A formative and developmental role for the HEAR

Higher Education Achievement Report

These case studies have been developed by the **Centre for Recording Achievement** on behalf of the Higher Education Academy. Their purpose is to illustrate how a range of higher education institutions in the UK have approached the formative and developmental role of the **Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).**

Case study 1: promoting student engagement within and beyond the curriculum

The University is a large, research intensive institution and member of the Russell Group. It has already undertaken a good deal of work with the Students' Union, Professional Services and Academic Departments in respect of Section 6.1 entries for the HEAR, and has chosen to initiate the HEAR with incoming undergraduate students in 2012 and build up such documents across the student life cycle. Gradates in 2015 - and beyond - will therefore emerge with documents which reflect their engagement across their complete time at University.[1]

Within a strategic institutional context, the HEAR is most appropriately seen as a mechanism for promoting student engagement within and beyond the curriculum. This is explicitly tied in with the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and the concept of 'the … Graduate', which identifies those attributes the University seeks to develop within its graduates. It is also strongly linked to the Students' Union's own strategic plan, which is committed to providing students with opportunities to develop and support student employability. It therefore offers a central mechanism and focal point for promoting the student development agenda, which lies at the heart of this.

A key emphasis so far has been upon raising the awareness of incoming students about the HEAR. This has been done in several ways, via a 'push' at induction, including in the Pro Vice Chancellor's introductory presentation to all new undergraduates and a HEAR stall in the Students' Union induction week. As already indicated, communication via the Students' Union is seen as important given the Union's close contact with students and its role in verifying many additional achievements – one of the most attractive aspects of the HEAR for students.

Communication and engagement is a continuing and important dimension. At this particular institution the following is already underway to raise awareness and promote engagement:
- Effort is going in to engaging key leaders within Students' Union activities; for sports clubs, society leaders, committee chairs etc., to help ensure that the HEAR can play a role in supporting the running of Students' Union societies, committees and clubs, not only by providing students with an added incentive for standing for a committee position, but also by incorporating training, attendance and the

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[1] Some programmes (e.g. Foundation, CertHEs) last two years, so it is hoped to offer some exit HEARs at the end of the 2013/14 academic session.

production of handover documents into required work for HEAR accreditation, so as to promote quality engagement and continuity in provision for new committees;

- Work is on-going to continually emphasise the HEAR with students, whether through further events, such as the 're-fresher week' at the start of the second semester and through developing new means of communication (via Twitter, Facebook and the development of a HEAR calendar indicating opportunities and specifying deadlines). A key aim here is to 'make it real for students so that they have something concrete to engage with – especially while technical developments are still a work in progress and the institution is unable to display a HEAR to students internally via the University Portal'.

In addition, the University intends that developing HEARs are able to be displayed electronically to students as a basis for reflection and planning by the end of 2012-13. Plans are also in hand to allow staff, especially personal tutors and student support staff, to review student HEARs informing discussion on progress and personal development. HEARs will therefore provide one reference point for such discussions and for work with students in the University's Careers Service and new Student Skills and Development Centre. As staff in this new centre will need to support students across the spectrum and help each individual to 'challenge themselves', they will also need to know about the HEAR and the verifiable activities in which students might engage.

In supporting a developmental and formative approach to the HEAR the current emphasis is therefore upon supporting constancy and consistency of engagement with students, and on awareness-raising with staff who have supporting and signposting roles. A range of resources will be made available to academic departments to enable staff to engage with the HEAR in a manner that suits existing practices. These will include web resources, centrally run guidance sessions to which departments can point their students, and the option for such sessions to be delivered locally within departments, so that these can be built into departmental skills development programmes. The University does not wish to put personal tutors in the position of having to become careers advisors themselves, owing to the more holistic scope of the HEAR's content. Guidance and resources will therefore be developed in way that is flexible enough to give departments the choice as to what they choose to deliver themselves, and what they wish other services to provide to complement their own activities.

Challenges in implementation have been identified in terms of:
- Keeping students engaged over the student lifecycle (see above);
- Technical challenges in displaying electronic HEARs to students and staff;
- Supporting a range of staff engagement (tutors, skills and development centre, careers and other support staff), not least in countering misperceptions as to what the HEAR is, and what it is not. This is particularly important when the HEAR is a relatively new initiative on the national scene.

Finally, while a strong partnership exists with the Students' Union, working to maintain this presents challenges, given the frequent change-overs at Sabbatical Officer level and the need to sustain the model of partnership (including ensuring that the University is kept up-to-date with HEAR development work undertaken on the Students' Union's own initiative).

Case study 2: 'end of year HEARs' as an aid to decision making and development

This small institution offers a range of generalist and specialist programmes, the latter often linked to professional accreditation for employment in the public sector. It issues HEAR to all graduates (at foundation degree, undergraduate and postgraduate levels) and sees a lot of opportunities for using the developing HEAR in formative ways.

In terms of on-programme support, the institution previously made Transcript information available to students on an annual basis, and now plans to issue from this year, an 'end of year HEAR', which provides a greater level of detail about academic performance (section 4) and wider achievements (section 6), thereby emphasising a more holistic view of student development. The greater level of detail in respect of the former helps students when they are making decisions about future modules to study, allowing consideration of their strengths and highlighting areas for further development. Results are provided electronically, and can be considered at an annual review meeting (with the student's programme co-ordinator or member of the academic support team) to which all students are invited (this is a requirement for those who need to undertake re-sits). Such an opportunity provides 'enhanced feedback and a greater sense of control for students'.

In addition, at key points (end of first year for placements – all full-time degrees have a work placement module; and at the end of the second year, for use in applications for employment after graduation), the HEAR will be made available in hard copy form by the institution as a verified document. In the future the institution will be looking to make this available electronically, possibly via a shared services provider.

Case study 3: demonstrating employability and raising aspirations

This University is a post-92 institution with a strong emphasis on widening participation and access. A current focus is upon the student experience, not least in the context of the new fees regime, and on supporting progression to employability into graduate-level employment, as opposed to employment per se. The use of the HEAR as a formative and developmental tool is seen as potentially an important element in driving and supporting this agenda. The University will be using a commercial software provider to make HEARs available.

The HEAR has yet to be formally issued to graduates, though the key elements are now in place, including:
- An institutional approach to the development of 'graduate impact statements' for section 4.2, emphasising what graduates will be able to do under the headings of subject knowledge, academic, professional and enterprise skills. Graduate impact statements will be developed with and for stakeholders including students and employers. It is the intention that there will be, within programmes, more explicit attention to activities which will allow employability to be demonstrated and assessed and hence to demonstrate that these graduate impact statements have been achieved;
- Additional co-curricular offerings highlighted in 4.2;
- Information on the nature of the assessment task alongside the associated grades (section 4.3);
- Information on representative roles and volunteering for section 6.1, together with the University's own employability awards.

Given the move to implementation, the opportunity to focus upon the formative and developmental aspect is helpful at this stage. A 'Careers and Employability Working Group', convened by the Vice-Chancellor and led by one of the Deans, provides the context for the development agenda. This emphasises the HEAR as a vehicle for working with students from entry to exit and beyond. Current plans include:

- Introduction and explanation at induction, with an emphasis here upon subject-specific activities, thereby engendering a sense of local ownership;
- Regular opportunities for students to re-engage with their developing HEARs, as presented through the commercial software used. This will adopt a personal tutor approach in year one, though such a model - given resourcing costs - may not be possible in later years. Other elements will emphasise more explicit links between the HEAR, and curriculum activities and assessment and through, for example, preparation for work experience or work placements during year two;
- A final year opportunity for all students to engage in assessment centre type activities with employers, possibly including alumni, using the HEAR as a base document from which to construct an application or articulate and interpret their experience for a particular application. Here, the emphasis is on students being able to articulate the richness of the curriculum they have experienced and the benefits they can bring to organisations.

Overall, challenges remain, of joining up technical systems e.g. matching that used to advertise job opportunities with that delivering the HEAR, for example: collecting and collating the data in appropriate formats and ensuring that practice is embedded within programmes. However, 'there is no point in investing in the HEAR if we don't see benefits for students, it's about raising aspirations and emphasising to students that they do have the wherewithal to apply for, and obtain, graduate level jobs'.

Case study 4: emphasising 'life-wide learning' with students and staff

This University is a major regional institution, which joined the HEAR trialling group in 2010. At this stage, it already had an online academic progress reporting system, so was in a position to provide information on academic progress (section 4) which could be made available to students to support reflective thinking and forward planning. In addition, with the strong commitment of the senior management team to employability and the development of graduate skills, the HEAR agenda has provided a context to augment this academic focus by the provision of wider information of student achievement. World of work skills certification, run by the Careers Service, is also an opportunity for students to demonstrate, and receive verification for, three broad skill areas (self-awareness, occupational awareness and making things happen) at different levels. Such verification can be included in section 6 of the HEAR, including the online progress report.

Current structures to support student development within the University centre upon personal tutorials, with a focus upon academic progress, a 'variable' PDP system (currently under review) and faculty based skills development officers who seek to work with students on the development of their graduate attributes. The expectation is that, by making the attainment of such attributes more visible within the online progress report, this will produce a more consistent approach to student development across the University. It also has the potential to highlight life-wide learning more effectively and consistently to both students and academic staff, and will provide students with a richer resource, which will help them to articulate their achievements to external audiences.

Though the University is participating in Project DARE (a system for the secure on-line delivery of degree certificates, transcripts, HEARs and other student data and documents as a Shared Service) this is currently separate from the online Progress Report. Should students wish to make use of the latter with external stakeholders, such as potential employers, they have the capacity to print out their progress report which can be forwarded to others, in some cases with a countersignature from their tutor.

Student representatives are members of the University's HEAR steering group. Student focus groups have been convened by elected Students' Union officers to consider and feedback on early drafts of reports or advise on content. Consistency has been an issue for the University as elected officers of Students' Unions change annually; different post-holders have their own priorities and there is an inevitable impact on developing initiatives, such as the HEAR. However, the University respects the autonomy of the Students' Union and believes that it would not be appropriate to expect an organisation with a distinct identity and evolving priorities to be either wholly engaged nor wholly disengaged with the development and management of the HEAR over time.

Case study 5: fostering confidence in articulating learning and achievements

The University joined the HEAR trial group in March 2010. Having moved to issue the HEAR for the first time to their graduates in 2012, this university is now seeking to make the HEAR available within the students undergraduate career prior to graduation. This reflects a recognition that the increasingly wide range of students entering the University will need more support to develop the levels of confidence that will enable them to make the most of their university experience (socially and in terms of community engagement, as well as academically). They are also likely to need support and practice in articulating their learning and achievements (both academic and extra-curricular) to potential recruiters.

Finally, the University is aware that the primary value of the HEAR for many will lie within the application processes, for employment and perhaps further study, that take place prior to graduation. Having the HEAR available as a reference point at this stage is therefore vital. The University also recognises that the HEAR is only one of a potentially wide range of tools, which are used by those nearing graduation and graduates who can showcase their achievements. Such tools include e-portfolios (from which presentational portfolios may be derived) and application forms provided by employers and postgraduate admissions teams.

A first step in achieving the deeper embedding of support for a life-wide higher education experience from the outset is has been to seek to 're-engineer' the personal tutor system, and specifically to emphasise overall student development 'taking account of developing the whole person', including their academic progress, as an agenda for personal tutor meetings. To this end, work has taken place with some 20 senior personal tutors across the institution, providing a context to develop a cascading approach to 'training the trainers'.

Beyond this group, there are three key needs that require to be addressed:
- The need for 'simple support materials' – a structured toolkit – for the majority of personal tutors;
- The need to provide information to tutors in a timely manner – 'a screenshot before the tutorial' - to inform and provide an individual context for tutorial discussions. This in turn entails the updating of central records in respect of academic assessment and wider verification of non-academic achievements. Crucially, it needs to draw in richer, more detailed assessment information as well as

marks and grades. Online submission of work, marking and feedback needs therefore to interface with any HEAR record in order to inform HEAR tutorial discussions;

- In terms of University organisation, current distinctions between the Academic Board, the Learning and Teaching Committees and the Student Experience Committee tend to imply that academic activity is out-with the student experience. There is therefore a perceived need to bringing these elements together in a more integrated way to facilitate an integrated and coherent HEAR tutorial discussion. As with many elements of the HEAR, implementation issues are themselves highly contingent upon one another; in this case it, will be necessary to find solutions to technical and strategic challenges in order to support an effective personal tutor system, which can operate to support formative and developmental use of the HEAR.

Case study 6: a catalyst for re-thinking the academic year

The University has some 11,000 FTEs and an emphasis upon liberal arts subjects within its curriculum offering, though with important vocational offerings in respect of public sector employment in some areas. The institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy seeks to incorporate graduate attributes within the curriculum, in terms of an expectation that these will be developed both within programmes and through co-curricular opportunities. There is an institutional commitment to provide placement opportunities for all undergraduate students.

The HEAR has provided 'a catalyst for re-thinking the landscape, forcing thinking about the wider student experience, within and beyond the curriculum'. This re-thinking has been connected to change initiatives[2] in a number of areas. Specifically in the context of 'Re-thinking the academic year', the HEAR has served to prompt a review of previous provision (two 12 week semesters, with the first finishing by Christmas. Several changes are being proposed here:

- A week will been added to each semester, to allow timetabled activities to be offered by Library and Information Systems, Teaching and Learning, Careers and ICT colleagues to support the more explicit development and recognition of graduate attributes. This will also allow students to get recognition for a range of provision, including formal awards, outwith the curriculum that can be included in section 6.1 of the HEAR and has had the unanticipated by-product of freeing-up opportunities for block teaching of students at foundation and postgraduate levels;
- Four 'HEAR weeks' will be added to allow time for mini placements, Students' Union activities, volunteering and projects, some of which can be verified in the context of section 6.1;
- The inclusion of an 'academic health check', in the form of a review meeting with academic review tutors; in this context, the HEAR acts as a prompt and reference point for discussion.

This extension of the 'contact year' will also allow for University celebration, in the form of end-of-year shows for performing arts students, for example. Crucially in the HEAR context, it ensures that students are still present when end-of-year results are declared, and allows for formative planning activities at the close of the academic year when such results are still fresh in the mind. Elements within this revised structure have also been supported by work to develop more coherent structures around ICT and digital literacy. In

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[2] Supported by structured change projects on the themes of 'Rethinking the academic year', 'Developing Digital and Information literacy', 'Retention' and Changing the Learning Landscape'.

addition, work with Student Records has led to the development of data exchange between Moodle and SITS, and opened up the way for online assessment and feedback, which itself contributes to the richness of the HEAR discussions referred to above. The emerging institutional agenda, in addition to supporting the formative use of HEAR materials accessed via a commercial software provider, also fits well with a drive to support the 'engaged university', making a difference in the local community, and has uncovered useful information in this area.[3]

Case study 7: a focus for students to review wider achievements with tutors

This University had been monitoring the development of the HEAR for a number of years. It previously issued the Diploma Supplement and published results online on an annual basis, providing a statement after the summer vacation. It also has a new system for monitoring student engagement which allows tutor access. Therefore, the HEAR has 'a lot of hook's … a firm bedrock, to build upon'.

Most recently, the University has undertaken a complete review of undergraduate provision, shifting from eight 15 credit modules to six 20 credit modules, leading to the validation of new programmes, which were introduced in September 2012. It was therefore decided to launch the HEAR with a pilot group, to commence with students entering the institution, and to progressively broaden out implementation to other groups over time. The Students' Union is involved in the pilot working group.

It is early days yet and this very much represents a 'work in progress'. One area of work for the pilot group will be to explore how the HEAR will be implemented through pastoral and / or tutorial meetings. One meeting per semester is envisaged, within which students within the pilot cohort will be encouraged to review their wider achievements and to explore opportunities for life-wide learning, such as work within the 'optional but encouraged' employability fortnight. The meeting will allow for the review of academic achievement and activities undertaken, which may qualify for inclusion within section 6 of the HEAR.

In respect of the latter, rather than start with a University-wide set of protocols the emphasis has been upon a 'bottom-up approach', with conversations with programme staff about what wider achievements it would be important to recognise, with reference to subject contexts, and beyond. The need for 'threshold criteria' for material to be included in the HEAR is seen as important, as is the need to evolve an approach, which can be managed easily and is meaningful within the context of a particular cohort. Such an approach will potentially reinforce the value of the tutorial discussion, as staff are more likely to have an understanding of what might be included in section 6, and also emphasise variability and individuation across different programme or subject groupings.

Issues still to be decided upon centre on a technical solution for delivering the HEAR (whether in its formative form or as a final document). As existing approaches to producing the Diploma Supplement and to providing results online have been developed within the institution, this is also an option for the HEAR. The student records system is 'Banner', for which no bespoke module currently exists, and discussions have been held with other external providers, such as Gradintel, Digitary, Hague and AST.

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[3] For example, 80% of students do at least 10 hours a week paid employment in term time; 80% are engaged in volunteering activities in some form but only 30% recognise this.