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# Darwinism and the Durham Award: the missing link between education, employment and engagement

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## Background

In difficult economic times, companies often cut back on non-essential, non-commercial activities, with attendance at Graduate Fairs an obvious target for easy savings. Yet it is precisely then that employers and students need each other: employers need to find the best students with the right skills to help their business survive and evolve; students need employers to engage with universities to offer the best employment prospects.

In this challenging environment, students need to make their skills work for them; to demonstrate that they have the key competencies and generic skills that employers require (Harvey et al, 1997). Many students already have the right skills, but seemingly lack the ability to demonstrate this during interview (Yorke, 2006). This is the modern day 'missing link'. How do you move from the world of education to that of employment in a way that allows graduates to enunciate their skills, leaving firms confident they are recruiting the right people with the right skills to ensure they survive and thrive in a sometimes hostile environment? This paper outlines one initiative which tries to bridge this missing link by utilising the expertise of employers to help students make the transition.

## Encouraging evolution

Durham University believes it has a duty to give students the best possible start when they leave University. This means helping them to match their skills to exactly what an employer is looking for, something that goes beyond purely academic work, linking experiences at University with what employers want in a concrete way (CBI, 2009). One response to this dichotomy is

the Durham Award, launched in October 2009.

Durham is not the first university to implement an extra-curricular award. York University has run a successful award for more than ten years, with universities such as Exeter, Birmingham and Nottingham following suit; while Dundee, Bristol, Lancaster and Worcester have all been engaged in pilots at the same time as Durham. The widespread nature of these schemes, covering old and new universities, research-led and teaching institutions alike, clearly demonstrates that graduate employability is an issue of increasing concern across the HE sector.

When planning the Durham Award we were able to draw on the expertise and generous sharing of knowledge by co-ordinators of awards at other institutions, while at the same time creating a structure that would be distinctive to Durham and make the most of the strengths of our student community. With this in mind, the Award is structured to recognise student involvement in University life, community engagement and work experience, the latter being a vital requirement for employers (Archer & Davison, 2008).

The key to success was actively to engage employers, demonstrating the value of the Award both to them and to individual students. The best way for employers to appreciate its relevance was for them to own the Award jointly with the University and be given the chance to make a significant contribution throughout the process – from initial planning through to final delivery and implementation. Feedback from participating employers, gathered as part of the end-of-first-year review, has shown that they very much valued this opportunity to shape the Award in a meaningful way.

Drawing on existing employer contacts through the Careers Advisory Service, meetings were held to discuss the idea of an Award which would recognise achievements outside the academic degree. Care was taken to ensure representation from a range of employers of differing sizes and sectors with involvement from both local and national companies. Employers ranged from those with just a few employees, serving the local economy, to national organisations such as banking, the public sector and transport industries. To succeed, the Award needed to be applicable to all students, regardless of current academic discipline or future career plans, and could not afford to be too closely linked with a particular employer or sector. At the same time, employers had to feel that their needs and requirements were being addressed. These two principles became the foundations of the Award.

The first step was defining exactly what skills employers wanted from their graduate employees and how these could be measured. For the Award to be credible it was important to have confidence that the right gap was being bridged and that completing the Award would help the future employability prospects of Durham students. Balancing differing employer perspectives was not as difficult as it first seemed. An open, round table discussion identified and defined five core competencies which would be relevant to all career paths and the development of which would help to set students apart in the recruitment process. These were communication, teamwork, commercial awareness, leadership and problem-solving, all of which are also identified as priority areas in the wider literature (Archer & Davison, 2008; Rees et al, 2007).

### Fostering engagement

With a strong foundation it would have been easy to forge ahead, confident we were helping our students to demonstrate these five core competencies. However, to maintain the credibility of the Award and ensure its future success we were keen to maximise joint ownership with employers. It was also important for students to feel they were engaging in something worthwhile and dynamic – not something that would quickly go out of date if employers ‘changed their minds’. Two key areas were identified where employers could have a significant input into the Award, beneficial to them and to Durham students.

A programme of skills workshops was created to support the Award. Some of these related to a particular competency, showing students what this skill involves and how to demonstrate it successfully.

Others were more general, such as delivering good presentations (often a key part of the modern interview process), or ‘selling yourself’ at interview. Rather than utilising existing University staff expertise, we took the decision to invite employers to run these workshops. This provided a number of advantages: it widened the pool of employers interested in the Award; it persuaded students of the value of the Award; and it ensured that the employers felt some ownership of the scheme. After all, who better to show the students the ‘missing link’ than the employers waiting for them when they made the transition from education to work? Feedback from the students was overwhelmingly positive, demonstrating that they valued this employer input: “It was the best workshop I’ve attended: it would be good if others followed this format.” Feedback from employers was similarly positive, and they valued the opportunity to be involved in the early stages of training the next generation workforce.

The second way to include employers was to give them an input into the assessment process. All Durham Award students are required to attend a short interview as part of their application and each panel includes an employer representative. This gives the students a realistic interview experience and allows us to use the expertise of the employers to provide real feedback on the applicants’ employability, identifying the areas where they are strong and areas for improvement. Several employers commented on the advantage this employer feedback will give Durham Award students at future interviews: “Our strongest contribution I feel was the very considered feedback at the end.” This strong link between student experience and employer needs and aspirations ensures that the Award remains credible and gives the students an edge for the future.

### Natural selection

It was important to use ‘appropriate’ employers, balancing large national companies with smaller, more local firms. Using employers in different ways has proved highly successful. A ‘core’ of employers acts in an advisory capacity and sits on the University Employability and Skills Steering Group to oversee development of the Award and other employability initiatives. Other employers take a less directive but no less valuable role, contributing standard skills workshops to the Award. Still others work with us to deliver tailored workshops addressing the key elements of the Award. This gives these employers a ready-made audience and access to motivated

students, expanding what the Award offers to students and employers alike. Of course, Durham is not unique. Many universities are seeking employer involvement for extra-curricular awards, which means it is important to actively market the Durham Award and consider carefully whom to approach. Durham already has strong links with many employers who have been keen to be involved; approaching individuals who have personal or local links with Durham has also proved successful. Having been careful to talk to employers at an early stage and ensure the programme was developed to match their needs closely, we have found it much easier to market involvement as something worthwhile and of mutual benefit.

As the Award has progressed, the benefits of the commitment to engage a range of employers have been realised. By encouraging representation from interested companies and sectors, the Award has a broad appeal, and this versatility is a strength which can be used to market the Award both to students and to other employers. From the outset we were keen to avoid the appearance that the Award was 'sponsored' by a particular company or sector, a stance which is important in a University which has a broad range of graduate destinations each year. Using a broad pool of expertise also ensures that interested employers can offer as much or as little support as they feel able to. Bigger firms may, naturally, be able to offer more staff time to support workshops and some sent several representatives to take part in the interviews, but this needs to be balanced against the danger that smaller employers may feel squeezed out. Similarly, a narrow focus on local firms will limit the impact and relevance of the Award to employers and students, who are increasingly operating in a global recruitment environment. It is a difficult balance to maintain, but spreading opportunities around serves the best interests of students, employers and the Award alike. Thus, the Award is supported by a wide range of large companies such as PwC, Network Rail, IBM and Enterprise Rent-a-Car, as well as smaller local organisations such as Waterstons and Ouseburn Trust. A large pool of volunteers puts us in a strong position to expand the numbers of students who are able to apply for the Award each year.

## Survival of the fittest

With a solid and credible foundation to the Award, we can now afford to be more creative and try to extend employer integration in the future, helping to ensure that the Award remains distinctive to Durham. Some developmental ideas which may be considered in future include:

1. The possibility of employer sponsorship for elements of the Award
2. Expansion of the workshop programme
3. Using employers as mentors for students working towards the Award
4. The potential for an employer forum online
5. Employers offering work-shadowing opportunities
6. Expanding networking opportunities.

The strength of the Award is that it allows the missing link to connect in two directions. Students get a direct link to employers to find out exactly how they should be marketing the portfolio of skills they have built up during their time at University. Employers get a direct link to students and can be confident that any successful Durham Award students will be able to demonstrate that core set of skills which they themselves have identified as being crucial for the modern workplace. In a time of recruitment cutbacks, offering employers a way to interact with students, without having to promise them a job, is hugely valuable.

## Facing the future

The first year of the Award has been a huge success. Registration was initially opened for 50 students, but this was expanded to 110 in an effort to meet the overwhelming demand. The quality of applications received was variable, with 63 students eventually achieving the Award. Successful students do receive a formal certificate which they can include on their CV, but the more important (though less immediately obvious) impact on employability comes from the exposure to a genuine interview process involving real employers, the reflective assessment of their own skills, and the opportunity for detailed and constructive feedback.

Measuring employability is not easy, owing in part to the debate about what 'employability' actually is. Is it simply 'getting a job' on leaving university; getting a job that utilises their specific skill set; or providing them with a core set of skills which will

be beneficial throughout their career? We intend to track the Award students through the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) information and through follow-up contact to give some idea of their employment prospects. However, it may never be possible to give statistical proof of the 'success' of the Award. Even if raw data relating to how many Durham graduates get a job within six months of leaving university are used, it is difficult to measure the impact of the Award on this, as many other factors may also be at work. Nevertheless, we are confident that the process of the Award gives students the opportunity to consider their skills and learn to articulate them in a way that gives them a greater chance of success. As long as we maintain employer involvement in the structure of the Award and its assessment, we have an on-the-spot endorsement of its relevance and value. The skills that the Award involves are by their very nature personal and it is the responsibility of the individual student to apply the lessons they learn to their future aspirations.

## Conclusions

Although still in its infancy, the Durham Award has proved popular with students and employers alike, as just two quotes (from many received) clearly demonstrate:

*"I think the award is a great idea and allows Durham students to really showcase their skills, practise interview settings and receive feedback. I would definitely recommend it to fellow students."*

(2010 student)

*"The Durham Award provides students with a fantastic opportunity to recognise their capabilities and articulate their skills so that they can differentiate themselves in a competitive graduate recruitment marketplace."*

(Employer)

In a difficult environment, it gives both groups the chance to articulate and assess their skills and requirements in a risk-free environment. Crucially, successful applicants can be confident that they can complete that missing link and demonstrate that they have both the academic knowledge and the wider employment skills that a graduate needs to survive and thrive in the modern employment market and that a graduate recruiter needs to enhance their business. In a 'survival of the fittest' employment market, Durham is doing all it can to ensure its students evolve in line with employer needs and expectations.

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Rees, C., Forbes, P. & Keble, B. (2007) *Student employability profiles: a guide for higher education practitioners*. York: The Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not*. York: The Higher Education Academy.

## Award websites:

Durham Award: <http://www.durham.ac.uk/durhamaward>

Birmingham PSA: <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/psa/>

Bristol PLuS Award: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/careers/plusaward/index.asp>

Dundee Graduate Skills Award: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/careers/skillsaward/about.php>

Exeter Award: <http://www.exeter.ac.uk/exeteraward/index.shtml>

Lancaster Award: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/ceec/students/lancasteraward.html>

Nottingham Advantage Award: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/ugstudy/introduction/life/advantageaward/about.php>

Worcester Award: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/1139.htm>

York Award: <http://www.york.ac.uk/services/careers/skills.cfm>