

Engaging students to support inclusive cultural change

Case study 1 – Student Employability Activators

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Anglia Ruskin University

1. About the project

The Collaborative Development Fund supports the development of our members by addressing key sector challenges together, through a series of innovative projects. Topics are co-created with the sector and projects aim to highlight different approaches, in different contexts, to support members to understand how practice might be learned from and applied. Awards are made based on the expertise of teams and the evidence and the relevance to sector-wide practice from an open call for submissions.

Working collaboratively across six University Alliance Universities in England, this project, led by Kingston University, explores the key attributes of student engagement programmes which support meaningful, far-reaching, and sustained transformation to a more inclusive higher education,

Research indicates that students who actively engage with their university through not only their academic curricula, but also co-curricular activities are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve better outcomes (Thomas, 2012). However, not all University students engage with their institutions to the same degree. These groups include mature students and those who are first generation to higher education, students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those from lower socio-economic households.

This case study forms part of a project that aims to surface the work of various student engagement programmes in six higher education institutions in England which have been developed to support inclusivity in their universities.

1.1 Summary section

This case study surfaces an initiative that universities may wish to consider. It was designed by Anglia Ruskin University with the intention of helping to better understand how to transform and enable inclusive cultures and ways of working in higher education through a programme which engages a diverse group of Student Employability Activators in transforming the Employability Service into a more inclusive and culturally responsive facility, thereby more effectively supporting the career aspirations of diverse student groups.

1.2 Name of programme and university

Student Employability Activators, Anglia Ruskin University (ARU).

1.3 What is the programme trying to achieve?

The programme seeks to bring the authentic student voice to the Employability Service at ARU to improve the service offering and student engagement with it. The programme aims to make students aware of the available services and how to access them as well as promoting the importance of building employability skills whilst at university – encouraging students to focus on their own graduate outcomes and future careers by preparing them to enter the workplace or go on to further education.

Additional aims include building the confidence of the Employability Activators and their ability to succeed professionally after university by gaining work experience in the Activator role. Activators develop increased employability skills whilst getting paid for work that fits flexibly around their studies. The Activator roles have been designed to co-create the ARU's Employability Service offering and are in line with Anglia Ruskin University's Employability Strategy 2018–2023, which commits our university to enhance student opportunities so that, irrespective of background or subject area, they have the chance to realise their full potential.

1.4 Who is involved?

Launched in 2019, the programme sits with the Employability & Careers team in the Employability Service and is championed by the Director of Student and Library Services. Any student at Anglia Ruskin University can get involved. In 2022, there were 11 student Employability Activators. Progress is reported half yearly and annually to the lead sponsor with interim updates provided as required for various university committees, including the Student Experience Committee and Education Committee.

1.5 Impacts and achievements

1.5.1 Institution

The Employability Activators have helped to foster a sense of student ownership of the Employability Service through their feedback and peer-to-peer messaging, thereby ensuring that the Service is more inclusive of the specific needs of our diverse students. Through this co-creation approach, we have facilitated change that is culturally responsive and supports the career aspirations of diverse student groups, in addition to identifying and overcoming barriers to entering employment and further study.

1.5.2 Key achievements include:

- + renaming of student resources for the Employability Service website and the Career Centre, for easy identification for students
- + improved marketing for large scale events (Futures Festival)
- + contribution to the development of resources for international students on the Career Centre
- + improved profile for the Employability Service across the university through in-person and digital events and activities
- + new paid Employability Activator roles and Senior Employability Activator roles created as we grow the team
- + helping foster a sense of student ownership of the Employability Service through their feedback and peer-to-peer messaging.

1.5.3 Participants

There have been very positive outcomes for the Student Employability Activators.

- + One student gained an international internship with a Fortune 500 Employer following support as a member of the Student Employability Activator team, utilising her experience during interview.
 - + Another student credited his work as an Activator with contributing towards winning the 'Best Student Entrepreneur of the year 2022' Award.
 - + Another expressed that his experience as an Activator has helped him to gain employment with a local council, working on a Career Pathways-focused project for young people. The skills and knowledge gained as an Activator directly contributed to his success in achieving this role.
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- + Two students were also linked directly with other Employability Service programmes. One Activator applied to and successfully gained a place on the Shine programme for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, attending exclusive self-development sessions and being paired with an industry mentor.
- + The other Activator successfully gained a place on a collaborative programme hosted in partnership, by ARU's Employability Service and a multinational technology company. This was a targeted STEM mentoring programme for women, allowing the student to be connected with a female mentor at the technology company.

1.6 Quotes

“Working as an Employability Activator, I helped many students to achieve their goals and explore what support we are providing. Most importantly I improved my employability skills and became more confident about my future career.” – Deividas Nikulin, BSc (Hons) Public Health, Third Year (Level 6)

“The Employability Activator programme has given students a voice and pathway to effect change within the Employability Service, whilst also giving an opportunity to gain work experience, developing student employability skills and confidence. The programme has offered several benefits to the Employability Service, including boosting the profile of the service across the university, and informing actions for positive change.” – Katie Johnson, Employability and Careers Adviser, Student and Library Services, Anglia Ruskin University

1.7 This case study exemplifies the following toolkit attributes:

Co-created

The programme is largely informed by Employability Activators, with the programme lead encouraging them to take the lead on the programme and guide the changes they want to see.

Flexible

The programme is agile and actively evolves and develops through its engagement with students, staff and the institution. This programme is dynamic, changing in-line with new ideas generated by staff and students; it is also nimble and adaptive to changing student and staff needs, whilst meeting institutional requirements.



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