

AGCAS Skills Award Case Studies

Background

The Bolton Award is the name given to the extra-curricular employability award at the University of Bolton. It was launched as a pilot project in 2014/15 in response to a number of internal and external drivers, some of which include:

- To support the roll out of the Higher Educational Achievement Record (HEAR)
- To address the growing, internal focus on helping students to acquire graduate attributes and skills
- To help evidence and consolidate existing good practice, providing a framework for collaborative partnership working, both internally and externally.
- To allow students to receive recognition for their personal development gained through participation in skills-related activities outside their degree programme.
- To ensure students have access to career development and practical activities, which will enhance employment and progression.

The main aim of the Bolton Award was to enable students to articulate and reflect on their skills development in readiness for graduate employment.

Structure

In order to gain the Bolton Award, participants must complete the following steps:

- 1) Attend an appointment with a Careers Adviser – this meeting is focused on developing an action plan, and looking at how the Award can help to shape future career thinking.
- 2) Complete a minimum of 35 hours of employability activity. This includes a minimum of 15 hours employability 'experience' (such as paid or voluntary work), 15 hours of employability 'enrichment' (such as society participation or additional training) and 5 'core' careers workshops (covering aspects such as interview techniques and writing application forms). Students can complete as many additional hours as they choose.
- 3) Have their CV checked by a Careers Adviser, with the aim of using the feedback to submit an updated CV and an 800 word 'reflective statement', which encourages them to look back on their own experiences and consider how they have developed as a result of participation in the Award.
- 4) Participate in a mock interview with the Project Officer and an additional member of staff (either a Careers Advisor or a Bolton Award 'Champion').
- 5) Receive a certificate of completion. Three students will also receive a Platinum Award, designed to reward those who go above and beyond with their commitment.

Recognition

Students who successfully complete and pass the Bolton Award are invited to receive a certificate at a special Celebration Event, held in April each year. The Ceremony celebrates achievement and is attended by the Pro-Vice Chancellor, and other key, senior personnel.

Completion is also factored in to the HEAR, with a bronze, silver or gold accreditation given, depending on the level of completion.

Size/Engagement

The Bolton Award has been designed with flexibility and accessibility in mind. All undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at the University of Bolton's UK campuses are eligible to participate in the Award, and they can start and complete it at entirely their own pace.

We administer a database of students who have registered their interest in the Bolton Award which is carried over from year to year. The database currently contains 500+ students.

We receive interest from over 200 students per academic year, and on average 30% of those complete, and receive their certificate of achievement within the same year.

The subject areas that have a more positive and prolific engagement with the Award are Psychology and Health and Social Care.

Resourcing

The Bolton Award is administered by a 1.0 FTE Bolton Award Project Officer, who oversees all aspects of the programme from marketing to delivery, and who is based in the Student Union office. The Award Officer works closely in tandem with the Careers and Employability team. Careers Advisers are involved in delivering the 1-1 guidance appointment as well as delivering the core employability workshops. Academic and Professional Support staff are recruited to act as Champions. All project developments are reported into and managed by the Head of Careers and Employability.

Evaluation and Impact

Currently, participant experiences of the Award are evaluated via a self-reported measure of overall employability at the beginning and end of the Award, supplemented by a more detailed completers' questionnaire. Monthly metrics are also collected, focusing on student engagement (such as sign ups) and activity undertaken by the Project Officer. Impact is measured through a graduate questionnaire sent to graduates who have completed the Award and plans are being made to expand the scope and detail of the Award's evaluation through a more explicit focus on groups with lower progression rates and a more robust pre, mid and post evaluation format incorporating a broader range of questions.

Key Successes and Challenges

The Award has a clear and established framework in place and benefits from wider staff buy-in, such as through Bolton Award 'Champions'. These are staff members in various departments who actively promote the Award to students and get involved with its delivery, such as through supporting mock interviews. In addition to its flexible and accessible nature, the Award has benefited from being administered through an automated CareerHub workflow, which allows the Project Officer to more carefully and efficiently track student progress. Likewise, students also benefit from the use of the workflow as it allows them to plan and organise their own progress.

However, challenges do remain, chiefly with regard to maintaining student interest once they have signed up and ensuring that they complete all elements. New developments are looking to address these problems, including a marketing campaign focused on bringing the student experience of the Bolton Award to life through a greater use of mediums such as video content and student blogs. Focus groups are also being held with students and staff members to streamline processes and remove any barriers to access that students have.

Advice to others?

In order for extra-curricular programmes such as skills awards to be successful it is imperative that they are as simple as possible to access and complete, whilst also striking an appropriate balance between rewarding substantial and relevant employability experience without being too demanding.

Future Developments

Some of the future developments planned over the course of the next three years include:

- New brand identity and marketing collateral to be launched
- To increase the number of students completing the Award each year, and converting those who show initial interest.
- To develop online video content, student blogs and utilise positive case studies to demonstrate progress, achievement and improve aspiration.
- To analyse key Award data and monitor the engagement from widening participation cohorts.
- To look at how we utilise employers more effectively in the design and delivery of the Award.

Email contact

Nick Wright: n.wright@bolton.ac.uk

Website:

<https://www.bolton.ac.uk/careers/bolton-award/>