

The Impact of Winning College Awards:

a review of winners of the
Edge-Sponsored AoC
Beacon Award for
Excellence in Real
World Learning

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Jane Samuels

June 2021

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Foreword – Jane Samuels



I have been lucky enough to be closely involved with Edge's support of the Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Awards for many years. I became Edge's sponsor assessor for the 2007/08 Awards and ever since then the Beacon Awards have been one of the highlights of my year. From visits to colleges whether Beacon related or not, it is clear that the Awards are held in extremely high regard by college staff and students. To win a Beacon Award is seen as a great achievement for the college, bringing recognition of the work of its staff and students and an acknowledgement of the college's place in its community and within the FE sector. A true "beacon" of good practice.

Since those 2007/08 Awards I have been able to read about the unique, innovative, rewarding and sometimes life changing initiatives delivered by colleges around the UK. Being able to visit the shortlisted colleges to see their work in action and meet the staff, students, employers and stakeholders involved has brought the initiatives to life. I've also been lucky enough to re-visit the winning colleges, to take part in their showcases and celebration events and to be able to share their pride and joy in their achievements. It has been wonderful to see our winning and commended colleges go on share their experiences and best practice with both internal colleagues and with other institutions and stakeholders.

The Beacon Awards remain a key point in the FE calendar and colleges continue to value the recognition that winning one brings. For this report, we have reviewed all the colleges that have won the Edge Award for Excellence in Real World Learning since we began our sponsorship in 2005/06 and looked at six winners during that time. We have looked at the initiatives that won the Award and what has happened to them since then, whether the initiative is still running and most importantly what impact winning the Edge sponsored Beacon Award has had.

It will come as no surprise that winning a Beacon Award brings many positive rewards for the initiative, the college, its staff and students and stakeholders and partners. Being a Beacon Award winner brings not only a sense of pride but also of recognition of the college's work and acknowledgement of the college's position in its community and within the FE sector.

Edge is proud to be a sponsor of these Awards and we strongly hope and encourage FE colleges across the UK to continue to apply for these Awards – and if a college has not done so in the past, to take the plunge and apply for the next round of Awards – they can have an amazing impact.

Jane Samuels

Director of Projects and Operations

Foreword – Ian Munro



The AoC Beacon Awards are now in their 26th year and remain the foremost award for recognising excellent and impact in the FE sector. The rigour and independence of the award process and support of partners and sponsors has ensured the Beacon Awards continue to receive significant numbers of applications highlighting amazing examples of innovation and outstanding practice regardless of the additional challenges and pressure placed on Further Education (FE) colleges.

The fundamental aim of the awards is to identify those examples that are transferable and sustainable and can lead to long term positive benefits to students. We have good evidence of the more immediate impact on a college and its staff in achieving the Beacon Standard e.g., motivation for staff and improving morale, enhanced standing of the college in their community and with national recognition, supporting an ethos of continuous development and recognising staff achievement. AoC are able to use these examples to celebrate success and promote the achievement of the FE sector to partners, stakeholders, and Government.

We do need to better understand the longer-term benefits and positive impact of the awards and are delighted that the Edge Foundation has been able to carry out this study. As a long standing supporter of the Awards it has been able to work with its own awards winners over many years and examine how winning an award has impacted college, students, and community in both short and longer term. A key change that we have seen in recent years is that college leadership teams use the awards as an integral part of annual cycle of identifying innovative practice and sharing across their college and often taking further to Beacon Award application. This college approach is led by staff and assessed by staff and creates a culture of peer support and critical challenge and tends to provide the strongest applications seen by our Beacon Assessors in meeting the individual award criteria. This approach embeds a culture that would sustain a longer-term impact of the awards and this is highlighted further in the Edge research project.

This research project has asked challenging questions of the remit and aims of the awards and identifies some areas that we will need to consider how AoC, and the Trustees can assist colleges maintain the energy and enthusiasm created from being recognised as award winners. We encourage all colleges to read the report and discuss internally as there are many valuable learning points or creating culture of continuous improvement. The report will also form part of the resources and information available to future applicants, prospective partners, and sponsors in providing deeper understanding of the purpose and impact of the AoC Beacon Awards.

AoC and Trustees are grateful to the Edge Foundation for their leadership and support in conducting this research and we look forward to taking the recommendations to further support and enhance the awards.

Ian Munro

Director, AoC Charitable Trust

Overview of the Report

The aim of this research was to explore how the Beacon Award for Excellence in Real World Learning, which the Edge Foundation has sponsored since 2005/6, has made a difference to the colleges that won the Award. We set out to understand what happened to the initiatives for which the colleges won the Award. Some of these may have ceased in the interim as policy and personnel have changed, some may have been sustained, and others may have grown and spread to other faculties within the colleges, as well as other colleges through wider networks.

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How have the initiatives that have won an Edge Beacon Award been developed since winning the Award?
2. How has receiving an Edge Beacon Award impacted the college and beyond?
3. What are some of the lessons learned from colleges who have received an Edge Beacon Award?

From this research we aim to illuminate specific examples of how Edge Beacon Award winning colleges have taken forward their work. This research may also have a number of wider implications. These include supporting innovative practice and showcasing this externally; and setting out lessons learnt that could help future Award winners to make the most of the opportunity to embed and sustain good practice.

Key Findings

The following key findings have emerged from this research. Winning an Edge Beacon Award has led to the following four impacts on the six colleges in this study:

- 1. Raised the profile of the college across the FE sector and their local community**
- 2. Developed a sense of pride in the achievements of college staff and students**
- 3. Improved staff motivation**
- 4. Attracted greater industry and employer links**

Structure of the report

The Introduction will explain the background of the AoC Beacon Awards and specifically the criteria relevant to the Edge sponsored Award, known as the 'Edge Beacon Award for Excellence in Real World Learning'. Next, the Methodology chapter will discuss the qualitative methodology adopted in this study and the modifications that were made due to the impact of Covid-19. This will be followed by a description of each of the six initiatives that won an Edge Beacon Award that are part of this study. The Findings will outline the impacts the Awards have had on the colleges and more widely. Finally, a discussion of the lessons learned from each college will be collated.

Introduction

Beacon Awards background and criteria

The AoC has been organising the Beacon Awards for the past 25 years to celebrate the best and most innovative practice among UK further education (FE) colleges.¹ According to the programme's website: *"The aim of the awards programme is to demonstrate and promote the far-reaching impact of colleges on their students and the communities they serve. The commended and winning case studies will be used to increase understanding of colleges' contribution to educational skills policy and economic and social development"*. There are currently 11 Award categories sponsored by different organisations.

The Edge Beacon Award is awarded to colleges showcasing excellence in real world learning. Edge is an independent education foundation which through its projects, research and policy work, strives to make education relevant. Edge believes that all young people need to be equipped with the skills that today's global, digital economy demands, that support them throughout their lives through high quality training, a broad and balanced curriculum, interactive and engaging real world learning and rich relationships between education and employers.

Therefore, Edge aims to recognise, celebrate and promote examples of excellent practical teaching and learning through awarding an Edge Beacon Award for initiatives which best meet the Award criteria. The current criteria are:

1. Demonstrate the development of a curriculum which has led to improvements in practical teaching and learning that have enabled learners to have experiences that:
 - a. are embedded in the real world, working with experts
 - b. learners find meaningful and challenging
 - c. are life changing
2. Demonstrate the development of a responsive curriculum for professional and vocational education which has a direct and sustainable impact on employment and enterprise
3. Demonstrate excellent engagement with employers and local communities, leading to sustained and successful involvement of learners in the workplace
4. Demonstrate innovative best practice that delivers identifiable results and benefits for both learners and teaching professionals
5. Demonstrate the development and implementation of flexible teaching, learning and assessment methods (Edge Foundation internal documents).

¹ For more information on AoC Beacon awards visit: <https://www.collegeawards.co.uk>

Furthermore, over the years the Edge-sponsored Beacon Award has centred on five core themes, where colleges can exemplify their learners have experiences that are:

- **Real** – with opportunities for learners to tackle real life problems by learning from people in the know, using the tools of the trade;
- **Meaningful** – the college can demonstrate that learners can explain why they are working on a particular task, and the benefits to themselves, and others, of completing it well;
- **Challenging** – with opportunities for learners to work alongside experts and be challenged to perform at new levels of skill;
- **Stretching** – the college can demonstrate that the learner can describe their new skills and insights and show the distance they have travelled; and
- **Life-changing** – the college can demonstrate the doors that are now open to learners and the way that their learning at the college has re-shaped their future.

A list of the past winners of the Edge Beacon Award can be found on the Edge Foundation website². The past 14 winners were adopted as the sample for this study. The research process will be discussed in the next section of this report.

² <https://www.edge.co.uk/grant-projects/awards/>

Methodology

Data collection

This research adopted a qualitative methodology. The data collection process began in September 2019. However, due to Covid-19 and its impact on school and college closures, this study was extended and data collection was completed by December 2020. The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How have the initiatives that have won an Edge Beacon Award been developed since winning the Award?
2. How has receiving an Edge Beacon Award impacted the college and beyond?
3. What are some of the lessons learned from colleges who have received an Edge Beacon Award?

There were two phases of data collection for this study. Phase one consisted of identifying and contacting 14 past college winners of the Edge sponsored Beacon Award. Six out of 14 colleges responded positively and agreed to take part in the research. The aim of phase one was to seek out staff at each college who were part of the initiative that received the Edge Beacon Award and learn if the initiative was still running and if so how it has been developed since.

This aim was achieved through semi-structured phone interviews with one member of each college who was, or currently is, a part of the initiative that won the Award. Hence, a total of six semi-structured interviews were conducted across the six colleges. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they can better capture the perspectives and viewpoints of participants rather than fitting them into pre-defined categories (Dane, 2010; Silverman, 1997). In using semi-structured interviews, a set of guiding questions were developed for the purpose of the phone interviews, however these questions were not fully prescriptive to allow for flexibility in refocusing questions or prompting more information (Yin, 2009). Participants are anonymised across the study but college names are provided due to their existing visibility as Edge Beacon Award winners (BERA, 2018).

The planned phase two of this research intended to adopt a case study design where each college that responded in phase one would be a single case study. Within each case study, further semi-structured face to face interviews would have been conducted with staff and students on the initiative that won the Award along with a member of the senior leadership team at the college. This would have been accompanied with observations at the college to view the initiative in action.

Phase two, unfortunately, could not go ahead as planned due to the beginning of the pandemic. From March 2020 the study was paused and it resumed in September 2020 when colleges were contacted again for participation in the study. However, only one college provided interviews with one staff member, student and a member of the senior leadership team. This is a major limitation of the study, and therefore the findings from phase one are considered as the main findings of this study.

Data Analysis

This study utilised thematic analysis after interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis is a form of content analysis “the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research” (Bowen, 2009, p.32). To do this, NVivo, a computer-assisted data analysis software was utilised, where common themes were extracted based on interviews to respond to the first two research questions of this study. Additionally, NVivo was used to extract word frequencies for the final research question. However, there

are limitations to using NVivo, such as distancing the researchers from the data and encouraging quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Welsh, 2002; Barry, 1998). Therefore, caution was adopted in using the software, and a combination of software and manual coding was used to confirm the themes emerging from the data.

Ethical Considerations

The Edge Foundation adheres to the British Education Research Association ethical guidelines 2018, concerning issues such as informed consent, anonymity of interviewees, confidentiality of research data and data protection (BERA, 2018). Edge also adheres to the EU's GDPR introduced in May 2019. Each college was contacted separately and participation in the interviews was voluntary and at the college's discretion, participants were provided with information about the study and consent forms prior to taking part in the semi-structured interviews. Participants will stay anonymous throughout this report but not the colleges.

Next, each of the six initiatives that received an Edge Beacon Award will be outlined. This will be followed by the discussion of the findings of the study highlighting the impacts the Award has had on the colleges and beyond. Part two of the Findings will bring together and discuss the lessons learned across the participating colleges.

The Winners: an outline of six initiatives

This section will outline the six initiatives that were awarded the Edge Beacon Award for Excellence in Real World Learning at each college that participated in this study. It will also discuss what has happened to the initiative since receiving an Award.

2010/2011 Award Winner: Coleg Morgannwg now part of Coleg y Cymoedd



Title of initiative:

Skills for Costume Construction in Theatre and Screen

Initiative Description:

The initiative focused on the skills needed for costume construction for theatre and screen productions. Offered at foundation degree level it was aimed at students with GCSEs, A levels or BTEC National Diploma in relevant subjects. Through close links with theatre and film production companies, the college realised that the industry had a need for employees with higher level practical skills in costume construction and developed this specific programme from a BTEC Diploma in Art and Design.

The college demonstrated the benefit of the industry links they had built and continue to use. The design of the course was informed by extensive industry consultation with small and large opera, theatre and ballet companies and television companies both locally and nationally. Industry costume construction and wardrobe departments were and continue to be involved in providing work experience for students. Industry also provided commissions for students in the production and maintenance of theatrical and screen costumes. The employer links enabled the college to ensure that industry-critical practical skills such as costume interpretation and costume construction including pattern cutting, measuring and cutting fabric, industrial machining, fitting and alterations were all embedded in the new curriculum.

In addition to these practical skills, the curriculum included knowledge of fabrics, visual awareness, professional and business skills, people management, research techniques and history of costume. The programme of study

was highly practical with approximately 70% being delivered by practical means. Students on the programme acknowledged the benefits of participating in "real" industry projects, demonstrated by the excellent student progression of 100% to either employment within the industry or to completion of the full BA degree, at that time delivered by a university partner.

What has happened to the initiative?

Interviews with staff on the programme at the college confirmed that the initiative is still successfully running. The programme has grown from a foundation degree to a full BA (Hons) degree, delivered within the college and accredited by the University of South Wales. The continued operation of the initiative can be attributed to growth in the demand for graduates in this industry area.

2012/2013 Award Winner: Bishop Burton College



Title of initiative:

Enterprise Education as a strategy for developing skills and employability in Agriculture

Initiative Description:

Bishop Burton, a specialist land-based college, operated a college-wide 'Enterprise Strategy' using their commercial farm and animal related enterprises to develop employability skills, enterprise capability skills including handling uncertainty and positive attitudes to change, work-related learning, leadership and entrepreneurial activity. The award initiative focussed on agriculture courses delivered on the college's commercial farm. Developed over many years, the agriculture curriculum embedded practical teaching, learning and assessment across all levels, which took place on the working farm supervised by industry experienced teachers. Building on the college's close links to the farming community, the curriculum was designed to deliver the employability and enterprise skills needed by the regional agriculture industry.

Students gained experience and understanding of commercial farming through the requirement for them to contribute to the daily operation of all the farm enterprises on a duty rota, working alongside industry experts. Students could also be employed by the farm at weekends and during holidays. College staff and visiting lecturers were drawn from industry and students highly valued this contact with up to date working practices. Live data from the college farm records and accounts were always available on the college Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) network and learners were encouraged to use the data to critically appraise the farm's performance and to propose projects to bring about further improvement.

The initiative demonstrated good levels of achievement and progression for all learners – 100% positive progression for Level 2 and Level 3 learners. Students from farming backgrounds returned to instigate change in family farming businesses and launch successful new enterprises. Others from non-farming backgrounds successfully entered the world of agriculture and related sectors, including self-employment. Several students progressed to higher education courses at the college or elsewhere. Student recruitment numbers to Level 3 courses doubled over the first 3 years of the initiative.

What has happened to the initiative?

This initiative is still running and has been amended slightly over time by having second year learners on the programme work more independently, giving them better preparation for the workplace. Additionally, the initiative has been replicated in the college's second agricultural campus also set on a commercial farm. The different skills required for running the programme has meant that more professional development for staff has been introduced.

2015/2016 Award Winner: Rotherham College of Arts and Technology



Title of initiative:

NHS Moulage Links with Special Effects

Initiative Description:

In 2013, Rotherham College established an innovative partnership with local NHS trusts to deliver enhanced simulation training involving Hair and Media Make-Up students supporting the training of medical professionals. Learners on hair and media make-up courses created the visual symptoms of medical conditions to facilitate accurate diagnosis by trainee doctors. The technique, known as 'moulage', allowed students to support local doctors while getting practical experience themselves. As the first partnership of its kind in the UK, the project allowed students to participate in real and meaningful work experience and work-related learning enabling them to develop outstanding technical and professional skills whilst effectively preparing them for employment.

The 'Moulage for Manikins' project facilitates student research and creation of moulage effects on the hi-tech manikins used for medical scenarios devised by the Clinical Lead for A&E and palliative care training sessions within the NHS clinical simulation suite. Students work alongside leading medical professionals sharing skills and gaining new medical knowledge whilst ensuring work carried out is anatomically precise and meets exacting standards. Consequently, student anatomical knowledge and terminology is developed and strengthened by

their exposure to medical professionals. Individuals built personal confidence and the ability to work under pressure against industry standards. Overall, involvement in the project allowed students to practice skills developed in their programme modules in an environment where *learning by doing* is the norm. The introduction of the 'Moulage for Manikins' project grew student numbers from 14 to 80 over six years with overall success rates for students at 92%.

What has happened to the initiative?

The initiative at the college has developed now to train simulation technicians in hospitals and to work with Sheffield Hallam University to create wound/illness scenarios on real life models used to make training for paramedics more realistic. Additionally, the initiative has seen an increase in employer links from 75 to 80 employers involved.

2016/2017 Award Winner: Activate Learning Group



Title of initiative:

Learning philosophy

Initiative Description:

A college-wide initiative to embed a learning philosophy across all teaching and learning practices. The learning philosophy created within a college environment which empowered learners, drove employer engagement, incorporated technology and delivered real project based learning. Departments within the college faculties were strongly aligned to specific industry sectors. Each faculty had Career Pathway Directors with responsibility for building relationships with employers, Curriculum Design Directors with responsibility for using industry links to design and develop industry relevant study programmes and Curriculum Delivery Directors with responsibility to ensure industry level quality and standards.

The application of the learning philosophy across all college activities resulted in a project based learning approach with high levels of employer engagement and real working experience. Learning Companies, where teaching and learning occur within commercial, college owned and run enterprises, were set up within sport (as a commercially operated gym), lifestyles (as a hair salon and beauty treatment rooms) and hospitality (as a range of catering/restaurant outlets). Within the Learning Companies, students worked alongside industry experienced staff to operate these enterprises gaining industry relevant skills in a real world environment. The use of the Learning Companies supported a 4% overall improvement in student achievement levels over three

years. Additionally, students benefited from the project based learning approach through participation in live briefs and projects set by employers which enhanced the development of technical and transferable skills.

What has happened to the initiative?

Activate Learning remain committed to the application of their learning philosophy across their network of seven FE colleges and seven schools. Activate Learning continue to work closely with employers to identify the characteristics and skills they are looking for and to help all learners identify and achieve the five key attributes to aid employment: Professional, Enterprising, Resilient, Confident and Aware.

**2017/2018 Award Winner:
Abingdon and Witney College**



Title of initiative:

The Oxfordshire Business & Enterprise School (TOBES) - Action Tap

Initiative Description:

This initiative was a new approach to curriculum delivery. It took a cross curriculum strategic approach to the development of students' practical skills through student-led live projects, overseen by a review panel comprising of external partners, teaching staff and student ambassadors. Projects were fully integrated into the study programmes at all levels for all full-time students in TOBES. The TOBES Action Tap was piloted in September 2015 within the Sport and Public Services curriculum and then fully rolled out to the whole faculty from September 2016. Since the introduction of the programme, achievement increased by 8%, with 89% of level 3 extended diploma students in the faculty achieving above their predicted grade.

Lecturers had to rethink their teaching delivery and search for opportunities to involve local employers and community in real life learning opportunities for the students. This resulted in the creation of a wide range of projects in which students gained valuable employability skills and real work experience of working to industry standards and deadlines. Students were being well prepared to become effective and responsible employees of the future who also took pride in contributing to their local community. This was evidenced by employer testimonials regarding students visits and support for patients in end-of-life care in local hospitals and other students who introduced an accounting system into a small local charity who could not afford to employ an accountant. Student achievement rates increased by 8% over years with 100% of students progressing to higher education, apprenticeships or employment.

Students from Business, Accounting, Sport, Public Services and Travel and Tourism worked collaboratively on social action projects, taking on specific roles as they would in cross-sector relationships found in real life industry. One project involved over 150 students and staff walking 15 miles raising over £1500 for Meningitis Trust, Make a Wish Foundation and The Albert Kennedy Trust. The Public Services students identified the route and organised logistical support, Business students gained the permissions from the local authority and landowners and also marketed the event. Sports students provided a health and fitness programme to prepare walkers and organised transport to the start point and warm up exercises, while catering students provided water and sustenance throughout the event.

What has happened to the initiative?

Action Tap is still running and has been expanded to other courses at the college such as Health and Social Care, Hair and Beauty, and Engineering. It has also involved other staff from a range of subject areas including English, Maths and Higher Education staff to aid in contributing to the development of the initiative. The staff are looking to start an online mentoring forum with employers as part of developing this initiative further.

2018/2019 Award Winner: Wiltshire College



Title of initiative:

Practical delivery of land-based animal husbandry and crop production practical skills

Initiative Description:

This project offered a unique curriculum to deliver industry required skills. It was developed with and by employers within the setting of a 1600-acre commercial working farm owned and run by the college. The curriculum offer included Agriculture; Horticulture; Equine Studies; Countryside Management; Game Keeping and Animal Care. Students at all levels were fully engaged with the day to day operation of the farm, working alongside industry experienced teaching staff as well as experienced farm staff, some of whom had completed or were working towards teaching qualifications. Students were also engaged with the management of a range of events and open days hosted on the farm and open to the general public.

The utilisation of a working farm enabled students to gain the industry standard technical skills to enable them to undertake compulsory external work experience of between 30 and 150 hours per annum. Students were also encouraged to develop enterprise skills through management of the Farm Shop, attendance at local farmers'

markets and undertaking research and investigative work to improve the farm's productivity and contribute to industry related commercial research.

Quality assurance effectively follows industry-led improvements which is clearly evident in the student success data, with progression into employment at 96%, indicating a high level of industry satisfaction. Students are actively encouraged to participate in industry sponsored competitions enabling them to match their skills with employers.

What has happened to the initiative?

The initiative is still running and has not changed substantially since the college was awarded the Edge Beacon Award. However, it was mentioned that there are plans to develop the initiative further.

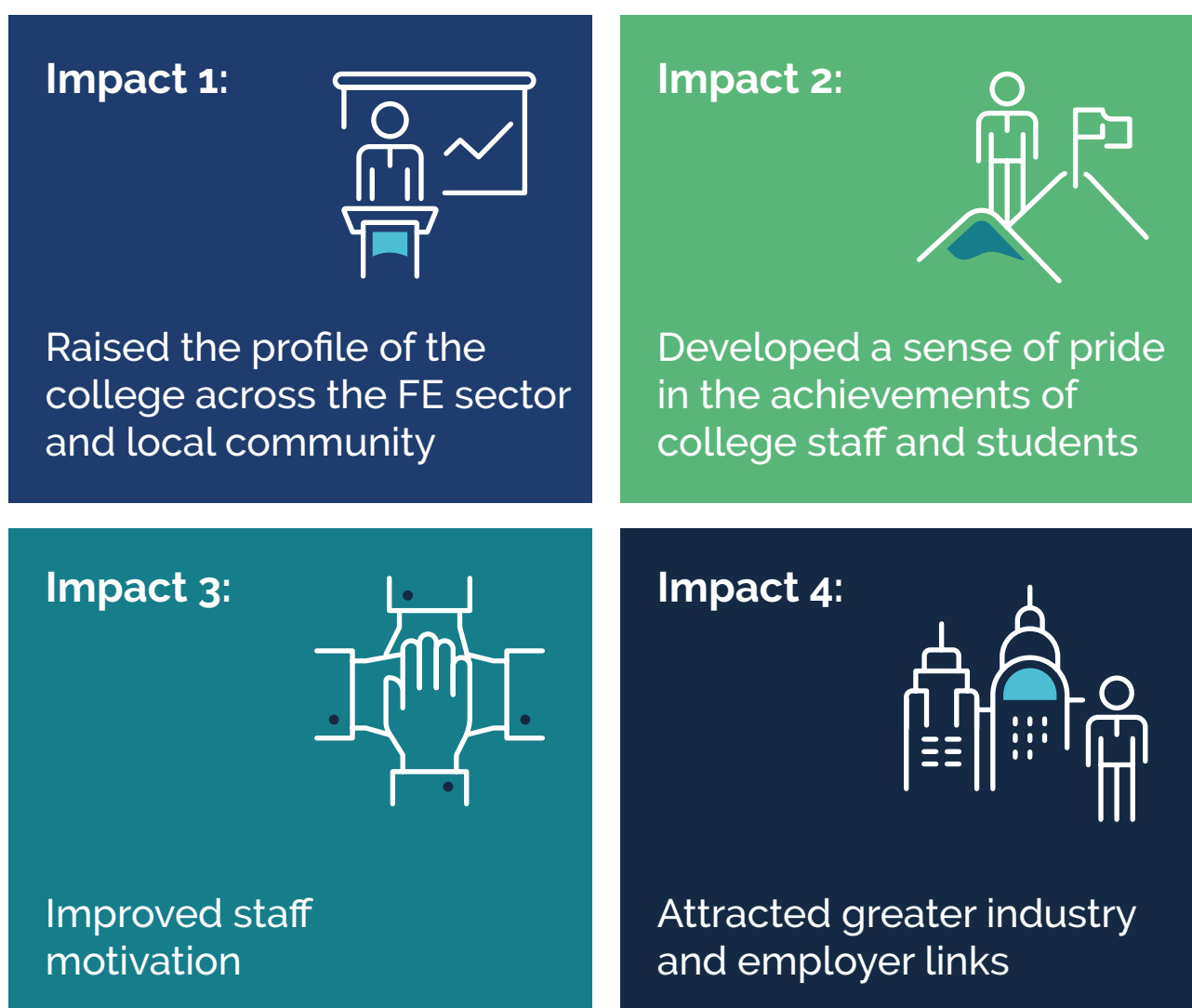
Findings Part One: impacts of the Edge Beacon Award on colleges

The findings in this part of the report will respond to research questions one and two:

1. How have the initiatives that have won an Edge Beacon Award been developed since winning the Award?
2. How has receiving an Edge Beacon Award impacted the college and beyond?

Figure 1 illustrates the four main impacts this study reveals the Edge Beacon Award has had on the college and students. These findings will be discussed separately in this chapter with anonymised excerpts from the interviews with college staff.

Figure 1: Impact of the Edge Beacon Award on college staff and students



Impact 1: Raised the profile of the college across the FE sector and local community

All participants of this study discussed the impact receiving the Edge Beacon Award has had on raising the profile of the college, both across the FE sector and in their local communities. The idea of recognition was strongly associated with receiving the Edge Beacon Award. Two members of staff interviewed from different initiatives emphasised the recognition their colleges received across the FE sector and in their local community. With one course tutor stating the importance the Award has had on highlighting the work being achieved within vocational education:

The Award has helped recognise the initiative at such a large scale, people know what's happening at the college in the sector and around us (Course Lead)

It's [the Award] a very strong way of being recognised among colleagues in the sector it has taken vocational education to higher-status (Course Tutor)

Furthermore, this impact was attributed to the opportunity the Award provided in celebrating and showcasing the work achieved across the college, specifically on the winning initiatives. Staff welcomed the opportunity to celebrate these initiatives and the hard work involved for both staff and students. A course tutor on an initiative where a large part consists of students working closely with employers, stated the Award has:

Shined a spotlight on students and the creative work they undertake external to the college (Course Tutor)

This recognition of what students have achieved was cited across a majority of the interviews with college staff. A lot of planning goes into developing the activities relevant to each initiative, and receiving an Award affirmed the hard work undertaken by staff. One college tutor highlighted this further stating the importance of developing "real-life" scenarios as part of the initiative, a key criterion of the Edge Beacon Award:

There's recognition of the hard work that goes into developing the real-life scenarios in the partnership for students that comes with it [the Award] (Course Tutor)

It is without a doubt that raising the profile of the college has led to even further impacts for both college staff and external stakeholders. One interviewee was very positive in how the Award has led to members of the local community and wider FE getting in touch to learn more about the initiative:

It [the Award] let the college be exposed to the wider FE community and now many people want to come and see how the initiative works (Course Lead)

Impact 2: Developed a sense of pride in the achievements of college staff and students

Raising the profile of the college also led to staff and students feeling a sense of pride for being on an initiative that won an Edge Beacon Award. The word "proud" was used by almost all participants interviewed in this study. This shows that the Award has also allowed staff and students to feel a sense of recognition of the work being celebrated. Tutors interviewed claimed that students were happy to be on a course that was well regarded across the college and the sector. This feeling of pride was even viewed in students applying to some of the courses:

Students applying to the course are proud to have an Award attached to the course (Course Lead)

Staff interviewed on the different initiatives also discussed that it was important for them to mention winning an Edge Beacon Award when communicating with stakeholders, such as employers. This revealed the achievement of the college.

We tell industry we work with we have an Award attached to the course, staff are very proud of it (Course Tutor)

This shows that among both staff and students on the course the sense of pride is instilled due to having an Award attached to the course. This allowed for a sense of fulfilment of the work being achieved on the initiative:

It made us feel proud of what we have done on this initiative and students are proud as well of what they are working on (Course Tutor)

Impact 3: Improved staff motivation

In a majority of the interviews, college staff discussed receiving the Award led to increased motivation. Staff on the initiatives felt much more motivated to find more creative teaching strategies to strengthen the initiative as a response to receiving the Award.

There was a sense of confidence among staff after receiving the Award and it was time to get on and find more creative ideas and activities for our students (Course Tutor)

Improved motivation also developed a sense of responsibility among staff to maintain the high standard of the initiatives. Receiving the award showcased the best practice being achieved at the college, and staff on the initiatives that won the Award felt a responsibility to maintain and continue to develop the good practice. One Course Leader stated:

We needed to continue proving why what we were doing was innovative and that meant more work into the initiative (Course Lead)

As a result of receiving the Award, some members of staff felt more proactive in spreading the achievements across the college. Across two initiatives, interviews revealed that staff were keen to connect with staff on other courses to apply the same principles that helped receive the Edge Beacon Award. This resulted in one of the initiatives being replicated across other parts of the college:

The concept has been applied now across other courses in the college they've learned from the success and challenges we've had (Course Tutor)

Impact 4: Attracted greater industry and employer links

The final impact associated with winning the Edge Beacon Award is the resulting increased involvement and new links with industry and employers relevant to the initiative's sector areas at the college. All of the participants of this study cited an increase in stakeholder involvement after receiving the Edge Beacon Award.

Employers see that the college has been recognised nationally through the Award and increases their confidence in working with the college (Course Tutor)

The Award has led to greater networking with stakeholders which in turn has led to more employers interested in working with the college. In one case, the enthusiasm across large employers who have offered to work with the college and lend equipment has resulted in the course appointing a practical instructor to support the link between the academic work and the practical work. The aim being to help liaise between staff and employer needs.

It [the Award] has attracted larger organisations to work with us as part of the initiative and this is because they see the Award attached to the course so they see there must be something working (Course Tutor).

Furthermore, the increased engagement with employers is invaluable for students because it increases the opportunities and experiences the college can make available to them. Moreover, one staff member interviewed stated that the strength of working very closely with employers is that it develops a sense of professionalism across students on the initiative.

We've made greater links with employers and this not only helps us as a college but it helps our students be exposed more too (Course Lead)

The professionalism our students develop on the course is only possible because of the links we have with employers and we have now added more employers (Course Tutor)

Figure 2: Words associated with lessons learned across colleges



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The Award application allowed for colleges to highlight industry-relevant skills being taught among students. Through winning the Award it confirmed the importance of developing skills for the workplace and work-ready students – a key mission among colleges. However, this also came with a challenge for some initiatives, with one course leader stating:

It is important to continue making sure that these skills being highlighted don't just become a tick box (Course Lead)

Proving that although the Award validated the work being achieved within the initiatives, it was a continuous process to develop the initiatives and highlight the skills being fostered among learners.

All colleges discussed how the Award attracted more employer involvement with the relevant courses that won the Award. This allowed for even richer experiences for learners. For example, a tutor on one of the initiatives discusses one key lesson from receiving the Award:

It's [the Award] has let us develop skills of students, as a result the employability skills among students and experiences are stronger (Course Tutor)

It is clear that the Awards have helped showcase the skills being developed among students. Even more, the Award process has provided one way to celebrate the work being achieved across the FE sector.

Challenge: greater staff needs post-Award

There were very minimal challenges associated with winning an Edge Beacon Award discussed across colleges in this study. As mentioned previously, continuous development of the initiative meant more resources were needed to maintain the initiatives' high level of performance. One challenge this brought was time management; lecturers on the course needed time for further training, either learning how to use new machinery in some cases, or keeping their industry knowledge up to date. We have seen one initiative in this study, appoint a practical instructor to help develop links between the academic side and the industry side of the initiative. This has illustrated that, in some cases, the Award has led to a greater need for resources to support staff.

One initiative, that has been running for seven years, has led to more professional development opportunities for staff to have more links with employers. Yet, this is an additional task for staff which would help them develop their industry knowledge. We have also seen an initiative grow from a Foundation Degree to a full BA Hons degree. This is a very positive development for the course however, this growth naturally requires more staff preparedness and resources. Therefore, a key lesson for colleges is that greater support is needed to maintain and develop the initiatives over time especially if they are to continue growing.

Conclusion

This study has shown that there are many positive takeaways from receiving an Edge Beacon Award for Excellence in Real World Learning. It is likely that this study captured colleges that have utilised the benefits of the Award better and developed their initiative further. Due to their positive experience, they were more willing to engage with this study. All staff interviewed were proud to have received an Edge Beacon Award at their college. It was evident from the interviews that the Beacon Awards are highly regarded across colleagues within the further education sector. Furthermore, having an Edge Beacon Award attached to a course or initiative at the college led to greater exposure and connections with employers and industry. Colleges found these new links valuable not only for the course that won the Award but for the college as a whole allowing for greater recognition of the work being accomplished at the college.

Nevertheless, colleges learned key lessons after receiving a Beacon Award. To keep the initiative running at a high standard, continuous development is needed. This included, making sure the skills being taught were up-to-date industry relevant skills, and the importance of continuing to develop creative and innovative activities that would provide rich experiences for students on the initiatives. Yet the common challenge witnessed across colleges to maintain the initiative was the increased staff needs and resources required. However, some colleges had found ways to remedy this over the years, with new staff roles created as part of the initiative and more professional development offered to staff.

From the lessons learned across colleges, a question emerges: how can colleges winning the Beacon Award be supported further to sustain and up-scale their successful initiatives? For this to be answered, more in-depth research is needed on additional resources and the type of support that would be required for these initiatives. Additionally, further research would be necessary to gain insights from external partners and learners on the initiative to get a well-rounded picture of the impact of Awards on colleges. This study has also revealed that a greater understanding of how specific elements of the initiatives have developed is necessary, including the impact Covid-19 has had on the initiatives and courses. As we emerge from this pandemic, future studies could allow for college visits and immersive methods of data collection to resume.

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