

Preparing university students for employment through extra-curricular development

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Abstract

The University of New England (UNE), New South Wales, Australia, recognises and rewards student development and achievement in extra-curricular activity through the New England Award (NEA) Program. The NEA recognises that valuable skills, attributes and talents are developed through participation in otherwise non-accredited activities whilst at university.

This paper presents research findings about the benefits that NEA students derive in terms of the development of skills and attributes sought by employers of graduates. Outcomes show that the NEA Program is an excellent vehicle for the development of graduate attributes and other desirable personal qualities. Additionally, participants better understand the benefits of extra-curricular activity as a result of the personal development planning and reflection that is required and they believe that they become more well-rounded and better citizens as a result of their experiences within the framework of the program.

It appears that institutionally endorsed programs which harness extra-curricular activity can provide important contextualised student development opportunities that are complementary to the formal curriculum. Moreover, they can enhance 'graduateness' through the growth of self-confidence and the ability to 'launch oneself forward' as recommended in recent discussions around graduate attributes.

Such outcomes are consistent with long held views about the overall value of university education. The NEA is one such example, supporting students to maximize their chances for success and empowering them for a fulfilling future.

Key words: graduate attributes; employability; graduateness; extra-curricular activity; personal and professional development.

Introduction

The New England Award (NEA) is a program which encourages, recognises and rewards students' personal and professional development through participation in extra-curricular activity in addition to the formal curriculum. It provides a collaborative framework within which both internal and external partners, including professional bodies, businesses and industries, are able to provide development opportunities to UNE students, thereby unifying otherwise unrelated activities under one umbrella program. Students are provided with the tools to plan and reflect upon their learning and development, and to enhance their graduate attributes and employability. The NEA is underpinned by the belief that a full and varied university experience can contribute significantly to students' learning and growth as individuals.

There are three categories of activities eligible for the NEA: extra-curricular learning and training; preparation for the workplace including professional development, paid and voluntary work; and contribution to the university and local communities. Examples of the latter include volunteering for service clubs, charities, church groups, arts societies, advocacy organisations, environmental groups and national organisations.

The program is open to all students. Participants are provided with an extensive database of activities and are encouraged to source additional activities and activity providers. Once potential activities are approved, participants are required to record their achievements in an e-portfolio and write a reflective journal about their personal and professional development. Emphasis is placed on addressing the skills

and attributes listed in UNE's Graduate Attributes Policy: communication skills; social responsibility; problem solving; information literacy; global perspective; problem solving and teamwork. The NEA is conferred at graduation and is considered a prestigious achievement.

This paper explores what 'graduateness' means in terms of preparedness for the world of work and presents research findings about the benefits of the New England Award that students derive, in terms of graduate attributes and other desirable personal qualities such as citizenship skills, from involvement in extra-curricular activity whilst at university.

Literature

Graduate Attributes

Whilst graduate attribute policies became a common feature in Australian universities in the 1980s and 1990s (Barrie and Prosser, 2004, p. 243), the debate about the purposes of higher education remained contentious in some quarters (Crossman 2005, p. 23; Harman 2005, p. 80). Many academics argued that preparing students for mere work was not their business (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann, 2004, p. 314; Maslen & Slattery, 1994, p. vii) or were perplexed by the prospect (Ramsden, 1998, p. 351); others believed that while certain skills and attributes were desirable in graduates they were acquired more through osmosis than direct instruction; others questioned the notion of transferable skills believing that skills cannot be divorced from context (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994). Possibly the most controversial aspect was the rising influence of employers of graduates who continued to be quite loud in their call for university graduates to be in possession of skills and attributes transferable to the workplace. In this they enjoyed substantial government support as governments came to realise that economic progress was linked to a skilled workforce (Rogers & Mentkowski, 2004, p. 350).

The development of generic skills has been an explicit target of tertiary education as a result of the graduate attribute movement. Before that generic skills may have been expected to emerge during the study of university disciplines but there was no real commitment to developing university-wide

approaches to their development involving curriculum design and teaching and assessment strategies (Gibson, 2003).

Personal qualities

Common understandings of graduate attributes were challenged, most radically by Barnett (2004) who has suggested an alternative conceptualisation of university pedagogy embracing personal or human qualities rather than the need for knowledge and skills. He believes that current notions of generic skills do not adequately meet the need to prepare students for an unknown future. His view is that in a rapidly changing world it is impossible to know what skills and attributes will be needed by graduates in their futures (Barnett 2004, p. 247). Government rhetoric began to reflect these ideas: 'The new century is generating a need for 'emerging' skills and knowledge that have not been previously a focus of higher education' (Nelson 2003, par 69).

Barnett (2003; 2004) proposes that it is not knowledge and skills that will assist graduates to prosper in an unknown world but rather a way of being that is characterized more by self-confidence and the ability to 'launch themselves forth in a world that will furnish responses that cannot be entirely anticipated' (Barnett 2004, p. 253). Barnett sees this ability as springing from self-belief, self-confidence and self-motivation (2004, p. 254). It goes beyond acquisition of knowledge and skills. For Barnett certain human qualities are more important than knowledge and skills, qualities such as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness (2004, p. 259).

The importance of desirable attitudes in graduates has been stressed by both Barnett (2004) and Barrie (2004). Barnett speaks of attitudes about life and about being which might be called wisdom. Barrie speaks of graduates' attitudes or stances towards knowledge, towards the world and towards themselves. In relation to attitudes, Candy et al (1994, p. 52) long ago described as desirable in a graduate the ability and preference to serve the community and assume community leadership and

preference for a dispassionate intellectual approach to problem analysis and decision making. More recently, personal literacy, the ability to read oneself and to be critically self aware (Rust and Froud, p. 2011), has been raised as an important graduate attribute .

Ironically, these views are not inconsistent with the beliefs of others who object to higher education being increasingly geared by economic rationalism and the demands of the workplace and employers. Typical of these is Heath (2000, p. 44) who believes that the contemporary university has been subsumed by the needs of the economy rather than the needs of people as citizens. That preparation for good citizenship is an important function of university education remains a firm belief for many involved in higher education (Heath, 2000, p. 43; Crossman, 2005, 23; Harman, 2005, p. 85; Phillips, 2007, p. 9).

Implementation of graduate attribute policies

The development of graduate attributes through extra-curricular activity, in addition to within the formal curriculum, as in the case of the NEA, is different to most other universities which have focussed their graduate attribute development in the formal curriculum. Indeed, while individual universities have adopted varying lists or sets of desirable graduate attributes, they have embarked on similar processes for their implementation. That is, the expectation, backed by official policy, that the required outcomes will be achieved through the formal teaching and learning process whereby academic staff will interpret, redefine and promote the attributes within a discipline context. As a result much has been reported of frameworks developed, problems, progress, assessment and outcomes of the teaching of graduate attributes within the formal curriculum (Barrie, 2004; Gardner & Martin, 2003; McLoughlin & McCartney, 2000; Muldoon, 2000). Problems have also been identified. There is evidence to suggest that when graduate attributes are embedded in the curriculum students don't necessarily realise they have developed the skills nor do they appreciate their transferability (Johnson 2010, 2; Rust and Froud, 2011, p. 29).

Far less attention has been paid to the potential that the non-formal tertiary curriculum, more commonly referred to as extra-curricular activity, has for the development of graduate attributes.

Curricular/extra-curricular

Most universities have had the planned and enacted curriculum in mind when developing their graduate attribute policies and most of the literature surrounding graduate attributes is centred on accounts of such practice (Alverno College, 2011; Candy, 1999; Cryer, 1998; Kuisma & Wong, 1999; Leggett, Kinnear, Boyce & Bennett 2004; McLoughlin & McCartney, 2000). However, learning which results from university experiences that are not part of the formal curriculum is extra-curricular. This is common usage worldwide. Ironically, activities at university which have been traditionally referred to as extra-curricular because they sit outside the formal curriculum, would, in combination with the formal curriculum, fall within another definition of curriculum, ‘the educational experience, the educational journey’ (Pinar et al., 1996, p. 27) or ‘the learning which takes place under the auspices of the (institution)’ (Maxwell, 1998, p. 9). The New England Award is about educational experience and its existence is rooted in that broader view but uses the language of the view that defines curricular and extra-curricular activity as separate and distinct.

There are several international initiatives to which the New England Award bears certain resemblances. Three which were early models for the New England Award are at the University of Leeds [the Leeds PDP (Jackson, Ward, Rees Jones & Butcher, 2000)]; Bradford University [Bradford Alternative Degree (Currant, 2001)] and the University of York ([The York Award (The University of York, 2011)]. Other similar international programs are at Dublin City University, Ireland [Uaneen Module (Dublin City University, 2011)]; Northwood University, US [EXCEL Program (Northwood University, 2011)], and Sabanci University, Turkey [Extra-curricular Activities Awards (Sabanci Universitesi, 2011)]. In Australia, similar programs are USQ’s Phoenix Award (University of Southern Queensland, 2009) and

the University of Canberra's Canberra Award (University of Canberra, 2011). The latter were both modelled on the New England Award.

What is inherently different about the development of graduate attributes through extra-curricular activity, as is the case with these programs, is that extra-curricular activity is not initially about graduate attributes and it mostly does not pretend to be. Nor are its providers or organisers required to ensure that graduate attribute development is indeed an outcome. That it is, or may be, an outcome, is one of the assumptions underpinning the New England Award but the onus is on the students to ascertain if indeed it has occurred. It is the students' experience and perceptions that provide the validation. The testing of this hypothesis is integral to this study.

The aim of this research was to determine the perceptions of NEA graduates about whether their participation in the NEA did contribute to their development of graduate attributes and other personal qualities.

Methodology

This single-case experimental design research used a questionnaire comprising two demographic items and four survey items (see Attachment 1). The ethics-approved questionnaire was developed with the assistance of a focus group of senior NEA students and was administered online using *Survey Monkey*. The graduates were contacted via email, letter and telephone, and were asked to participate voluntarily in the survey. A total of 65 graduates returned the questionnaire, a response rate of 57%. Unfortunately, many of the graduates were not able to be contacted having moved on from their last known address. 67% of the respondents were female and 33% were male. Four of the respondents were postgraduate students, two were unemployed and the remainder were in full-time employment.

Two of the four survey items required categorical responses and were simply analysed according to frequency of responses. These questions asked specifically about UNE's graduate attributes and certain other personal and professional skills respectively. The third survey item, about other unspecified

personal and professional benefits, required open responses which were analysed using QSR NVivo software. Nodes were named according to emerging ideas and then refined to six themes against which the data was entered and managed. The fourth survey item was another general question about whether the NEA increased participants’ understanding of possible benefits of extra-curricular activity. Those that responded in the affirmative were asked to elaborate. These responses were also analysed using NVivo software with three broad themes emerging.

Results

The NEA graduates were asked which of the seven UNE graduate attributes (described above), they believe they had developed or enhanced. An overwhelming majority said that they developed or enhanced ‘a lot’ or ‘a little’ all of the listed graduate attributes. Table 1 shows students’ perceptions in order of the degree to which they believe they were developed or enhanced through their NEA activities.

Table 1: UNE Graduate Attributes enhanced through participation in the NEA Program

| | Teamwork | Comm skills | Social Responsibility | Lifelong Learning | Problem Solving | Info Literacy | Global Perspective |
|------------|----------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------------|
| A lot | 64% | 75% | 71% | 70% | 57% | 39% | 32% |
| A little | 36% | 23% | 27% | 28% | 36% | 54% | 57% |
| Not at all | 0% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 7% | 7% | 11% |

The graduates were also asked which of certain additional personal and professional skills, attributes or benefits might also have been gained or enhanced. A clear majority believed they gained or developed interpersonal skills (100%), confidence (97%), ability to plan and organise themselves (94%), and initiative and enterprise (93%). Workplace experience (75%) and knowledge of industry relevant to career (70%) were developed /enhanced to a lesser extent with 25% and 30% respectively saying ‘not

at all'. Table 2 below sets out these results in order of the degree to which NEA graduates believe they were gained or enhanced through their NEA activities.

Table 2: Additional personal and professional skills developed through participation in the NEA Program

| | Inter Personal skills | Confidence | Ability to plan & organise | Initiative & enterprise | Workplace experience | Knowledge of industry relevant to career |
|------------|-----------------------|------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|--|
| A lot | 75% | 70% | 55% | 50% | 36% | 23% |
| A little | 25% | 27% | 39% | 43% | 39% | 47% |
| Not at all | 0% | 3% | 6% | 7% | 25% | 30% |

The graduates were asked to describe any other personal or professional benefits gained from participating in the NEA. Six themes emerged. In order of frequency (from most to least experienced) they were: personal satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment; meeting people; gaining extra skills; and what it might mean to potential employers. Sample responses are provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Other personal and professional benefits gained through participation in the NEA Program

| Personal/ professional benefit | Example |
|---|--|
| Personal satisfaction and sense of accomplishment | <p><i>*Getting out of the 'comfort zone' of University life.</i></p> <p><i>*Feeling of pride.</i></p> <p><i>*An extra boost at graduation - what a feeling. The NEA also encouraged me to crawl out of my shell and learn in a different (more practical) way than the learning environment in the uni classroom. Volunteering/paid work was about using skills you hadn't used before and getting a sense of what it felt like in the real world. I was also forced to do more than I would have so that I could reach the points, which was annoying at the time but it was all worth it.</i></p> <p><i>*The knowledge that I can be successful if I dedicate myself to anything that I am really passionate about.</i></p> <p><i>*A sense of accomplishment. Upon my graduation feeling very honoured to have stood out from the crowd.</i></p> |

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Met people | <p><i>*I really enjoyed meeting people who I would not have normally met.</i></p> <p><i>*I meet a lot of students from different courses and colleges, this opened me up to many new and long lasting friendships.</i></p> |
| Extra skills | <p><i>*Understanding people skills and be able to develop emotional intelligence is just great.</i></p> <p><i>*Time management, belief in my abilities.</i></p> <p><i>*Confidence, public speaking, encourages lifelong learning.</i></p> <p><i>*Gained increased knowledge and confidence in my chosen career and in myself.</i></p> |
| Recognition from employers | <p><i>*The NEA demonstrates the involvement in extracurricular activities at University which is a quality employers look for.</i></p> <p><i>*Professional benefit - assisting in securing my first job.</i></p> |

In response to the question about whether the NEA helped participants to realise the benefits of extra-curricular participation, 80% of the respondents believed it did, 18% believed it did not and 2% said they did not know. Those that said yes to this question were asked what they believed the benefits of engaging in extra-curricular activity were. A clear majority (95%) of responses were about becoming a more well-rounded person with many students specifying the development of emotional intelligence, altruism and good citizenship. For example:

**University should be about much more than just getting a degree. Real learning takes place just as much in involvement in the community (local and global), and in working for the community and the environment;*

**Gives a sense of giving something back to the community when volunteering services. It's fun, it's thought provoking, and it's motivating;*

**Making you a more rounded person, developing other aspects of your personality;*

**They help you as a whole person;*

**Good citizen, understanding of yourself and others, balanced person and willingness to be involved;*
and

**These types of activities contribute to the longevity of the community, to building social networks and help to develop a more altruistic approach to life (i.e. the greater good). They encourage independence and initiative for the right reasons and provide a fresh take on actions within public and private organisations.*

Discussion

The results of this study overwhelmingly support the hypothesis that extra-curricular activity of the kind described in this paper can contribute to the development of graduate attributes and other desirable

skills and attributes according to participants' experience and perceptions. Indeed, only an extremely small minority of participants felt that the UNE Graduate Attributes and additional specified personal and professional skills attributes were not developed or practised at all. Furthermore, a large majority believed that the structure of the NEA Program assisted them to more fully realise and appreciate the benefits of extra-curricular activity in terms of their personal development.

Skills development, improved interpersonal skills and increased confidence were significant outcomes of extra-curricular activity within the NEA. Studies by Harvey et al. (1997 cited in Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004, p. 148) and Te Wiata (2001) have found that students' ability to demonstrate proficiency in the workplace was linked to the development of confidence in their ability to apply themselves in new and different contexts so this is an important outcome of involvement in extra-curricular activity in terms of the aims of the program.

The ability to plan and organise oneself and develop initiative and enterprise were also important outcomes in the light of Barnett's belief in the importance of self-belief, self-confidence and self-motivation for graduates' ability to prosper in an unknown world (2004, p.253). Accumulation of workplace experience and increased knowledge of industry relevant to career were less important outcomes of the research. A possible relevant factor in this is that large numbers of UNE students do not have access to relevant work experience in the small towns and regional areas in which they reside.

The abundance of references to personal satisfaction, becoming more well-rounded and developing emotional intelligence, altruism and good citizenship are particularly significant in that they demonstrate a synthesis of traditional expectations of higher education with contemporary ideas about the personal qualities of graduates that should matter most (see Barnett, 2003, 2004; Barrie, 2004).

The desire to be more involved and to seek fulfilling experiences is also indicative of the growth of the types of personal attributes and attitudes, and human qualities expounded by Barrie (2004), Barnett (2003; 2004) and others (Coldstream, 2003; Rooke, 2003). Additionally, the benefits derived by students

from community involvement is consistent with a view that is strongly held in Great Britain, the United States and Canada where service to the community and voluntary work which steers students into civic engagement is more commonly part of undergraduate programs (Coldstream, 2003, 13). In Australia, the value of extra-curricular activity involving voluntary and community work is increasingly being recognised by employers (Alexander, 2006, p. 3).

This is consistent with Atkins' (1999) findings that students develop personal and professional skills through participation in clubs and societies and doing voluntary or community work and that this impacts on their confidence and increases their employability. However, Atkins points out that the value of participation in extra-curricular activities such as these are not usually appreciated by students until it is harnessed and translated back into the classroom and made part of students' learning objectives. The New England Award allows for the harnessing of the potential of extra-curricular activity without the need for it to be made part of learning objectives in the formal curriculum. Through the New England Award and its explicit relationship with the development of personal and professional skills, learning objectives are made clear and students self assess through the reflective component of the New England Award. This has resulted in participants being more focused on the benefits of extra-curricular activity than they might otherwise have been which in turn makes them more articulate about their personal and professional skills and better able to demonstrate this to future employers. As we know employers of graduates take individual personal development seriously and graduates need to be able to know themselves and their strengths and be able to provide examples of how they have demonstrated these (Barnett 2004, p. 253; Rust & Froud, 2011, p.34).

Furthermore, such personal and professional development, as described here, does not occur outside of meaningful contexts as per the concerns raised by Candy et al (1994). Indeed, these meaningful contexts have tremendous potential to complement the planned and enacted curriculum as described by Candy et al (1994) and Gardner & Martin (2003). In this sense 'extra-curricular' might better be described as 'co-curricular'.

Conclusion

The New England Award Program encourages, recognises and rewards student development through participation in otherwise non-accredited extra-curricular activities. It appears that, based on the views of New England Award graduates, with the benefit of both the experience of the world of work and hindsight regarding their experience of the New England Award Program, that this approach is validated as an effective vehicle for student development. Additionally, programs such as the New England Award may have the potential to positively impact on retention through strengthened student engagement.

Institutionally endorsed programs which harness extra-curricular activity alongside the formal curriculum can provide important contextualised student development opportunities which encourage students to develop personally and professionally and in a way that meets the demands of employers of graduates who seek transferable skills such as communication and interpersonal skills. Moreover, they can enhance ‘graduateness’ through the development of other desirable personal and human qualities as well as self confidence and the ability to ‘launch oneself forward’ as recommended in recent discussions around graduate attributes and employability as well as long held views about the overall value of university education.

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Appendix 1

Survey of New England Award graduates

This is a survey of students who have graduated from the University of New England (UNE) with a New England Award (NEA) since the program was launched. Your feedback is highly valued so please take the time to complete the survey and return it electronically. We guarantee that your answers will remain anonymous. The information collected will be used to inform the future development of the NEA. It will also be used (anonymously) in the NEA annual report and to develop and publish academic papers.

Q1. Are you Male / Female ?

Q2. What is your current occupation?

Q3. Which of the UNE Graduate Attributes did you develop or enhance through the activities you participated in throughout completing the NEA?

| | A lot | A little | Not at all |
|-----------------------|-------|----------|------------|
| Communication skills | | | |
| Global perspective | | | |
| Social responsibility | | | |
| Teamwork | | | |
| Problem solving | | | |
| Information Literacy | | | |
| Lifelong Learning | | | |

Q4. Which of the following personal or professional benefits did you develop or enhance through the activities you participated in for the NEA?

| | A lot | A little | Not at all |
|---|-------|----------|------------|
| Ability to plan and organise yourself | | | |
| Interpersonal skills | | | |
| Confidence | | | |
| Workplace experience | | | |
| Initiative and enterprise | | | |
| Knowledge of industry relevant to your career | | | |

Q5. Please describe any other personal or professional benefits (apart from indicated in question 4. above) that you gained from participating in the New England Award.

Q6. Did the New England Award program help you to understand the benefits of extra-curricular participation?

If 'yes', what do you believe are the benefits of extra-curricular activities?