

The New England Award: providing student development opportunities through cross-campus and external collaboration

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The University of New England (UNE) recognizes and rewards student development and achievement in extra-curricular activity. The New England Award (NEA), introduced in 2004 to on-campus students for a three year pilot period, recognizes that valuable skills and attributes are developed through participation in otherwise non-accredited activities whilst at university. Eligible activities include contribution to the university community, engagement with the local community through informal collaboration with outside organizations, extra-curricular learning and training and professional development. This case study focused on the outcomes of the NEA for a range of stakeholders during its pilot period in the light of the types of skills and attributes sought by employers of graduates. The first two NEA cohorts (students who graduated with NEAs in 2005 and 2006) were canvassed via postal and phone surveys. Six of 2005 cohort were surveyed again one year after graduation. Other participants in the research were the NEA activity providers; employers and supervisors of students involved in part-time paid and voluntary work with external organizations; and a selection of senior University staff. The 79 participants were asked their views about the value of extra-curricular activity; the value of being registered for the NEA; and the perceived value of the NEA after graduation. Additionally the six NEA graduates and another 49 students who participated in examples of each of the three NEA categories of activity were asked specifically about their development of the UNE Graduate Attributes. The research indicated that the NEA was successful in meeting its primary objective which was to support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy through recognizing extra-curricular activity (thereby complementing curriculum-based strategies for graduate attribute development). Not only that, students also developed a range of other valuable attributes and attitudes. On the basis of these results, the NEA was endorsed by the UNE Council as an ongoing feature of UNE from 2007 and has been extended in Semester 2, 2007 to all students, including those studying at a distance. While these results are not generalizable because of the small sample size and the uniqueness of the UNE on-campus experience, the underlying notion of providing student development opportunities through cross-campus and external collaboration is transferable (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 8(2), 149-162).

Keywords: New England Award; graduate competencies; external collaboration; Australia

The New England Award (NEA) was established in 2004 by the University of New England (UNE) for on-campus (internal) students for a three year pilot period. Its primary aim was to recognize and reward student development, particularly of the UNE graduate attributes, through extra-curricular activity carried out concurrently with academic studies. Extra-curricular student development opportunities are made available to students through cross-campus and external collaboration with a range of organizations.

The UNE on-campus experience offers many and diverse opportunities for extra-curricular involvement. Approximately 50% of nearly 4,000 internal students live on campus in the University's residential system which comprises seven residences known as colleges and a complex of self-catering flats. The residential system offers a huge array of social, cultural and sporting opportunities to its residents and actively promotes these activities to prospective and current students.

The other 50% of internal students live in or close to the nearby city of Armidale. All are able to affiliate with the various colleges and participate in college life. In addition to the college-based activities there are a large number of campus-based clubs and associations. The presence of 4,000 internal students on or very close to the campus increases opportunities for involvement in campus life because of proximity, accessibility and immediacy, and also assists in generating an environment which is conducive to such activity and contributes to its growth.

There are three categories of NEA eligible activities: extra-curricular learning and training such as leadership training and technical and further education (TAFE) courses; professional development; and contribution to the university and local communities. Typical examples of the latter are volunteer work with Lifeline; Lions Club; Salvation Army; RSPCA; Oxfam; Cancer Council; Camp Quality; Girl Guides Association; St John Ambulance; National Trust; and local church groups, arts societies, advocacy organizations and environmental groups. Participation in NEA-eligible activities earns NEA points for both completion of the activity, and demonstrated commitment and success in the activity.

Students who register for the NEA in order to gain recognition of their extra-curricular achievements are required to plan their activities; inform the relevant activity providers and employers/supervisors that they are NEA students so that their performance can be monitored; and keep a record of their activities in an e-portfolio. They are also required to write a reflective journal about their personal development, including reference to the UNE graduate attributes (communication skills, global perspective, information literacy, lifelong learning, problem solving, social responsibility and teamwork). This requirement is included to encourage critical reflection and the exploration and articulation of personal journeys, achievements and experiences (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1988; Boud & Walker, 1991; Cartwright, 1997; Walker, 1988; Zegwaard, Coll & Hodges, 2003) and also to encourage students to plan and take responsibility for their learning (Anderson, Boud & Sampson, 1996; Boud, 1986; Hammond & Collins, 1991).

Students who accrue a certain number of NEA points across the three NEA activity categories and who have written journals of sufficient worth receive the New England Award with their degree at their graduation ceremony as an additional testamur. Accompanying information describes how the NEA provides a framework within which students are able to receive recognition for not only participation in extra-curricular activity but also the skills and attributes developed through these activities which complement the skills and knowledge developed through their studies.

THE STUDY

The study was an interpretive one within the constructivist paradigm. Its aim was to determine how well the NEA in its pilot period met its objective: to support the

development of the UNE graduate attributes through extra-curricular activity, thereby complementing the embedding of the graduate attributes within the formal curriculum.

The development of graduate attributes through extra-curricular activity in addition to within the formal curriculum is different to most other universities which have focused 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 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 (see, e.g., Barrie, 2004; Bruce & Middleton, 1999; Chapman, 2004; Gardner & Martin, 2003; Lines, 2003; McLoughlin & McCartney, 2000; Muldoon, 2000; Muldoon & Buckland, 1998; Nunan, 1999). However 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. This is in spite of the fact that students who find time to engage in extra-curricular activity while at university make a very positive impression on graduate employers (Marshall, 2005).

The influence of employers is now widely acknowledged by universities (Crisp, 2003; King & Nunan, 2003). There is no escaping the fact that employers of graduates expect that graduates are able to demonstrate skills and attributes in addition to discipline knowledge and related expertise (Allen Consulting Group, 2004; Barrie & Prosser, 2004; Bowden, Hart, Trigwell & Watts, 2000; Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994; Goldsworthy, 2003; Kapoor, 2003; Leece, 2005; Nelson, 2003, Ronayne, 2003). There are continuing calls from employer groups for universities to produce more employable graduates (Wimshurst, Wortley, Bates & Allard, 2006). For example, "Employers are concerned about the lack of skills regarding creativity, initiative, oral business communication and problem solving among graduates" (Maiden & Kerr 2006, p. 1). The Business Council of Australia said in its March 2006 report that its research showed that businesses remain concerned about the ability of education and training systems to provide people with capabilities such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, ongoing learning, creativity, cultural understanding, entrepreneurship and leadership (Business Council of Australia, 2006).

Also, in recent years traditional understandings of graduate attributes have been challenged, most radically by Barnett (2004) who has suggested an alternative conceptualization of university pedagogy embracing personal or human qualities rather than the need for knowledge and skills. 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; it goes beyond acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Some universities are responding to such calls. Student qualities such as being creative, innovative, entrepreneurial, collaborative, flexible, self-motivated, self-managed and having a capacity for reflexivity are increasingly being included in discussion about the purposes of higher education (Coldstream, 2003; Rooke, 2003) and finding their way into universities’ graduate attribute policies.

In this light, the study also sought to discover if additional personal skills and attributes were developed by students through extra-curricular activity, in addition to the graduate attributes, and if employability was believed to be enhanced. The role of the NEA in providing a framework for such outcomes was also explored.

The first two NEA cohorts (i.e., students who graduated with NEAs in 2005 & 2006) were surveyed about their experience of the NEA. The 2005 cohort were surveyed again one year after graduation. Other participants in the research were the on-campus activity providers; external employers and supervisors of students involved in part-time paid and voluntary work in their communities and with external organizations; and a selection of senior UNE staff.

Participants in the research were asked their views about the value of extra-curricular activity; the value of being registered for the NEA; and the value of the NEA for students after graduation. There were 35 responses from students (a response rate of 41%), 10 from on-campus activity providers (a response rate of 83%), 23 from external employers/supervisors (a response rate of 70%) and 11 from senior staff (a response rate of 55%). Also, six NEA graduates (a response rate of 66%), and an additional 49 students (a response rate of 34%) who participated in examples of each of the three NEA categories of activity responded to a question asking specifically about their development of the UNE graduate attributes through NEA activities. There were a total 128 participants in the study. Data were collected via nine postal surveys and one phone survey (of the external employers/supervisors) all of which were approved by the UNE Human Ethics Research Committee. The phone survey required additional explanation of UNE-specific matters such as the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy because the participants were not necessarily familiar with the UNE context like all the other participants who were either staff or students of UNE.

The qualitative data were managed and analyzed using QSR NVivo software. Tree parent nodes were established for each survey, each with child nodes corresponding to the survey questions. Each individual answer in each document was coded initially to the tree child node corresponding to the question being answered. After that each child node was browsed and recoded as grandchild nodes named according to emerging themes. The responses to similar questions in different surveys were coded similarly where possible. For example, students were asked what value they derived

from being engaged in extra-curricular activity. The answers fell into three categories or themes: personal development, skills development and seeking to get involved or engagement. Four other surveys contained a similar question so the responses were coded to the same three categories as in the first survey. When a response necessitated a new category it was coded accordingly and used if needed henceforth. This pattern was repeated as each of these surveys was coded.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Value of Extra-curricular Activity

The participants in the study were asked what they thought were the benefits of extra-curricular activity.

Students

According to the students, the benefits of extra-curricular activity were related to personal growth and development, skills development and gains related to engagement. The personal growth and development described by the students encompassed increased motivation; a growing sense of responsibility; and gaining feelings of achievement, fulfillment and satisfaction: "So much! Learnt more about myself and a wealth of experience and knowledge to utilize for the future. Helped me to get motivated to be involved in events that promote my personal and professional development." Increased confidence as a result of participating in extra-curricular activity was a common outcome: "Also helped me to become more confident through participation outside my comfort zone." Other comments were about gaining as much from the university experience as possible: "Helping me realize the value of making my time here at uni really count." Many of the benefits listed by the students implied a growing sense of social responsibility, which is a UNE graduate attribute.

The types of skills gained through extra-curricular activity according to the students were leadership, time management and three UNE graduate attributes; lifelong learning skills, teamwork skills, and communications skills. Many students said that these skills impacted positively on their confidence levels. Most saw these as skills that enhanced their employability: "It has built my leadership and graduate skills so that I am ready for a career." In general, the feeling seemed to be that the overall skills development resulting from participation in extra-curricular activity would be useful after graduation.

There was awareness amongst students that a well-rounded student experience involves more than study. Students also saw benefits related to making friends, having a sense of community, and increased enjoyment of student life as a result of their extra-curricular activities. A typical response was: "A sense of belonging. It has made my time at UNE far more enjoyable because I am involved in all aspects, not simply academic life."

Activity Providers

All members of this group were actively involved in the NEA in some way, ranging from being foundation members of the NEA Advisory Committee through to being 'gatekeepers' or monitors of NEA students' participation in NEA activities. Personal development was the most important benefit of extra-curricular activity for this group with all making comments related to students gaining confidence, being extended, developing a sense of community and becoming more mature and responsible: "More mature attitude and responsibility. Opportunities to reflect on performance and improve strategies for achieving goals." All of the activity providers cited skills development as important benefits of extra-curricular activity, particularly life skills and leadership skills. Five said that enhanced employability was an important benefit of extra-curricular activity. Four said that simply being involved in activities outside of the formal curriculum was beneficial because it gave a perspective beyond the purely academic.

Senior Staff

Unlike the activity providers, this group did not have insider knowledge about the NEA but interestingly their responses to the question about the benefits they believed accrued from being involved in extra-curricular activity did not differ widely from the activity providers. Personal development topped the answers including the value of engaging in the broader university experience. This was followed by skills development, with specific mentions of social responsibility, communication skills, teamwork, and enhanced employability.

Clearly personal development was seen as a more important outcome of engaging in extra-curricular activity than skills development. Interestingly, the examples of personal development cited are consistent with the types of personal attributes and attitudes which are believed by many to be the most desirable qualities of university graduates as described above.

Value of Being Registered for the New England Award

The participants in the study were asked what they thought were the benefits of being registered for the NEA.

Students

The students' responses about the value of participating in the NEA, categorized in descending order of frequency, were about the positive effects of encouragement and goal setting; being focused on skills development; the social value of the NEA experience; and the value of the reflective component. The responses about skills development mentioned communication skills, people skills, leadership skills, time management skills, organizational skills and self discipline.

Some said that the NEA encouraged them to be more involved than in the past: “It has drawn my attention to my extra-curricular activities and led me to avenues I might not have done otherwise. It has increased my social awareness, motivated me to attempt things I had previously put off.”

Others said that the NEA resulted in a broader university experience. There were also responses about the beneficial aspects of the NEA requirement that students keep a record of their activities such as: “Involvement in NEA has both encouraged me to engage more fully in extra-curricular work, and to keep a record of the activities. I would normally have done without such a record.”

Interestingly, the students’ responses about the social value of extra-curricular activity are indicative of student engagement which is a well known ingredient of student retention (Astin, 1993; Kraemer, 1997; McMillan, 2005; Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel & Lerner, 1998; National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2001; Pascarella, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, the student experience is considered a powerful indicator of excellence in university education in Australia (Parry & Debowski, 2004). The students’ appreciation of the reflective component of the NEA is consistent with the aims of reflective journals and also with the view held by supporters of self-assessment in higher education, as described above.

Activity Providers

When asked what value they saw students deriving from being registered for NEA, as opposed to simply participating in extra-curricular activity, the majority of the activity providers focused on the value of students learning to set goals and the ensuing sense of achievement. The activity providers viewed the NEA requirement of writing reflective journals and recording skills development in the e-portfolio as highly beneficial. For them, the reflective exercise enabled students to better understand their own personal and skills development which in turn assists with their goal setting, assists deeper learning, and enhances their ability to talk about their learning and development.

Senior Staff

The members of this group brought a different perspective to that of the activity providers. For them the major benefit of being registered for the NEA was the structure that the NEA provided for documentation of and coherent, rather than piecemeal, recognition of achievement. This group also saw motivation as an important benefit of students being registered for the NEA while they were involved in extra-curricular activity. Other benefits put forward by senior staff were related to the broadening of horizons and the development of life and citizenship skills.

Employers

The students' employers gave answers that were more related to the development of life skills rather than increased employability. Other benefits related to recognition of effort and the encouragement factor of the NEA. The employers also commented on the value-adding to degrees and the intrinsic worth of extra-curricular activity. Typical responses from employers were: "Recognition that extra curricula activities are as important as academic goals for the 'well-rounded' student", and "The documentation is sanctioned by the University, portable and tangible so that employers should have confidence in the validity of its worth."

Perceived Value of the New England Award After Graduation

The participants in the study were asked what they thought might be the value of the NEA to students after graduation.

Students

In terms of value after graduation the students said that enhanced employability was very much an expectation followed by the value for their lives in general. One student seemed to sum up the prevailing view with: "Increased experience in real life work situations, better social and team work interaction, increased learning skills and perspectives, fantastic memories, sense of achievement, life experiences you don't always come by."

Activity Providers

The activity providers felt that the NEA would mainly enhance the employability of UNE graduates. There were also several comments about students gaining a broader outlook, life skills and increased confidence as a result of the NEA.

Senior Staff

Senior staff also rated increased employability and broadened outlook in NEA graduates as positive outcomes of the NEA. They also recognized the role that the NEA played in skills development and confidence building.

Employers

In answer to the same question the employers of students gave similar responses but with greater emphasis on employability. Of the 23 respondents, there were two who were not confident enough to answer this question. Each of the remaining 21 made comments related to increased employability and enhanced resumes. One commented on the importance of maintaining standards of achievement within the

NEA for it to be meaningful. The employers also indicated that they understood the potential of the NEA to enhance life skills which they appeared to value highly. There were 10 such comments. Other comments from employers were: “From my reading of the requirements of the Award, they should have a real sense of having achieved something significant”, and “Once it is more generally known and recognized, it will be very valuable.”

The employers were also asked in what ways they would be swayed by a potential employee holding an NEA. The 23 respondents were unanimous in saying that they would be impressed by a potential employee with an NEA and they would take it into consideration because of what it says about the applicant’s character, experience, skills and motivation. Two added the proviso that they would be swayed by an applicant with an NEA if all else was equal between candidates and two others said that they would be swayed if the NEA recipient was able to explain why they received the NEA, and how it had benefited them or could demonstrate how their paradigm has changed. This is a clear endorsement of the reflective component of the NEA. These responses are consistent with what we already know about the expectations of employers of graduates as described above.

Graduates

When asked what benefits they had gained personally from participating in the NEA all of this group talked about the development of personal qualities, the challenge, the development of personal responsibility and empathy, confidence and a sense of achievement.

The same group was asked if they had used the NEA to their advantage since graduating. All six said that they had by including it in their CV/résumés and job applications. Four felt that the NEA contributed to a successful outcome. All said that their employers were aware either about the NEA or the extra-curricular activities that were carried out for the NEA and the related skills. Four of the six said that they knew for sure that their employers had reacted positively to the notion of the NEA. One said she was not sure about her employer’s reaction, but had experienced very positive reactions from others. None had felt that their employer had reacted negatively to the notion of the NEA. All six believed that the NEA would continue to be of use to them in their careers.

Graduate Attributes

Six NEA graduates plus 49 students who participated in selected examples of each of the three NEA categories of activity were asked specifically about their development of graduate attributes

Graduates

All of the NEA graduates believed that participating in the NEA had assisted their development of the UNE Graduate Attributes to varying degrees ('a lot' or 'a little'). None said 'not at all'. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Student Leadership Program (Category 1-Extra-curricular Learning and Training)

Nine of the 12 respondents to the survey of participants in a student leadership program (an NEA category 1 activity) said they believed that participating in the VCSL Program had assisted their development of the UNE Graduate Attributes to varying degrees ('a lot' or 'a little'). Two said that information literacy had not been developed 'at all'. One said that global perspective had not been developed 'at all'. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Work Experience (Category 2- Professional Development)

In the survey of students who claimed NEA points for paid and voluntary work (NEA category 2 activities), all 17 respondents said that they believed that their work experience has assisted in the development of the graduate attributes. Between them they listed 42 different part time paid jobs or voluntary work they had been involved in and indicated which of the graduate attributes they thought they had developed through each job. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Peer Support Program (Category 3- Community Contribution)

A survey of 20 participants in a peer support program (an NEA Category 3 activity) indicated that the graduate attributes were developed, to varying degrees, through participation in the program. Communication skills were selected most frequently by the participants and global perspective was selected the least frequently. These results are summarized in Table 1.

All 55 students who were asked about their development of the UNE graduate attributes through the NEA or through participating in an example of each of the three NEA activity categories, said that they had developed some or all seven of the graduate attributes. Clearly some were enhanced to a far greater degree than others. These were communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving and social responsibility. Others were enhanced to a far lesser degree than others. These were global perspective and information literacy. In the middle sat lifelong learning.

Significantly, the students generally rated the enhancement of personal qualities more highly than skills development as benefits to be derived from participation in extra-curricular activity and being registered for the NEA. This is an important outcome in the light of the above discussion about the desirability personal attitudes and attributes in graduates.

TABLE 1
 Graduates views' of the value of the New England Award in the development of graduate attributes

	New England Award (N=6)			Leadership Program (N=12)			<i>Response</i> Work Experience (N=17)	Peer Support Program (N=20)
	LOT	LIT	NAA	LOT	LIT	NAA	# part-time jobs that it was felt graduate attributes developed helped gain	# graduate attributes it was felt were developed via peer support program
<i>Graduate Attribute</i>								
Communication skills	6	-	-	9	3	-	38	18
Teamwork	6	-	-	11	1	-	36	12
Problem-solving	5	1	-	6	6	-	34	10
Social responsibility	4	2	-	5	7	-	35	11
Lifelong learning	4	2	-	7	5	-	26	9
Global perspective	1	5	-	2	9	1	20	1
Information literacy	3	3	-	-	10	2	22	5

Key: LOT= a lot; LIT=a little; NAA=not at all

CONCLUSION

Clearly extra-curricular activity through cross-campus and external collaboration offers a range of ideal opportunities for student development. In spite of the small sample from which the data was drawn, it would seem that the New England Award, by providing a means by which UNE is able recognize and reward student development through the broader university experience and community involvement, offers a complementary approach to curriculum-based student development of UNE's listed graduate attributes resulting in well rounded graduates who have experienced a holistic rather than narrowly academic education. However, the UNE graduate attributes were not evenly and consistently developed through participation in NEA eligible activities which was a mixed outcome in terms of the original aim of the NEA. On the other hand, other valuable personal qualities were. By focusing students' attention on the benefits to be derived from extra-curricular activity, particularly activities involving community service and working to support others, desirable personal qualities such as confidence, altruism, community spirit, personal responsibility, empathy, citizenship and life skills are also enhanced. These are typical of the types of personal attributes, attitudes and human qualities being increasingly expounded in the graduate attribute literature. Additionally, student engagement is enhanced through extra-curricular activity.

The NEA thus provides some reciprocity. Students benefit from institutional recognition of their extra-curricular achievement through the formal validation of their personal development and enhanced ability to utilize it in their lives after graduation, particularly professionally. In return, the university has more engaged and satisfied students, who are highly likely to impact on student success and retention.

On the basis of these results, the NEA was endorsed by the UNE Council as an ongoing feature of UNE from 2007 and has been extended in Semester 2, 2007 to all students, including those studying at a distance. This will mean that further informal collaboration between UNE and community organizations will occur as external students seek opportunities for engagement with their communities across Australia. While these results are not generalizable because of the small sample size and the uniqueness of the UNE on-campus experience, the underlying notion of providing student development opportunities through cross-campus and external collaboration is transferable.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based.

Cooperative education in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. Essentially, cooperative education is a partnership between education and work, in which enhancement of student learning is a key outcome. More specifically, cooperative education can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

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