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Work-related Learning and Co-curricular Activities

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Background and context

Universities have an important role in developing the skills and competencies of students so that they are well equipped for the world of work. For some time universities have been responsive to the 'skills agenda', placing emphasis on the development of a more work-orientated provision in higher education. Most, if not all, universities now better prepare graduates for employment in terms of enhancing their skills development and providing more structured work-related learning opportunities to boost graduate employability. It is also widely recognised that students develop and enhance key skills through their academic studies as well as through activities undertaken alongside their degree programme. The STAR (Students Taking Active Roles) Award at the University of Aberdeen recognises the learning derived from co-curricular activities. The scheme focuses on the transferable skills and competencies that students develop and enhance through their involvement in activities organised by the Aberdeen University Students' Association. Participants include students involved in sports, societies and charities. The Award has

been influenced by the results of a number of small-scale pilots which have taken place in earlier academic years. It operates alongside the academic curriculum and captures the benefits students gain from their non-academic achievements, offering students the opportunity to engage with work-related learning through an accredited programme (Moreland, 2005).

Developing the University's Co-curricular Award

Before the University decided to embark upon a scheme to recognise the non-academic contribution of students, it was important to learn about similar developments in other higher education institutions. At the time it was also prudent for the University to consider a number of key issues, such as what type of recognition would the University bestow? What types of activities should be included? What evidence would be required to ensure that students have undertaken the activities and to a reasonable standard? In order to start answering these and other questions, a desk-based study was commissioned in 2007-08. As part of this study, various co-curricular

schemes employed by other UK universities were investigated. A briefing paper was produced to summarise the research, the paper also contained several key recommendations including one for a pilot non-academic recognition scheme for Students' Association postholders in the second-half session of 2007-08. Since the initial small-scale pilot in 2008, the key strategic driver for our evolving co-curricular award has been the University's Curriculum Reform Project, which places emphasis on the entire student experience and the enhancement of student employability through the co-curriculum. During the various stages of the award's development, a systematic review to identify good practice and areas for improvement was conducted with various stakeholders. Many new ideas have been generated and new directions taken, particularly through focus groups, including the introduction of employer-led student skills development workshops in 2008-09. The current upscaled Aberdeen STAR Award draws upon aspects of interactions with other institutions, but also aims to offer students a co-curricular award which is institutionally distinct.

The STAR Award framework

During the academic year the STAR Award provides a foundation for ongoing skills development, enabling students to recognise transferable skills and personal qualities beyond the purely academic curriculum. The scheme also encourages students to

articulate their co-curricular learning, deepening their reflective learning. Students' Association postholders are required to record and submit evidence of their activities and reflect on their experiences, particularly with respect to transferable skills development in their role. Enabling students to learn about themselves is an important aspect of work-related learning (Gibson & Howells, 2004). Each participant also has a mentor, from either the Students' Association or Careers Service, to help them understand and learn from their day-to-day experiences within their non-academic role and to recognise and identify opportunities within such roles to develop new skills. Mentors also provide encouragement to help students see the scheme through and provide formative feedback on their work, helping them draw out important ideas and reflect on how to make improvement to their STAR Award assessments. Students meet their mentor at least twice during the project.

Co-curricular assessment

Ensuring students undertake their activities to an appropriate standard relative to their Students' Association job description is an important aspect of the scheme. This is monitored by students recording and submitting evidence of the activities they have undertaken and their contribution therein, plus a reflective log which describes and explains how they feel their skills and attributes have developed during their time as a Students' Association postholder. Final assessment of students is

undertaken by a team comprising the Students' Association, University of Aberdeen staff (including the conveners of the Academic Standards Committees) and, given the strong emphasis on transferable skills, representatives of the local job market. At the end of the academic year successful students are awarded a formal STAR certificate by the University of Aberdeen. This certificate can be taken to an employer by an awardee as proof that they have reached a prescribed standard.

Employers' perspectives

Local employers are involved in developing, assessing and evaluating the STAR Award. Employers are impressed by the scheme, especially as it encourages students to identify and articulate specific skills they have and to provide evidence of their accomplishments. Employers are very positive about the benefits of the STAR Award in providing an opportunity for students to record and reflect on an aspect of their university achievement. Recording and reflecting on transferable skills in a logical manner as part of the Award will also be useful for students to prepare for future graduate competency-based interviews. A unique feature of this Award is that an employer delivers a supporting skills workshop. The session focuses on encouraging students to recognise their Students' Association postholder skills as well as providing an opportunity for each student to present key aspects of their co-curricular activities to

an interested employer. Students identifying what they have learned and communicating it to others is a valuable component of work-related learning (Knight & Yorke, 2004). The involvement of local employers adds significantly to the Award relevance and clearly enhances the scheme credibility to students. Working closely with employers also facilitates the valuable exchange of STAR Award developmental discussions with university staff.

Future development plans

Plans are already underway to upscale this opportunity for Aberdeen students. It is anticipated that, as the STAR Award scheme develops, the use of ePortfolio technology will be incorporated as both a presentational and reflective tool in the assessment strategy. In addition, it is hoped that the scheme will be extended to taught postgraduates over time. Upscaling will also involve recognising and rewarding a wider range of work-related activities, such as entrepreneurship initiatives, and will include the development of an assessment framework to monitor student achievement of Aberdeen-specific graduate attributes. There is still much work left to do to implement and evaluate these development plans; however, hopes are high with students, academics and employers for the co-curricular STAR Award to be a distinctive feature of the student campus experience at the University of Aberdeen.

References

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Association including volunteering, training and development and employability issues.

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