



## ESCalate Themed Funding: Graduates with Impact Grant Project Interim Report

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**Project Title** Understanding the value of extra-curricular activities in creating graduates with impact in education

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## **Understanding the value of extra-curricular activities in creating graduates with impact in education**

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### Aims and Objectives

This project is a collaboration between Leeds Metropolitan University and four Further Education Colleges across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The overall research aim is to enhance conceptual and theoretical understandings of the diversity and value of extra-curricula activities (ECA) to education students, staff and employers and to the wider society; and to understand how ECA might be integrated into the education curriculum, developed to enhance employability and, in so doing, to create graduates with impact.

### Research objectives

- Establish the full range of ECA that students on education courses engage with and whether there are differential patterns of participation by social group/ gender/ethnicity and type and level of course being undertaken
- Establish the rationale for participation in ECA, for example for ethical, social and environmental reasons as well as to become the ‘future employed’
- Establish the possible impact of participation on retention, achievement and the student satisfaction of education students
- Explore student, staff and employers perceptions of the value of participation in ECA to the enhancement of graduate outcomes, into both teaching and allied professions, and to the wider community; and, alongside this, explore inter-sectionality in relationship to the differential valuing of the forms of ECA
- Explore how education staff and students can draw on ECA in relationship to curriculum activities and in shaping graduate futures, including creating graduates with impact on the economy and society

### Progress to date

		Progress to date	Progress for completion
<b>Project start up</b>	Project design and set up: project publicity; design of research tools; ethical approval; networking with subject/course/module leaders and employers	Completed	NFA
	A systematic literature review of research and institutional practice relating to participation in ECA; ways in which ECA is embedded into education courses; impact of participation on curricular experiences, retention; attainment; success and employability.	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project

Desk based research:	A web-site analysis of the TDA; QAA; DfES; AGCAS; Prospects; TES; the HEI and FECs involved in the study; the recruitment pages of the relevant LEAs etc., providing a picture of where and in what context ECA is recognised as important in relation to recruitment on to courses and into employment.	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project
	Curriculum analysis: samples of course/module handbooks will be analysed to explore where/in what context ECA is referred to (if at all) in relation to the curriculum and to the development of student employability and graduate outcomes	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project
Field research	Focus groups with students (10, 70 students in total), exploring forms of ECA students are participating in; rational for participation; how they are thinking about their futures; how they are/not using participation in ECA to become the 'future employed'.	4 completed (total 23 students). Completed in Leeds, Durham and Glasgow.	6 to be completed (total additional 47 students by end October 2011)
	Interviews with students (20) exploring how students see and are building towards their futures and the forms of curriculum intervention they consider most relevant to help them become graduates with impact. This will allow us to explore, from a student perspective, what sort of strategies appear to make most impact	5 completed, taken place in Leeds, Belfast and Glasgow	15 to be completed by end of October 2011
	Interviews with staff (total 10) exploring overall course aims; support given for participation in ECA; valuing of different forms of ECA; ways in which ECA is integrated into the curriculum, including within specific employability initiatives (if any). This will enable us to understand ways in which staff valorise (or otherwise) participation and the impact this has on creating graduates with impact.	9 completed, taken place in Leeds, Belfast, Durham and Glasgow	1 to be completed by end of October 2011
	Telephone interviews (20 in total) with head teachers or other key recruiting staff in teaching and/or other education-related areas, exploring how employers regard different forms of ECA and how these can contribute to employability	2 completed in North and West Yorkshire	18 to be completed between July and October

Dissemination	Internal thematic staff development workshops 1 and 2	On-going	1 <sup>st</sup> workshop planned for September to coincide with the new School of Education at Leeds Met – delivered through the Regional University Network WP forum. Second will take place December 2011
	Higher Education Academy (HEA) or the ESCalate conference	No ESCalate conference planned for this year; project work did not fit in with overall themes of HEA national conference	Will aim to disseminate via the HEA in 2012
	Report on curriculum analysis made available to ESCalate and to project partners	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project
	Presentation at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference	Abstract accepted	Presentation to be delivered on 7 <sup>th</sup> September 2011
	Development of a short booklet highlighting different ways in which students are using participation in ECA to enhance their graduate outcomes, suitable for integration into PDP elements of the curricula	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project
	Production of a short report highlighting the link between employer's attitudes towards ECA and the link to graduate outcomes. This will be sent to the TDA; QAA; DfES; AGCAS; Prospects; TES; the HEI and FECs involved in the study and their relevant LEA	Partially completed	For completion and publication by end of project

## Preliminary Findings

### 1. Defining ECA

Students' definitions of the term 'extra-curricular activity' are very dependent upon the type of educational course they are undertaking. Full-time students would consider sporting activities, voluntary work and, possibly, part-time paid work as being activities of an extra-curricular nature. However, part-time students who have paid work (especially those in full-time employment) view their course(s) as extra-curricular because it is in addition to their job which is their priority in life. Mature students prefer the term 'life experiences' as they feel this encompasses all the activities 'that they do in life' be it sports, voluntary work, caring for others, political or faith related activities. Younger students instead argue that extra-curricular activities must be fun, unpaid and optional. However, the majority of students irrespective of age believe that the inclusion of extra-curricular activities on application forms/CVs is more important than the actual degree they gain in order to secure employment.

### 2. Participation in ECA

This is extremely variable. However it is clear that many of the younger students had stopped participating in the diverse ECA that they had enjoyed before coming to university. Many found it difficult to combine their studies with participation in ECA, whilst others had the additional difficulty in having to work part time. Some students also commented about the cost of ECA.

### 3. Valuing ECA

Employers value extra-curricular activities and believe they can be the determining factor in selecting an employee when faced with dozens of applications from graduates all with the same degree/qualifications. However, not all extra-curricular activities are valued and some can be seen as disadvantageous when included on a CV e.g. involvement in political activities. The main criticism forwarded by employers with regard to graduates and their participation in extra-curricular activities is that graduates do not sufficiently align their ECA to the specific application and/or organisation, its requirements and how such activities support their application and suitability for the role - instead they offer generic application forms/CVs and fail to utilise the potential of their ECA to its fullest capacity.

### 4. Students views of their futures

These are extremely mixed. However, it is notable that some students on courses which might be considered as having a clear exit route (e.g. in to primary teaching) were much less certain about their future careers than other students but this did not appear to be recognised by their tutors and so they were receiving very little careers guidance or support. Consequently they were uncertain about the value they could place on their participation in ECA.

## Impact on the project plan/timescales

It proved difficult to make effective contacts with staff and students at our original partner colleges of Manchester and Loughborough. However, we have worked with New Durham FEC instead and will be working with partner FE colleges in Wakefield and Leeds in the autumn.

Progress with staff and student interviews and focus groups has been steady. The long summer holiday means that there will be a gap until staff and students are available again in the autumn. However, we are confident that we will achieve our outcomes. No other issues have been identified.