

Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum

A toolkit for enhancing strategy and practice

December 2013

Strategic direction

Award design

Assessment and recognition

Practical arrangements

Quality assurance and evaluation

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Introduction

What is this document?

This document is about how higher education providers may choose to recognise some of the activities which students undertake outside their academic programme through an additional award. It is designed as a practical toolkit which higher education providers can use to reflect on what they do to recognise student achievement beyond the curriculum.

The aim of encouraging students to participate in activities beyond their academic programme is to help students make the most of their higher education experience and take responsibility for their own personal and professional development. Awards aim to provide a means through which students can more fully recognise, develop and articulate their skills (including attributes, competencies and qualities). In the short-term, the focus which awards offer can assist students to articulate and evidence their achievements in a way which contributes to their immediate employability. They also have the potential to demonstrate to students the long-term value of learning as a lifelong and life-wide activity, and that higher education can be about more than getting a degree and a graduate job. More generally, they often emphasise the importance of reflective practice and its positive impact on personal and career development

Why have we written it?

The number of awards offered by higher education providers in the UK has grown steadily in the last decade.¹ This growth has been stimulated by a number of factors, including increased emphasis for higher education providers on being able to demonstrate added value and employability for graduates, and the development of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR)², alongside a wider sense that students welcome recognition for the non-academic activities they do while in higher education.³

The growth in award schemes offered by higher education providers reflects calls from government, professional bodies and employers to provide greater preparation for students in the skills they need when entering employment after leaving higher education. Moreover, in light of increased focus on the quality of the student experience, awards also add value by making higher education more relevant to the lives of learners and enable them to recognise that there is more to learning in higher education than just academic study.

With such expansion has come an increasing range of approaches and award structures. Awards may simply recognise participation in activities beyond the curriculum, require demonstration of the learning from such activities, or require students to meet set criteria. QAA has therefore recognised an opportunity to work with the higher education sector to capture experience and distil guidance which higher education providers can use to

¹ AGCAS (2011) *Initial findings from the skills and employability awards survey*, available at: <http://agcas.org.uk/assets/download?file=2655&parent=1046>; QAA (2013) *Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum: survey of sector practice*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognising-achievement-beyond-the-curriculum-survey-13.aspx

² www.hear.ac.uk.

³ See, for example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England requirement for 'employability statements' available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/kes/ee/graduateemployability/employabilitystatements; the Wilson review of Business-University Collaboration available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32383/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration.pdf; Universities UK (2007) *Beyond the honours degree classification: The Burgess Group final report*, available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/BurgessBeyondHonours.aspx.

ensure that the award schemes they offer are effective in achieving their purpose.⁴ The guidance draws on the experience of the sector to date and reflects on the lessons learned from the operation of award schemes over the last decade. It also considers the likely future of award schemes.

Relationship to the HEAR

The UK higher education sector has worked to develop the HEAR in order to present a broader picture of student achievement beyond a final mark or grade.⁵ A fundamental aspect of the HEAR format is section 6.1, where activities beyond the student's academic studies can be captured. The degree-awarding body needs to be able to verify the items which are included, and consequently award schemes offer a valuable tool in completing this section. The guidance issued to higher education providers implementing the HEAR includes the proposal that entries in section 6.1 should be made 'on the basis of considerations of access and equality...[and] include only opportunities open on an equal basis to all students on the same course/programme'.⁶ This consideration needs to underpin discussions about the nature of award schemes, if the higher education provider's intention is to include the award in section 6.1.

Who is it for?

This toolkit is aimed at practitioners; those members of staff within higher education providers, including within students' unions (or equivalent), who are charged with designing, implementing, running or revitalising award schemes. It is designed to be useful for both those who are creating an award scheme from scratch and those evaluating and enhancing an existing scheme.

Terminology and scope

Awards which recognise achievement beyond the curriculum are known by many names across the UK higher education sector, including:

- extra-curricular
- co-curricular
- skills
- employability
- graduate
- development
- life-wide learning.

The variety of terms used to describe awards reflects the range of approaches which the awards represent. This toolkit simply refers to 'awards' and 'award schemes'.

The focus is on awards offered by higher education providers, but similar awards have also been developed by professional bodies, membership organisations and national training providers. The toolkit may help higher education providers decide whether to adopt one of these schemes rather than developing their own.

⁴ Betts, C E and Jackson, N J (2011) Lifewide Development Awards: an emergent phenomenon in UK higher education in Jackson N J (ed) *Learning for a Complex World: a lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development*.

⁵ Universities UK (2012) *Bringing it all together: Introducing the HEAR*, available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/IntroducingtheHEAR.aspx.

⁶ HEAR Starter Pack (2013), available at: www.hear.ac.uk/other_sites/resources/detail/heard/HEAR-starter-pack.

Awards recognising achievement beyond the curriculum are generally additional to a student's academic programme (their degree, or other qualification). They do not typically carry academic credit. As such, they do not sit on the higher education qualifications frameworks and do not fall within the remit of the external reviews coordinated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).⁷

The status of this document

This document is intended to be useful for higher education providers in reviewing and enhancing their own practices. It does not form part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).⁸ It celebrates the diversity and autonomy of higher education providers, and allows for flexibility in their approaches to recognising achievement beyond the curriculum.

How has this document been written?

The toolkit builds on feedback collected from the higher education sector through a number of mechanisms:

- responses to two stimulus papers written from the perspective of the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and published by QAA⁹
- a plenary workshop at the CRA residential seminar, November 2012¹⁰
- two workshops at the event Recognising Lifewide Learning: Looking to the future, organised by CRA, June 2013¹¹
- a survey of sector practice.¹²

To advise on the drafting of the document, QAA convened a working group of practitioners from across the sector (see [Appendix 1](#)).

⁷ However, one of the two themes for Higher Education Review 2013-14 and 2014-15 is 'student employability', and higher education providers may choose to use an award scheme as an example of how they are addressing this topic. The thematic element of Higher Education Review leads to a commentary in the final report but does not contribute to the review judgements. For further information see www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/higher-education-review-themes.aspx.

⁸ The Quality Code sets out the Expectations which all higher education providers must meet. Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode.

⁹ Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Pages/employability.aspx.

¹⁰ Available at: www.recordingachievement.org/news-and-events/events/post-event-resources/item/root/12th-annual-cra-residential-2012.html.

¹¹ Available at: www.recordingachievement.org/news-and-events/events/post-event-resources/item/root/recognising-lifewide-learning-looking-to-the-future.html.

¹² QAA (2013) *Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum: survey of sector practice*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognising-achievement-beyond-the-curriculum-survey-13.aspx

How do I use it?

The toolkit is designed to be used in two main circumstances.

- When a higher education provider is considering introducing an award scheme - the toolkit will help the provider to decide whether an award is appropriate in their situation, and if so, help in designing and implementing it.
- When a higher education provider is reevaluating an existing award scheme - the toolkit will help the provider consider the strengths of the existing scheme and identify ways in which it could be improved and changed.

For those completely new to award schemes, the **Getting started: the big questions** section, lists the 'big picture' questions which it would be helpful to consider at the outset. The answers to these questions will influence the route taken through the rest of the toolkit.

The main toolkit is divided into five colour-coded sections:

- 1 Strategic direction
- 2 Award design
- 3 Assessment and recognition
- 4 Practical arrangements
- 5 Quality assurance and evaluation

Each section contains a series of self-assessment questions, aimed at encouraging structured reflection. The questions are followed by a short commentary explaining why the areas covered are important and describe some dimensions of possible answers. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the area, but an explanation which helps to illustrate the self-assessment questions. The commentary is illustrated by findings from the survey of sector practice carried out in summer 2013 and points to other sources of information where relevant. The full survey findings are available on QAA's website.

The sections can be used in a linear fashion and are arranged in roughly the order in which they need to be approached, with interrelationships between different topics highlighted. Each section can also be used separately as relevant and the diagram on page 6 suggests other possible routes through the toolkit. This may be particularly useful for higher education providers reviewing an existing award scheme where there may be particular areas on which they want to focus.

Every higher education provider and every award scheme is distinctive. The relevance of different elements of the toolkit will therefore vary. It is up to individual higher education providers to determine the extent to which they wish to use the self-assessment questions to challenge themselves. The final section, **The future of awards: prospects and challenges**, highlights some of the issues which have been identified as likely to have a particular effect on the nature of award schemes in the next few years.

Other resources

The toolkit is complemented by a number of other resources available from QAA's website:

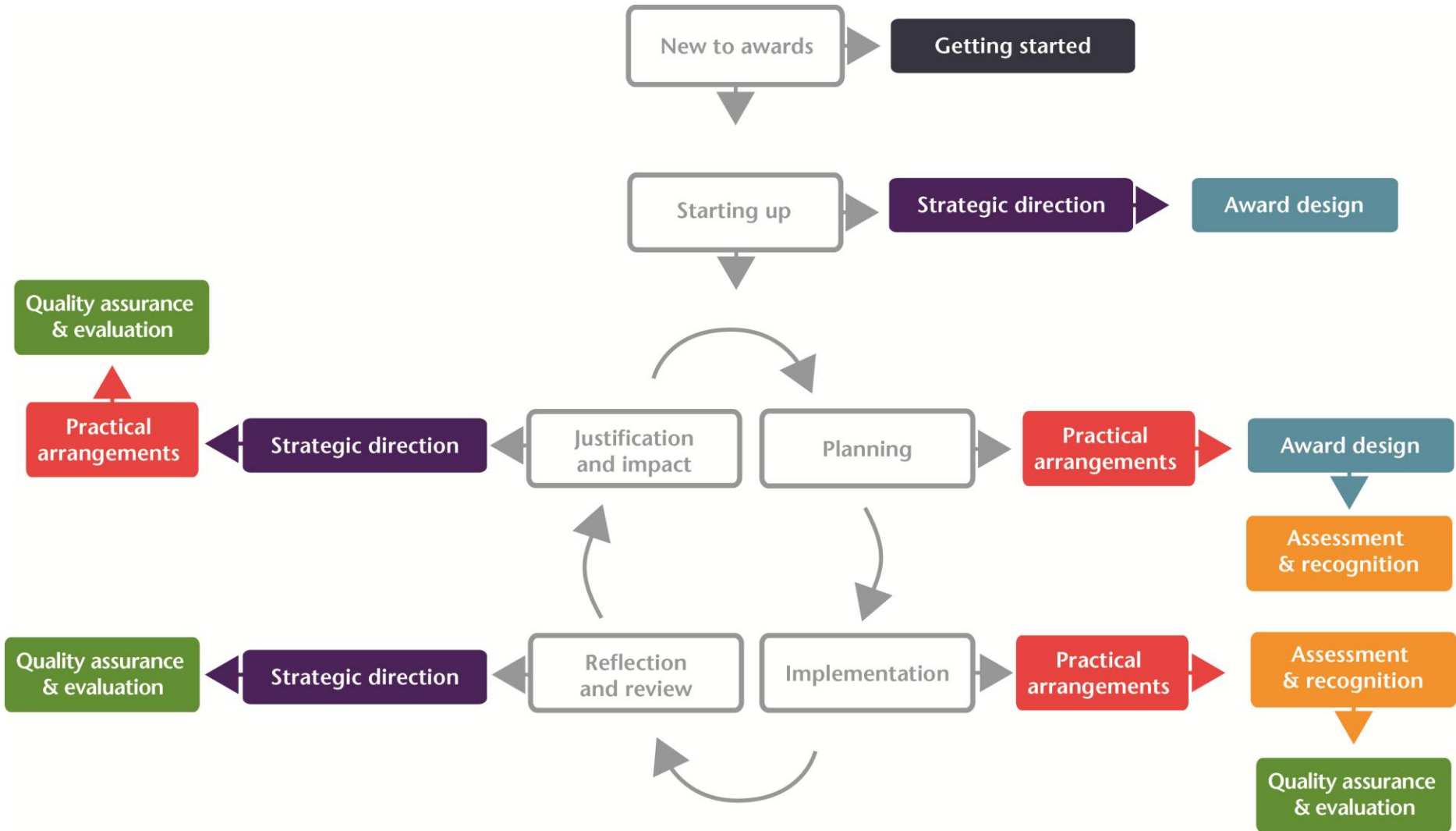
- the detailed findings of the survey of sector practice¹³
stimulus papers by CRA and AGCAS, discussing the background to recognising achievement beyond the curriculum¹⁴
- an online directory of existing award schemes, categorised by main characteristics (to be published January 2014)

For elected officers and staff in students' unions, further information and guidance is available from the National Union of Students (NUS) Student Opportunities Team.

¹³ Recognising Achievement beyond the curriculum: Survey of sector practice summary report December 2013 available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognising-achievement-beyond-the-curriculum-survey-13.aspx

¹⁴ Stimulus papers by CRA and AGCAS available at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/extra-curricular-awards-CRA.aspx
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/extra-curricular-awards-AGCAS.aspx

Possible routes through the toolkit



Getting started: the big questions

For those approaching the development of an award scheme from scratch, these 'big picture' questions highlight the key issues which need consideration from the outset.

- Why are we thinking of offering an award?
- What do we want the award to achieve for students who participate?
- What do students need and how will the award help them get it?
- What resources (human, physical, technological, financial) do we have for the award?

Understanding why you want to offer an award, and what you want students who participate to achieve from it, enables your planning to focus on fulfilling this aim. Ensuring that you can clearly articulate what you want students to have achieved by undertaking the award will help you in designing the different elements of your award programme. Try to be as specific as possible: 'enable students to articulate the skills they have developed' is more useful than 'improve student employability'.

1 Strategic direction

The underpinning questions which need to be considered to create a framework within which an award operates. These include determining the intended purpose and nature of the award, and questions about the scale and accessibility for students.

Self-assessment questions

Purpose and intended outcomes

- Why do we want to have an award available for students?
- Where is the push to run an award coming from?
- What external policy drivers does an award help address?
- What organisational objectives does the award address?
- Is there support from senior management for the award?
- Is there interest or demand from students for the award?
- What outcomes do we want for students from their participation in the award?
- What are the needs of our particular student body which an award addresses?
- What does the award recognise: participation in activities, learning gained and/or achievement demonstrated?
- Are there other ways which activity beyond the curriculum could be recognised?
- How much commitment does the award require from students?
- What does the award offer which is not already available through a student's academic programme?
- Are any of the intended outcomes of the award for students already achieved through their academic study?
- What other initiatives within the organisation (existing or planned) might the award overlap with or be able to draw upon?
- How do we make our award distinctive and how do we show this?
- Are awards offered by other similar higher education providers?

Scale and accessibility

- Who will the award be open to?
- Do we want to target a particular group of students or emphasise equity of access for all?
- What resources (human, physical, financial, technical) do we have to support the award?
- How many students can be supported to participate in the award?
- Does the award need to take account of the needs of any particular groups of students?

Commentary

Purpose and intended outcomes

Drivers

There are many drivers which lead higher education providers to offer awards which recognise achievement beyond the curriculum. Inevitably, the nature of the driver may influence the purpose and focus of the award.¹⁵

For many higher education providers, an immediate driver is branding and reputation: the need to be able to make their offer to students comparable to that available at a competitor provider. The need to address this may be recognised by the provider's senior management, or may be driven by student demand. In these circumstances, the higher education provider may assess the business case for contributing resources towards the award.

More broadly, awards can offer a way of working towards achieving organisational strategic priorities and developing the student experience, within the context of the organisational mission. For example, awards can offer a way to establish links with employers or build further on existing relationships, or to involve students in their wider community.

The existence of an award scheme, and its nature, reflects the culture of the higher education provider, especially where it is supported by senior management. It may be considered whether an award scheme can be used to bring together or give increased visibility to existing activities.

However, awards may not be the way to achieve these objectives for all types of higher education provider or all types of student. There are other ways in which objectives could be achieved. The nature of the academic programme may mean that students already achieve the outcomes which would be the focus of the award. Consultation with students may help to demonstrate whether there is a demand for an award and the outcomes that students would like to gain from such a scheme.

Award focus

It could be argued that the underpinning purpose behind all awards is to enhance the student experience, but the exact focus the scheme takes may vary, depending on the drivers behind it.¹⁶ For example, awards are a way in which higher education providers can claim to enhance student employability in its broadest sense.¹⁷ In the first instance, this is immediate employability potential in terms of securing an appropriate job when they have completed their academic programme, but also in the longer term, providing students with

According to the survey:

- 75% of higher education providers currently offer an award
- 16% of higher education providers plan to offer an award
- 6% of higher education providers have never offered an award and have no plans to do so.

¹⁵ Norton, T and Thomas, H (2009) *Beyond the Curriculum: Opportunities to enhance employability and future life choices*, available at: http://old.1994group.co.uk/documents/public/091106_BeyondTheCurriculum.pdf.

¹⁶ QAA (2012) *Extra-curricular awards stimulus papers: Centre for Recording Achievement perspective*, available at: www.gaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/extra-curricular-awards-CRA.pdf.

¹⁷ There are many definitions of employability, but the following has been widely accepted in the higher education sector: 'a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (HEA(2012) *Pedagogy for employability*, available at:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/employability/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012). See also HEA (2013) *Defining and developing your approach to employability: a framework for higher education institutions*, available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/employability/A-framework-for-higher-education-institutions.

knowledge, skills and attitudes which will help them to remain employed throughout their working life.¹⁸ These include self-management, the ability to work in teams, awareness of business matters, problem-solving and communication skills, and application of numeracy and information technology skills.¹⁹

The nature of such employability skills overlaps with another potential focus of awards; encouraging students to become lifelong and life-wide learners, and more reflective practitioners. Equipping students to identify, develop and articulate their abilities and skills (attributes, competencies and qualities) is of value both within the employment market and beyond in their personal lives. Rather than simply honing a set of employability skills, awards may encourage students to consider their 'graduate identity', which comprises values, intellect, social engagement and performance as aspects of development of the whole person.²⁰ Awards may offer the opportunity to develop self-confidence and a sense of self, an understanding of other people and social networks, and leadership skills.

The award may then provide evidence of these abilities and skills which students can present to employers and others.²¹

Many of the abilities and skills which awards seek to develop can also be gained through academic programmes. One model for an award structure is to embed the learning within the curriculum, with an additional element of assessment for students to gain the award in addition to their academic qualification. However, it can also be argued that a different pedagogy underpins many awards, for example, by introducing students to a wider range of experiences and helping them to appreciate the opportunities higher education offers beyond the academic, alongside a structure for developing skills and learning, to articulate their value. This in turn may increase their interest in, and motivation for, their academic studies.

Awards can develop social responsibility, civic engagement and involvement in the wider community beyond a university or college environment, developing the ability of students to participate in, and contribute to, society in future.²² They may contribute to helping students

According to the survey, reasons why higher education providers don't offer awards include:

- it does not fit with our priorities
- we doubt whether our particular type of student would benefit from it
- the students who would participate would not be the ones with most to gain from it
- students don't understand the value of it
- it would not fit into already full professionally focused programmes
- we don't have funding or staff capacity to run it
- we don't have anyone who could take responsibility for developing and running it
- we think an external scheme would be more valued by employers.

¹⁸ QAA (2012) *Extra-curricular awards stimulus papers: Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services perspective*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/extra-curricular-awards-AGCAS.aspx.

¹⁹ CBI and NUS (2011) *Working towards your future: Making the most of your time in higher education*, available at: www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf.

²⁰ QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes: *Graduates for the 21st Century* available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/graduates-for-the-21st-century.

²¹ HECSU (2012) *Futuretrack Stage 4: Transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes*, available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_research_reports.htm.

²² Quinlan, K M (2011) *Developing the whole student: leading higher education initiatives that integrate mind and heart*, available at: www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/publications/index.cfm/ST%20-%20001.

feel part of the university community and developing a sense of belonging.²³ Awards can also encourage students to explore new experiences, gain new insights and develop new contacts, who may have different insights and ideas. This range of experience may contribute to the decisions they make about their future after higher education.

Student outcomes

By making available opportunities to experience a range of activities, awards can encourage students to recognise the range of contexts in which learning takes place, including those which are less controlled or taught, for example, in workplace or community settings. When students engage in a structured and supported process of reflection through an award, they can identify their development needs, and plan for further experiences to extend their personal development.

Reflective skills help to put students in a position where they can make the most of the experiences they encounter. Awards encourage students to record those experiences and recognise their value in providing detailed evidence of skills developed, achievements and competencies. In terms of what the award measures, it may simply be participation in these experiences. Alternatively, the award may measure the learning from the experience through reflection; in this model, the learning is defined, to an extent, by the student. In other cases, achievement of an award is dependent on a student being able to demonstrate that they have met defined criteria.

Verification

The range of activities which fall within the scope of the award will be determined by what the higher education provider is prepared to verify directly, or accept as verified by a third party. In terms of the outcomes an award may seek to develop, there is merit in encouraging students to identify and pursue suitable activities, not necessarily defined by the provider at the outset. The higher education provider may need mechanisms to validate participation, such as contacting the organisers of the activity and/or may focus on measuring the learning gained from the experience. If the student is involved in verifying the experience and/or is asked to reflect on what they have learnt from it, this helps to demonstrate the value of the experience which the student might not otherwise recognise. On the other hand, consideration needs to be given to where boundaries should be drawn, in terms of what students are prepared to share from their life beyond their academic programme.

Higher education providers may also wish to explore offering an award designed and accredited by a third party, such as a professional body or membership organisation. Consideration needs to be given to how the outcomes of the award align

According to the survey:

- 100% of awards are open to undergraduates
- 74% of awards are open to taught postgraduates
- 51% of awards are open to research postgraduates
- 19% of awards are open to students at partner further education colleges
- 18% of awards are open to students studying abroad (at partner colleges or overseas campuses).

30% of awards are targeted at particular groups, including:

- undergraduate students
- students in particular roles, such as student representatives or union officers
- students studying particular subject areas.

²³ National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement: *Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community* available at: www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/vinspired-students/about-our-project/research/bursting-bubble; HEA: *Retention and success* available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-and-success.

with the aims which the higher education provider has agreed and whether external validation adds value to the student experience of participating in the award.

Scale and accessibility

Awards may be offered to the whole student body or to subsets within that body, or may be open to all, though targeted at a particular group. Target groups may include particular cohorts, or students studying specific subjects. A higher education provider may decide that an award should be designed to highlight the achievements of a small proportion of students, such as those in student leadership roles, or that it should offer opportunities to all students. One significant factor influencing this decision will be the resources available for supporting the award, and the extent to which the values underpinning the award are seen to be a crucial part of the higher education provider's conception of the student experience.²⁴

Consideration needs to be given to the nature of the student body who will be participating in the award. There are challenges, for example, in facilitating involvement in activities beyond those necessary for completion of the academic programme for students who have other responsibilities (such as a parent or carer), or who are not based on a campus or close to the higher education provider if they are studying through a distance learning arrangement.²⁵ Students may continue to participate in activities in which they had been involved before entering higher education, and through them develop the skills which the award is designed to encourage; questions arise and decisions need to be taken about the extent to which the higher education provider is prepared to recognise or validate this activity. Consideration also needs to be given to how students with additional needs are enabled to participate. For postgraduate research students, the Researcher Development Framework may be a useful tool.²⁶

If designed appropriately, awards can help address some of the challenges of widening participation in higher education by creating an environment where all students can access a full range of opportunities, and be supported in their transition beyond higher education. Social and economic factors influence the access which students have to varied experiences and networks, and awards help to make this available to all students.

²⁴ Norton, T and Thomas, H (2009) *Beyond the Curriculum: Opportunities to enhance employability and future life choices*, available at: http://old.1994group.co.uk/documents/public/091106_BeyondTheCurriculum.pdf.

²⁵ HECSU (2012) *Futuretrack Stage 4: Transitions into employment, further study and other outcomes*, available at: www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_research_reports.htm; National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement: *Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community* available at: www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/vinspired-students/about-our-project/research/bursting-bubble.

²⁶ Available at: www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/428241/Researcher-Development-Framework.html.

2 Award design

The challenges of designing an award structure: determining the elements which students will be able to participate in, how these will be offered and their relationship to the curriculum.

Self-assessment questions

- What elements does the award need to include to achieve the agreed outcomes for students?
- What elements can be offered with the resources available for the award?
- What relationship does the award have with the academic curriculum?
- Does the award need to offer completion at more than one level? How will students progress through them?
- Do we need to offer different pathways for different student groups?
- What activities does the award recognise?
- Do these include activities not directly managed by the higher education provider?
- Are there any compulsory elements in the award?
- Does the award carry academic credit?
- How does the award fit with the timing of the academic cycle?
- What agreement do we need to run the award? Which processes do we need to follow?
- How do we engage academic staff with the award?
- Are employers involved with the award? In what ways?

Role of the students' union (or equivalent)

- How do we work with the students' union (or equivalent) in running the award?
- Does the students' union (or equivalent) offer activities which fit within the scope of the award?
- How do we engage with the students' union (or equivalent) to understand the needs of students?

Commentary

The challenge is in designing an award which achieves its agreed outcomes for students and the higher education provider (see section 1 [Strategic direction](#)) but can also be delivered and supported using the resources available (see section 4 [Practical arrangements](#)). A working group approach to designing the award helps to engage a range of stakeholders from the outset.

Many different award structures are possible; these can typically be described as involving one or more of the following:

- recognition of activities completed by students which are or are not managed by the higher education provider or students' union (or equivalent)
- completion of elements offered by the provider or students' union (for example, skills courses)
- assessment of elements embedded within the curriculum in addition to the requirements of the academic programme.

An award scheme structure may allow for varying amounts of flexibility in how students complete the award depending, for example, on the volume of any compulsory elements,

such as, a certain number of hours of activity or attendance at particular workshop sessions, as well as the level of verification required.

The range of activities which a student may participate in beyond their academic programme is infinite, so it may be necessary to define the types of activity that fall within the scope of the award. Areas to be considered include:

- volunteering
- placements/internships
- community engagement
- work experience
- enterprise
- mentoring
- career management activity
- intercultural/international activity
- digital literacy
- sustainability and/or environmental citizenship
- languages
- student representation
- engagement in student groups and societies
- music and the arts
- sports.

According to the survey a range of types of activity are recognised in awards:

- volunteering: 94%
- student representation: 89%
- community engagement: 86%
- engagement in student groups and societies: 85%
- work experience: 75%
- enterprise: 75%
- mentoring: 75%
- career management activity: 71%
- placements: 68%
- sports: 60%
- intercultural/international activity: 55%
- music: 52%
- languages: 46%.

Where activities are not directly organised by the higher education provider or students' union (or equivalent), consideration needs to be given to whether it is necessary to be able verify student participation, and whether, and how, the outcomes of learning from the activity will be determined. For example, for the purposes of the award, a student may need to participate in a workshop which draws out learning from external experiences. Higher education providers need to be aware of any legal implications arising from student participation in some types of activity.

According to the survey 92% of awards include a reflective element.

The reflective elements include students:

- articulating how participating in the award has developed capabilities sought by employers
- evaluating what they have achieved against the goals they originally set themselves
- describing their aspirations, development and challenges during the award, and the impact the award has had on them
- completing a learning log during their participation in the award, which is submitted and monitored at key points
- attending workshops which introduce the value of reflection and reflective practice techniques
- carrying out a skills audit, identifying skills to focus on, and developing an action plan.

The same award structure and activities could be offered to all students eligible to participate on scale and accessibility (see section 1 [Strategic direction](#)). Alternatively, groups of students may follow different pathways, each with a specific focus. The extent to which these pathways are formalised may vary. Offering the award at different levels (for example, bronze, silver, gold) can provide employers with evidence of progression and increasing challenge for students.

The nature of any agreement required to put an award scheme into operation may depend on any regulatory frameworks within which it falls, such as the higher education provider's quality assurance procedures (see section 5 [Quality assurance and evaluation](#)). This will particularly be the case if the award carries academic credit which counts towards a student's final qualification.

An award needs to take account of the range of student needs and entitlements including different learning styles. It may be possible to address by offering alternative routes for completing the award, or a suitable variety of activities for example.

Engaging academic staff with award schemes may require a variety of approaches drawing on evidence and underpinning theory, and recognising that award schemes may challenge discipline-focused conceptions of the purpose of higher education. Working with academic departments to offer award pathways, or specific activities, that take into account differences between subject areas may help to demonstrate their relevance.

Including employment as an activity which is recognised in the award scheme may help to demonstrate that the workplace is a valid context for learning. Employer involvement in awards may help to maintain student enthusiasm, by indicating that employers are interested in the outcomes of the scheme. However, engaging employers may be challenging, and the choice of organisations to approach needs to take account of policies of both the higher education provider and students' union (or equivalent), for example, on ethical issues. It also needs to be clear to students that not all employers they subsequently encounter may recognise the nature and significance of the award the student has completed.

Role of the students' union (or equivalent)

Partnership working with the students' union (or equivalent) helps to ensure that student views are taken into account in the design, implementation and ongoing running of an award.²⁷ The scale of involvement of the students' union (or equivalent) will vary depending on individual circumstances, but may include:

- overall coordination and/or leadership of the award scheme
- membership of the award steering group
- delivery of elements of the award (such as workshops)
- providing opportunities which can be counted towards the award, including clubs and societies, and student representation systems (course representatives)
- promoting the award to students, and explaining its purpose
- identifying activities which could contribute towards the award and verifying student participation in them
- recording student participation in activities
- providing members of assessment panels
- running the award presentation night.

According to the survey 48% of awards involve the student union or equivalent in some way.

²⁷ The National Union of Students is working to support students' unions (or equivalent bodies) to be involved in award schemes. Further information is available from the NUS Student Opportunities Team.

Any contribution needs to be adequately resourced and supported to ensure full involvement of the student body.

Students' unions (or equivalent) can also contribute to supporting students to support each other during their participation in the award, maintaining student interest in involvement in the award and creating a sense of community among participants. Strong buy-in from students is essential in making the award appealing to students, and this can be facilitated by having the support and engagement of the students' union (or equivalent).

3 Assessment and recognition

How students are judged to have completed an award, and how their achievement is then recognised.

Self-assessment questions

Assessment

- Do students need to complete an assessment to gain the award?
- Is it possible to fail the assessment?
- Is it possible to retake the assessment if a student fails?
- Does the assessment distinguish between different levels of achievement or is it just pass/fail?
- What form does the assessment take?
- Who is responsible for carrying out assessments or marking submissions?
- How are the assessment criteria decided?
- How do we identify the need for reasonable adjustments to assessment? Who will be responsible for implementing any reasonable adjustments?

Recognition

- How is a student's completion of the award recognised?
- Is it recorded on their degree certificate, transcript and/or HEAR?
- Are names of students who have completed the award included in graduation day publicity (the programme or similar)?
- Are certificates presented at graduation, either with their qualification certificate or separately?
- Is there a separate award scheme presentation ceremony? If so, when and where does this take place? Who organises it?
- Who is responsible for ensuring that the correct information is included on any official certificates or documents?
- Who is responsible for producing any separate certificates?
- Are records relating to awards integrated with the student records system?

Commentary

Assessment

If a student has to pass an assessment to gain an award, this gives value to the award which can be demonstrated to employers. It helps to ensure that award holders meet certain criteria. However, it can be argued that the real value in the award is in the processes the student goes through while participating in the scheme. This is difficult to assess and care needs to be taken that suitable forms of assessment are used so that the value of participation is not lost.

The decision whether or not to assess, and the form of assessment used, is related to whether the award is intended to recognise participation in activity, skills gained from participation, development of reflective capabilities, or achievement of defined outcomes (see section 1 [Strategic direction](#)).

A number of different forms of assessment can be used, including:

- reflective statement/essay(s)
- portfolio
- training/development record
- application form or CV
- interview
- presentation
- poster.

Many of these forms of assessment could employ information technology.

The appropriate form(s) will depend on what outcomes and/or activity are being assessed. For example, if the intended outcomes of the award are improved employability skills, the assessment used can reflect a recruitment process by requiring a written element and/or an interview, through which the student

demonstrates the skills sought by employers. In contrast, the development of reflective skills may be more appropriately measured by self-assessment.

Carrying out assessment can be one of the most time-consuming elements of an award scheme for the staff involved. It may be possible to involve individuals beyond those directly responsible for running a scheme in the assessment, such as personal tutors or postgraduate students. Employers could also be involved, or peer-assessment mechanisms could be used. In all cases, including where a single person is responsible for all assessment, processes will be needed to ensure consistency and transparency as to what exactly is being assessed and the method through which it will be assessed, probably including providing training for those involved.

It may be possible to adopt assessment criteria from those used for academic programmes, or to involve academic staff in setting criteria specifically for the award. Similarly, existing processes for determining reasonable adjustments may be employed, and/or advice sought from the relevant professional services area.

If the award is offered at different levels, different forms of assessment could be used at the various stages. For example, employers could be involved only at the highest level, if it is anticipated that the numbers participating at that level will be smaller, hence making it more feasible to secure employer engagement. The value of formative assessment, with feedback which identifies how a student can develop further, should also be considered. Feedback could be provided in person or electronically.

According to the survey, awards employ a variety of assessment methods (over 50 combinations reported), including:

- reflective statement
- portfolio
- training/development record
- application form/CV
- interview
- presentation
- poster.

65% of awards included reflective statements as an assessment component.

Recognition

There are many possible mechanisms by which student completion of an award can be recognised, each of which presents different logistical challenges (see section 4 [Practical arrangements](#), on links to the student record system). These include separate certificates awarded alongside the qualification certificate at graduation or at a specific ceremony, inclusion on the student's transcript or HEAR, or issue of a letter recording award completion. Factors to consider include responsibility for and the cost of producing certificates or letters, and organising any specific ceremonies.

It may also be necessary to provide information about the award (for example, on the provider's website) for employers who wish to find out more when a student includes the award in their application.

According to the survey:

- 5% of awards are included on the degree certificate or transcript and carry academic credit
- 32% of awards are included on the degree certificate or transcript and do not carry academic credit
- 15% of higher education providers list award winners in the graduation programme (or similar)
- 42% of award certificates are presented at a specific ceremony.

Other recognition mechanisms reported included:

- official letter
- included on the HEAR
- certificate available from student records.

4 Practical arrangements

Practical considerations that need to be taken into account to implement and run the award.

Self-assessment questions

Staffing and coordination

- Who is responsible for leading the implementation and/or management of the award?
- Who is responsible for coordinating the award on a day to day basis?
- Who is responsible for delivering any face to face elements of the award?
- Who is responsible for making practical arrangements for face to face elements?
- Who answers student enquiries about the award? How will these enquiries be answered?
- How do we identify and support students with additional needs who participate in the award?
- How do we handle any claims for mitigating circumstances, appeals or complaints about the award?
- Who is responsible for maintaining relationships with other stakeholders involved in the scheme, such as employers?
- What system do we use for recording student participation in the award?
- Do we need to use or integrate with existing student record systems?
- From which budget does the funding for the award come?
- Do we make any charge to students for participating?

Promoting student participation

- What mechanisms can we use to inform students about the award?
- How can we make use of existing channels of communication to students?
- How do we demonstrate the benefits of participating in the award to students?
- How can we engage a full range of students with the award?
- How can we work with the students' union (or equivalent) to promote the award?

Commentary

Staffing and coordination

Determining where responsibility sits for managing and coordinating an award scheme is a key decision for a higher education provider.

Awards are most often designed and coordinated by careers services, but may also be based within learning and teaching units, other central services areas or individual academic departments, or the students' union (or equivalent). Continuity in the staff involved in running the award contributes to more effective operation, supported by thorough and documented processes, but there are also risks if coordination is reliant on a single individual.

According to the survey, units typically involved in coordinating award schemes include:

- careers service
- employability or workplace learning departments
- student union (or equivalent)
- learning and teaching unit
- academic departments.

There are benefits to spreading responsibility for the award across the organisation. If individual academic departments take ownership of the award, this can help to reduce the resource required from any central coordinating unit. When introducing a new award, it may be necessary to identify 'pilot' departments initially, and then build on their engagement. In selecting internal 'champions' for the award scheme, it is important to consider their reputation with others within the higher education provider and be prepared for them moving onto other roles. Decisions on responsibility for award coordination need to consider how this will be affected if the number of students participating in the award increases.

According to the survey, the numbers of staff involved in coordinating award schemes are:

- 42% less than 1.0 FTE
- 20% 1.0 FTE
- 29% 1.0-2.0 FTE
- 6% 2.0-5.0 FTE
- 3% More than 5.0 FTE.

The volume of human resource needed to manage and run an award will vary. For many staff responsible for coordinating awards, it is only one part of their role. Typical activities which need to be considered in determining how management of an award is to be resourced include:

- answering student queries and supporting students participating in the award
- liaising with internal stakeholders, including the students' union (or equivalent)
- liaising with external stakeholders
- recording student participation and other data input
- arranging student activity sessions
- training staff and students who are involved in delivering elements of the award
- organising ceremonies to celebrate award completion
- developing materials to promote the award to students
- monitoring the award scheme, identifying trends and determining whether and how they should be addressed.

Where the students' union (or equivalent) is involved in the management of the award scheme, the higher education provider needs to discuss and agree their capacity to do so, as it will be dependent on individual circumstances. The students' union (or equivalent) contribution needs to be adequately resourced.

Designing and implementing a new award scheme, or making significant changes to an existing scheme will be particularly resource intensive, and may benefit from the use of project planning and management techniques. It may be possible to link the (re)development of the award to other projects underway elsewhere in the organisation, such as the development of IT systems or databases, which can help to prevent duplication of effort. When the award is running, peaks of activity can be expected when students register to participate and when assessment is taking place. Responding to student enquiries can be very time consuming and so thought will need to be given to how to address the change in demand for information and support throughout the year and the resources allocated to this activity.

It is likely that staff beyond the coordinating unit will need to be involved in helping to deliver the award. These may include personal tutors (or other similar roles), academic staff or staff in the students' union (or equivalent). Involving personal tutors in the delivery of an award scheme may help to provide a context and purpose for tutorial meetings for both staff and students; for example, tutors can help students to articulate the skills they have developed through participation in the award. However, care needs to be taken that their involvement

can be accommodated within the remit of a personal tutor, that they are trained and supported to fulfil this role, and that their involvement is recognised. On the involvement of others in assessment (see section 3 [Assessment and recognition](#)).

It may be possible to adopt the higher education provider's existing processes and policies on mitigating circumstances, complaints and appeals, rather than designing them specifically for the award.

There may be a number of challenges in identifying an appropriate system to use to record student participation in the award. Central student record systems may not be sufficiently flexible, but any separate database may need to be able to interact with the central system (for example, to enable the award to be included on a student's HEAR). The development of bespoke systems takes time and money, while 'making do' with existing mechanisms can take up staff time.

In addition to staff time, costs associated with an award may include producing publicity materials, learning resources and certificates. A small number of award schemes charge students a fairly nominal fee for participating to encourage retention and completion, and cover these costs. Where there are costs to students, students need to be clear about what the costs are and the reasons for them.

Promoting student participation

Advertising the award at induction helps to bring it to the attention of students but risks being lost among the 'information overload'. The most effective promotion often comes from other students, but allowance needs to be made for training them. The students' union (or equivalent) will have existing communication routes which it may be possible to tap into; not all communication needs to come from the central coordinating unit. Alternatively, champions within academic departments may have more immediate contact with students, and can put the award into a disciplinary context which enables students to recognise its purpose and potential.

To help students understand what the award is about, it may be necessary to 'demystify' it by providing examples of previous student involvement (for example, portfolios of evidence). However, care is needed that students can identify with case studies; examples of exceptional achievement can discourage students from participating.

Promoting the award at open days may help to bring it to the attention to students' parents or sponsors, who may appreciate its potential value and hence encourage students to participate.

5 Quality assurance and evaluation

Mechanisms which can be used to assure the quality of awards, and ways in which the value of award schemes can be evaluated.

Self-assessment questions

Quality assurance

- How do we assure the quality of the award?
- Is the award subject to the higher education provider's academic regulations?
- Is the award subject to the higher education provider's quality assurance processes?
- Does the award have external examiners and/or an exam board?
- Is an external body involved in accrediting the award?
- Does the award have a steering group?
- Who sits on the steering group?

Evaluation

- How do we collect feedback from students and other stakeholders?
- How do we measure whether the award has been a success?
- How often do we need to carry out an evaluation?
- What criteria do we use to evaluate the award?
- What targets does the award need to meet?
- How do we decide if changes need to be made to the award scheme?
- How do we put any changes into practice?

Commentary

Quality assurance

If awards are to have value to external stakeholders such as employers, the higher education provider needs to be able to show that awards are only made to students who demonstrate that they have achieved certain agreed criteria, whether in terms of volume of participation or meeting defined learning outcomes. This achievement may be measured through assessment (see section 3 [Assessment and recognition](#)). Quality assurance can also help to ensure that the opportunities available to students participating in the award are of a certain quality.

It may be possible to run the award using the higher education provider's existing academic regulations and/or quality assurance processes, such as programme approval and annual monitoring. This can provide a ready-made framework, for example, for dealing with mitigating circumstances, and demonstrate the credibility of the award to academic staff. However, these processes may be considered over-burdensome for an award scheme, so it may be appropriate to design an alternative. Data which could be used for quality assurance purposes includes feedback from students, for example through questionnaires or focus groups, and reports from external examiners or employers involved in assessing students. An alternative form of quality assurance for an award could be through accreditation by an external body/organisation such as a professional body or national training provider.

A steering group can provide strategic direction for an award, in addition to a quality monitoring role. The steering group may also be involved in agreeing whether activities may be included within the scope of the award, and how they are incorporated within the award framework. The remit of the group needs to be clearly defined. Membership may include:

**According to the survey
65% of awards have a
steering group.**

- members of the higher education provider's senior management team (for example, Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for student experience)
- representatives of academic departments
- representatives of professional services involved in delivering the award
- representatives from central administration functions
- employer representatives
- students
- representatives from the students' union (or equivalent).

Evaluation

In addition to ongoing monitoring of the operation of the award, consideration also needs to be given to how the overall benefits and value of the award can be demonstrated, to show that it is achieving its intended purpose (see section 1 [Strategic direction](#)). This may be carried out by the unit responsible for coordinating the award, a research or evaluation unit based within the higher education provider or an external body. There needs to be clarity about what is being evaluated, and consequently what data is required.

In the first instance, it might be by measuring whether agreed targets have been met, such as numbers of students registering to participate and numbers completing an award. A more detailed evaluation may include seeking student feedback and measuring student satisfaction. Feedback may also be sought from alumni who have completed the award, who are in a position to judge its impact on them since leaving higher education, and from employers who have employed award holders. Data from the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey may also be used, though this is not without methodological difficulties (for example, controlling for likely student outcomes without involvement in the award). Useful feedback may be collected from students who participated in the award but did not complete it.

**According to the survey
67% of awards have been
evaluated.**

Reasons given for evaluating the award included:

- to inform its future development
- to collect feedback from students, staff (for example, about the workload involved) and senior management
- to determine whether offering the award was feasible for the organisation
- to measure whether the award had achieved its aims
- to identify how student behaviour had changed as a result of participation in the award
- to audit the quality of records of participation
- to find out what are the barriers to completion of the award.

Comparisons can also be made against other higher education providers, with either a similar student profile or a similar award. This may be facilitated through network

organisations such as AGCAS or CRA, or through making contact directly with other providers. Little data about awards is currently available publicly.

The future of awards: prospects and challenges

For practitioners either designing an award for implementation, or reviewing an existing award scheme, it is helpful to take account of directions of travel for practice in the sector. This section summarises current views of the ways in which award schemes are likely to develop in the next few years, and the possible areas of challenge which award schemes may need to tackle. This summary draws on feedback from practitioners and the findings of the survey of sector practice.

Where are award schemes going?

- Attempting to increase engagement by students, in terms of both involving large numbers in award schemes and a more diverse range of participants. Possible approaches include the use of incentives or simply raising the profile of awards. Alongside this, increasing completion rates of participating students.
- Securing a higher level of meaningful employer involvement, ensuring awards continue to enhance student employability and increasing understanding among employers of the value of awards.
- Reworking award schemes to be more closely connected to individual academic subject areas, in order to make them seem more relevant to students and academic staff. For similar reasons, making award schemes more embedded within academic programmes.
- Creating multiple or additional levels within a scheme, or alternative pathways targeted at particular groups of students.
- Greater use of technology to streamline award administration processes and/or delivery.
- Widening the range of activities which are recognised within the award scheme.
- Investigating the possibilities of third party award schemes and initiatives such as Mozilla Open Badges.²⁸
- Dealing with issues such as verification and recognition where these currently create barriers to including awards on student transcripts or HEAR.
- Ensuring sustainable resourcing and cost-effectiveness in managing awards.

What challenges do awards need to tackle?

- Maintaining quality with larger numbers of participating students, without changes to levels of staffing and resources; balancing demand and capacity, as the administration of awards is labour intensive and resource heavy.
- Generating interest and commitment among students, and ensuring the award remains relevant to organisational priorities and to a diverse student body; this may include facilitating transferability between awards offered by different providers.
- Making award participation meaningful while also light enough touch to encourage engagement, alongside developing and embedding a culture of taking responsibility for learning among students. Where students are paying higher fees, demonstrating the value-added that awards offer in addition to their academic programme.
- Making awards accessible to a wider range of students, particularly part-time and mature students, students in employment, students studying at partner colleges (where the college may have multiple higher education provider partners), and students studying internationally and by distance learning.

²⁸ More information on these initiatives is available at: <http://openbadges.org>

- Communicating the value of awards to academic staff, particularly where awards become more embedded in the curriculum or carry academic credit.
- Communicating the value of awards to employers, in the context of an improving economy and job market.

Appendix 1: Membership of the Working Group

Name	Organisation	Position
David Croot	Independent	
Fiona Ellison	National Union of Students	Student Opportunities Manager
Tim Hinchcliffe	Keele University	Head of Curriculum Support and Development
Rosie Hunnam	National Union of Students	Student Opportunities Coordinator
Sarah Jeffries-Watts	University of Birmingham	Personal Skills Award Programme Manager
Vicky Mann	University of Nottingham	Nottingham Advantage Award Manager
David Nelson	Manchester Metropolitan University	Careers and Employability Adviser
Nikki Spalding	Higher Education Academy	Academic Development Officer
Rob Ward	Centre for Recording Achievement	Director
Rose Watson	University of Worcester	Senior Careers Advisor
Harriet Barnes (chair)	QAA	Development Officer
Ruth Burchell (secretariat)	QAA	Project Officer
Heather Gibson	QAA Scotland	Development Officer (corresponding member)

Appendix 2: Who are we?

The **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)**'s mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education. We offer advice, guidance and support to help UK universities, colleges and other higher education providers to deliver the best possible student experience of higher education. We conduct reviews of providers and publish reports detailing the findings. Our reports highlight good practice and contain recommendations to help improve quality. To support standards and promote quality enhancement, we publish a range of reference points and guidance, including the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. These publications are widely used by UK academic staff responsible for shaping the student experience. At a time of rapid change, we aim to be at the heart of the debate about quality, standards and enhancement. Both in the UK and internationally, we lead or participate in discussions and consultations with a wide range of interested parties, including universities and colleges, funding councils and students' union representatives.

www.qaa.ac.uk

The **Higher Education Academy (HEA)** is a national body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education in the UK. We work with institutions across the higher education system to help bring about change in learning and teaching to improve the outcomes for students. We do this by recognising and rewarding excellent teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice and by helping influence, shape and implement policy. The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their career from those who are new to teaching through to senior management. Through the partnership management team we work directly with institutions to understand individual circumstances and priorities and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Its service and product range is broader than any other competitor, and it is trusted to deliver higher education system advancements in partnership with its member institutions.

www.heacademy.ac.uk

The **Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA)** is a network organisation, registered educational charity and Associate Partner of the Higher Education Academy. Its membership is drawn from Local Authorities, Universities and Colleges and Professional Bodies. Through a programme of leadership, consultancy and support we seek to develop and demonstrate the value of 'recording achievement and action planning processes as an important element in improving learning and progression throughout the world of education, training and employment'.

www.recordingachievement.org

The **Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)** is the professional body for careers and employability professionals working with higher education students and graduates and prospective entrants to higher education. Its aims are to: provide a lobbying voice for its membership; be the focal point for sector-wide research and expert opinion; and provide a range of support and development opportunities for its members. To achieve this, AGCAS promotes standards for ensuring excellence in service delivery; conducts, gathers and disseminates research intelligence on higher education and the graduate labour market; delivers high-quality training, development opportunities and events; and offers peer support, mentoring and networking.

www.agcas.org.uk

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