip them to fulfil their career ambitions.
- The Ulster EDGE Award has been recently redeveloped to a) fit into the University strategic plan and b) to improve the student experience.

Structure

Students participate in the EDGE Award by completing three steps:

- First they have to register online.
- The second step is to choose and complete four/six activities from at least two of a range of categories to evidence their achievement. They have the length of their degree programme to complete the activities but each activity must be completed and signed off by the verifier within that academic year.
- The third step is to apply for the Award via a written application that clearly demonstrate how engagement with the Award has enhanced their employability and capability as reflective learners.

We have recently moved from four to six categories of activity:

Category 1	Career & Skills Development
Category 2	Civic Contribution
Category 3	Work experience, placements & internships
Category 4	Subject specific opportunities
Category 5	Developing a global vision
Category 6	Student's Union activities, roles & societies

The Award structure includes activities provided by central departments, the Students Union, academics and employers. Currently there are over 100 activities available through the Ulster EDGE Award.

In September 2014 an advanced level award called 'Ulster EDGE Excel' was launched in recognition of students who have demonstrated exceptional dedication to enhancing their employability. These students complete a minimum of six activities from across two of the six categories of the Award. The selection process includes the completion of a detailed application form and attendance at an employer-led selection interview. More recently these interviews have been conducted online.

Recognition

- Since 2013, Award recipients are presented with Ulster's EDGE Award certificates at graduation within their degree certificate folder. All EDGE graduates are listed in the graduation booklet.
- Since 2014, the Award is also added to students' HEAR.
- EDGE Excel recipients are eligible for the 'Ulster EDGE Excel Student of the Year Award' prize.

Size/Engagement

- The Ulster EDGE Award is currently only open to all full-time and part-time undergraduates.
- The most recent cohort of Ulster EDGE Award/EDGE Excel Award graduates totalled 250.
- The Award has been embedded as part of 'Ulster's Learning and Teaching: Implementation and Review Framework' as a performance indicator of employability. The Learning and Teaching Committee recommended that from June 2013 that all Faculties were to aim for 50% of all first and second year full-time students within the University to be registered on EDGE. This has resulted in increased engagement from academic staff in promoting the EDGE to their students and has also increased the number of EDGE activities provided by academics for their students to complete.
- Student registrations have increased year on year with registrations for 2016/17 at over 5000.

Resourcing

- The management of the Award is the responsibility of Employability Manager, Brian Byers with Information Manager's Donna Caldwell and Angela Hamilton co-ordinating much of the day-to-day activity in relation to student and staff engagement.
- A team of Career Development Consultant's support faculty and student engagement. Staff involved in the management of the EDGE Award also have other significant responsibilities i.e. staff roles aren't fully dedicated to the Ulster EDGE Award.

Evaluation and Impact

- Students were surveyed directly after graduation regarding their perception of the value of the EDGE Award to their employability prospects. 45% (i.e. 86) of graduates responded and were very positive about the Award. The overarching theme was a substantial increase in students' confidence in their abilities.

"I gained valuable confidence and expertise. Now, I am a more outgoing person and I am developing the necessary skills that employers are looking for." (Sport and Exercise Science student)

- EDGE graduates were surveyed again 5 months after they graduated and 31% (i.e. 57) responded. They were very positive about the EDGE's contribution to their skills set. However, as the EDGE Award graduating cohorts are still relatively small numbers, it must be considered exploratory in nature.

"I feel that the EDGE award has allowed me to build on my confidence which has reinforced my ability to speak to potential employers, manage and deal with peers' grievances, and enhanced my self esteem." (Adult Nursing graduate)

- Forty employers were surveyed regarding the Award and all of them stated that they were in favour of its focus. The majority (95%, i.e. 38) felt that, having been made aware of the Award, they will look for it as a differentiator in the recruitment process.

"It's a brilliant idea! We find lots of grads are not overly commercially aware and I think this Award scheme would assist with this." (Axiom)

Key Successes and Challenges

- **What has worked well for your Award?**
  - One of the key successes has been the development of innovative activities in collaboration with employers and academic colleagues. Subject specific activities closely linked to industry compliment other generic skills development activities.
  - In summer 2017 we moved to online employer led interviews for the EDGE Excel Award and that worked very well.
  - Newly developed webpage with an embedded online chat service has been well received.
- **What have been the main challenges in developing/delivering your Award?**
  - The University is coming through a period of change but as well as creating some challenges the new strategic direction has provided us with an opportunity to redevelop the Award so that it positively and clearly impacts broader University objectives relating to civic contribution and global vision.
  - Staff time and resource to really engage staff and students in a more targeted way. Back end systems to manage activity and reporting is an on-going challenge.
- **What advice would you give to others setting up an Award?**
  - Try to combine strategic relevance with a clear, meaningful offering to students.
  - Give serious thought to how you will 'assess' students reflection and self awareness. Achieving the balance between meaningful assessment and going too far is challenging.
  - Don't over-complicate the award and try to recognise activities that students are already involved in.

Future Developments

- Reconsideration / Redevelopment of the final 'assessment' for students.
- There is a body of work to be carried out with employers in relation to creating an awareness of the HEAR and the EDGE Award.
- Further development of back end system to enhance activity monitoring and reporting
- Development of online experience for students e.g. integrating a new 'search' facility for users looking at activities.
- Development of new pathways for subject areas.
- Improved targeted communication for students at different stages.

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