



University of New England

Case study report

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This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:

Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

<http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/>

Executive summary

The New England Award program is designed to encourage, recognise and reward students' personal and professional development through participation in extra-curricular activity. It is open to all UNE students and is targeted at 'whole person development'. Students report that participation in the program has multiple benefits, and these are different for each individual. Common experiences among UNE's distance education (hitherto referred to as 'distance') students are that participation leads to a greater feeling of belonging to the institution; increased sense of citizenship and immediate and longer term success in their professional lives.

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

The University of New England serves a diverse and distributed student population, with more than 80% studying by distance (online, and at distance from the UNE campus in regional NSW). The New England Award (NEA) program is designed to encourage, recognise and reward students' personal and professional development through participation in extra-curricular activity. The NEA provides students with a framework within which to plan and reflect upon their learning and development, and recognises the activities of students studying by distance which are undertaken in their own communities.

1.2 Purpose of report

The purpose of the report is to provide a way of communicating the themes from the case study.

2 Case design

2.1 Case study plan

Step 1: Description of New England Award program – Alicia Zikan

Step 2: Interviews with staff and student participants who are studying by distance – Tony Marks and Edward Campbell

Step 3: Thematic analysis of data derived from interviews – Tony Marks and Alicia Zikan

Step 4: Mapping of themes against the Kahu model - Alicia Zikan and Tony Marks

2.2 Theme

2.2.1 Theme title

The role of an award program recognising extra-curricular activity in contributing to an enhanced experience for students studying by distance with a regional university.

2.2.2 Theme description

This case study focuses on the impact of distance students' participation in the NEA program. The program provides a structure for participation, which recognises students' aspirations, interests and, importantly, existing commitments, to accommodate the busy lives of UNE distance students. While encouraging participation in extra-curricular activity, the program recognises activities that distance students are already engaged in and supports them to reflect upon those experiences so as to turn experience into learning. Students report that translating the "UNE" program to their own context, regardless of where they live, gives them a sense of belonging, and an appreciation that their university

recognises the diversity of the student population and the activities they undertake in their own communities. Students who participate in the NEA, regardless of whether they complete the requirements, complete their studies at a much higher rate than the general UNE student population. We will investigate the impact on distance students' enhanced experience, in light of the conceptual model proposed by Kahu.

2.2.3 Unit/Units of analysis

Interview data was analysed thematically by Alicia Zikan and Tony Marks, with the student experience of participation in the New England Award program as the focus.

2.2.4 Theme scope

The opinions of students participating in the NEA program who are defined as studying by distance (outside the postcode 2350), graduate recipients of the New England Award who completed their studies by distance, and opinions of staff of UNE, as well as senior members of the University, are included.

What was not included – opinions of students who are not participating in the program, international students, postgraduate students, and students who participate in the program who are defined as 'on campus' students, including those enrolled as off-campus, but who live in the Armidale area (with a postcode of 2350).

2.2.5 Participants

An invitation was sent from Alicia Zikan to students participating in the NEA program through the NEA Moodle unit (LMS), with the criteria for participation (undergraduate students studying by distance, outside the postcode 2350) outlined. To ensure that student participants had an adequate understanding of the NEA program, an additional requirement was that those agreeing to participate must have accrued at least 500 points (half the required total) in Category 3 – Service to the University and wider community. Also included were graduates who were also NEA recipients, who had achieved the Award at the conclusion of their undergraduate study, while studying by distance.

Staff were also interviewed and selected based on their involvement with the program, including the current program manager, program founder and senior institutional sponsor.

2.3 Data Collection, management and Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed before being analysed using nVivo software to identify themes and allow cross-case analysis.

3 Timeline

Case study timeline

Invite Participants, Nov/ Dec 2015. Conduct interviews, Nov, Dec 2015, Feb, Mar 2016. Conduct analysis April 2016. Write report, May 2016

4 Findings

4.1 Overview

The findings from the interviews conducted for this case study reaffirm those from larger studies with NEA participants over the past decade. The five student/ graduate participants in this study report that their participation in the program:

- increased their sense of **belonging** to the institution
- influenced their sense of **citizenship** and their appreciation of the University for providing **recognition** of their contribution
- had a positive impact on their **work success**

4.2 Description of themes

Belonging

Students studying by distance report feelings of isolation and disconnection from the University and their colleagues. This is embodied in comment from participants in this study, including UNE04¹, who said: *as an external student you do feel quite removed from the University.*

As a result of their participation in the NEA program students and graduates in this study conveyed that they developed a sense of belonging. This was often expressed as feeling valued because the University made the program available to students studying by distance, thereby recognising the contributions these students made in their own communities. Students appreciated the inclusivity, and the opportunities to be able to suggest activities from their own communities and areas of interest, and to complete these at their own pace over the course of their academic studies. Students and graduates also noted that feeling connected to the University and other students had benefits in terms of motivating them with their academic studies, as well as their self-concept as a student of UNE.

Interactions with their peers also stimulated feelings of belonging to a broader community. They observed that the feeling of connectedness to the provided a way of remaining ‘linked’ during periods in which they weren’t formally enrolled. Students and graduates in the study indicated that being able to engage with other participants in the program through the LMS, over a prolonged period, was valuable.

Citizenship

The NEA structure requires that participants complete at least one activity related to service to the community. For distance students, this is generally within their own communities, and depends on their individual interests and the opportunities available to them. Participants in this study noted that their involvement led them to engage in activities that stretched them personally – ‘stepping out of the comfort zone’, leading to increased confidence, self-awareness and development of leadership skills. Their communities greatly appreciate the contributions made by NEA participants, who volunteered for a wide variety of organisations across Australia. Participants spoke of the development of UNE’s graduate attributes through their activities and also the personal benefits that arose through their participation. These included opportunities that presented in their professional lives as a consequence of their community involvement. Participants related the impact on their own satisfaction, well-being and sense of achievement. *Overall the community thing has been really valuable because it has made me stretch myself outside my normal areas of comfort [UNE01]; and you have all these things that you can do within the University community as well as within your own community, that will help you contribute and develop you as a person, and impact on your well-being [UNE02].*

Work success

Participants indicated that their participation in the New England Award program was influenced by their expectation that doing so would contribute to their current and future work success. Participants in this study were all engaged in paid employment, and were undertaking study for a variety of reasons, from interest to intended career change. They spoke of development of skills related to employability such as team-work, time management and communication, as well as expanded professional networks.

¹ All quotes are from interviews undertaken during the course of this study

They were strategic with the activities they chose, planning their activities around their areas of professional and personal interest, with the aim of being able to demonstrate to potential employers that they had achieved more than ‘just a degree’ during their time at UNE. Participants explained how involvement in the NEA gave them confidence to ask for opportunities in their current employment, as well as developing confidence in job interviews. This was also a theme that resonated with staff and stakeholders of UNE.

4.3 Observations from the case study

A UNE specific insight came from the interviews conducted with staff of the University. Even though the diverse nature of the UNE cohort is widely known and acknowledged, many staff view students through the ‘traditional’ lens, and an overall focus on the on-campus younger student population prevails.

Themes discovered during interviews for this case study reflect those which have emerged through research of the NEA over the past decade. Using the Kahu engagement framework model has facilitated the connections between influences and consequences of student engagement, in relation to the NEA program and this has resulted in implications for responding to the needs of small and specific populations of students.

5 Understanding the regional student experience

5.1 Relationship to the Kahu model

Applying the Kahu model presented challenges but also reinforced that every student is an individual and therefore experiences life as a student, and life in general, in different ways. While the student/graduate participants in this study share some characteristics (female, mature aged, distance, part time, dependants, and work commitments), they nevertheless had differing motivations for participating in the New England Award program, and their anticipated (and actual) outcomes and experiences of their engagement also varied. This highlights the point made by Kahu that ‘A key strength in envisioning engagement in this way is that it acknowledges the lived reality of the individual, while not reducing engagement to just that.’ (Kahu, 2013, p 766).

The majority of UNE’s distance student population is employed full or part time, so for these students the alignment of the work success factor within the Kahu model as a ‘distal consequence’ doesn’t necessarily represent their ‘lived reality’. One participant, UNE04, reported that her participation in the NEA program gave her the confidence to ask for alternative *work experience in different sectors in my employment, so I was able to leverage the NEA to get some different work experience opportunities which was really awesome* [UNE04]. Kahu acknowledges that there is ‘overlap between the structural and psycho-social influences on one side, and the proximal and distal consequences on the other’ (Kahu, 2013, p 768).

Given the long term involvement of students participating in the NEA program, some other consequences that might be considered ‘distal’ appear to eventuate during participation, rather than ‘some time down the track’. The emerging and strengthening sense of social responsibility, and development of a sense of citizenship is among these.

5.2 Insights gained

The contribution of this case to the study is through the experiences of students studying by distance with a regional university. These students are not necessarily residing in, nor do they come from, regional areas, and in many cases never physically visit the institution until the day they graduate. Student experiences of participation in the New England Award program show that a strength of the

program is that it creates a sense of community among students, in particular among students studying by distance. The large majority of UNE students studying by distance are aged over 24 years, studying part time, occupied in part time or full time work which they balance with study as well as family commitments (dependents). This case demonstrates that recognising each student as an individual, while providing an overarching program structure, provides students with opportunities to bring their lived experience to their learning, thereby enhancing their overall student experience.

This case study specifically demonstrates the unmeasured benefits of a program of extra-curricular activities to ‘whole of person’ development, and the impact on students and society in general.

5.3 Good practice examples

While studying by distance is increasingly a choice, and indeed a necessity, for a growing number of students, it can be an isolating experience for many, as comments such as *I do feel probably more connected to the University, because doing off campus stuff is hard and... it can be isolating ... so I really like the fact that the New England Award is open to external students because it means it's an award scheme that's not isolating* [UNE01] attest, this case study establishes that feelings of inclusion and belonging can be fostered in the online environment. While this is also true of curricular courses/units of study, the benefit of participation in the New England Award program is that it connects students in an online community, through time.

I think what is good about the New England Award is that it does build up this knowledge about what people have done, and people make suggestions about things they could do. Students do have a bit of discourse... so it is very good to have that community spirit about it [UNE01].

Participation in the New England Award program is undertaken over a much longer period than a single unit/ course of academic study. Students studying by distance may not follow the ‘traditional’ enrolment pattern for their degree program. This can be due to their existing commitments, as well as university issues, such as units/ courses only being offered on a semi-regular basis (not in every teaching period). This engenders engagement through the commitment participants make to being involved in the program over a long period. *I think that the New England Award says you don't do it in a year, you need to do it over the course of your degree, over the time you are here, that's really effective* [UNE02]. As a consequence of this, students value the sense of achievement they experience as a result of University acknowledgement of their efforts and commitment: *The acknowledgement of it is really lovely, because it does take a long time.* [UNE01] and *the New England Award is a way of the university and the wider community going (sic), we understand that being involved in a community organisation and giving up your time is valued* [UNE02].

Recognition that extra-curricular activities provide for an enriched student experience and, as noted by Kahu, ‘has the potential to have a much more profound influence upon students and society (Kahu, 2013, p767), is also an important. Participants in this study all conclude that their participation in the New England Award increased their feeling of connectedness to the University community, but also their sense of citizenship and the value of the contributions they make to their local and professional communities. UNE05 says that she chose to participate in the NEA program because

[I was] feeling a bit disconnected not only my workplace, but I didn't feel like I was part of a university cohort at that stage, and I thought look I've really got to get plugged in otherwise I'm going to drop the ball. And I thought, what better way than to challenge myself.

While some participants had always been involved in community organisations and volunteering, the majority said that their participation in the program led to them becoming involved in community activities which they otherwise wouldn't, or that they extended themselves, resulting in personal growth: where community service (citizenship) also stimulates personal growth, sense of achievement, and lifelong learning: *it's recognizing that community involvement as an important part of the education*

process, not just from a personal perspective, but looking at global implications of participating, and being involved [UNE02].

Results from this study reaffirms larger studies undertaken with NEA students and graduates over the past decade, in relation to the development of the UNE graduate attributes, and the consequences for work success. All but one of the student/ graduate participants in this study indicate that they initially became involved in the NEA program because of the benefits they perceived in relation to their future employment. It is important to note that all participants, and a large majority of UNE students studying by distance, are already employed in full time or part time work, so are not looking to enter the workforce for the first time at the end of their degree. UNE01's experience was that participation led to further opportunities *I was invited – you start doing these things and people hear about your willingness – to go as a non-executive director on the Australian XYZ² Network [UNE01].* All participants recognise that their involvement in the NEA program has provided them with opportunities to develop attributes through extra-curricular activities, and that they anticipate (and in most instances have experienced) an advantage in their professional lives. UNE04

I decided to become involved in the New England Award because I thought that the extra-curricular activities could benefit both me personally, but also show prospective employers that I'm not only able to complete my studies but also to contribute to the greater good of the University [UNE04].

UNE04 is now employed as a lawyer with an international law firm. UNE05 reports that her involvement in the *NEA helped me in my career. ... it helped me in a recent series of interviews [UNE05].*

6 Implications

To a large extent, our findings add further support for the Kahu (2013) model. Structural influences within UNE enabled the creation of the New England Award program in such a way that it recognised the contribution of distance students. These impact favourably on the proximal consequences of student satisfaction and well-being and feeds back to psychosocial benefits including an enhanced sense of belonging and support. Ultimately, the NEA program has distal consequences, including a demonstrable contribution to work success, citizenship and personal growth. The conception of 'student success' or 'work success' is implicated as needing some attention however, for diverse populations. In the case of distance students, the lived experience of combined work and higher education commitments needs to be accounted for in the way institutions structure models of engagement. For students engaged in an ongoing career, the notion of distal consequences is somewhat ambiguous. The student participants described 'here and now' beneficial consequences of the NEA and this implies additional future opportunities for nuanced approaches to student success. The development opportunities afforded by the NEA suggests that student efficacy and self-worth can be realised during the period of studentship- it suggests that for distance students 'success breeds success'.

Students described participation in the NEA as being influential to their sense of connectedness and sense of belonging. This has an implication for the way in which institutions define and enact an understanding of community. This project has indicated that community need not be place-based or bound by geographical proximity and this could influence the way in which engagement is enacted in higher education.

While the University of New England has offered the New England Award program for more than a decade, and research indicates that participation in the program leads to greater engagement and

² Name of organisation deleted.

academic success, there remains a degree of ambiguity around the issue of whether participation in the program leads to greater student engagement and success, or whether students who are more likely to succeed, and are already highly engaged, are more likely to participate in the program. Students who complete activities and register these in the New England Award program complete their studies at a much higher rate than the general UNE student population. It is anticipated that future research into the impacts of the program will be interested in further evaluating these connections. Applying the Kahu model to research data gathered in previous studies may provide greater precision around this issue, with ‘...the student at its centre.’ (Kahu, 2013, p 766).

7 Conclusion

Students who study by distance with regional universities do not comprise an homogenous ‘student body’; there is diversity between institutions, and within institutions. Measures to improve engagement with students, must be adaptable to accommodate the personal aspirations and opportunities available to each student.

8 References

Kahu, Ella R., (2013) Framing student engagement in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*. 38:5, 758-773, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2011.598505](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505).

9 Funding acknowledgement

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

10 Appendices

1. Interview Protocol
 - a. Student questions
 - b. Staff questions
 - c. Participant information sheet
 - d. Participant consent form
2. Context of the case study.
3. Full case exploration, including participant profile

Appendix 1

Interview protocol

All interviews were conducted by Associate Professor Tony Marks and Mr Ed Campbell. Participant Consent Forms were obtained prior to interviews being undertaken.

a. Student Interview Questions

Why did you decide to become involved with the NEA?

Give me some examples of some activities that you became involved in because of the NEA.

How did your experience with this program affect your level of motivation and enthusiasm towards your studies?

What skills (if any) have you developed through the NEA?

How has the NEA influenced your sense of belonging to UNE?

How has the NEA influenced your self-belief in your own academic abilities?

In way ways (if any) has the NEA affected your academic results?

How did your experience with this program affect your wellbeing and satisfaction with life?

b. Staff Interview Questions

The NEA has been running for about 10 years now. Do you think it's important for this University to run such a program? Why?

What challenges were there (that you are aware of) in gaining approval for the NEA program and in getting it up and running?

In what way(s) do you think the NEA program impacts on the student sense of belongingness here at UNE? Is this the same for distance education students?

Do you think the NEA impacts on students' motivation and enthusiasm for study? How?

Do you think the NEA enhances students' academic performance?

Do you think the NEA impacts on students' range of career options and employability?

In way way(s) does the NEA impact on UNE as an institution?



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INFORMATION SHEET

for

PARTICIPANTS

Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities

We invite you to participate in this project being conducted by:

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Dr Ian Stoodley Email: istoodle@usc.edu.au Phone: 0420 323 928	Professor Karen Nelson Email: knelson@usc.edu.au Phone: (07) 5456 5458	Ms Kylie Readman Email: kreadman@usc.edu.au Phone: (07) 5456 5541

<p>Aim of the research</p>	<p>This project is a joint collaboration between 8 regional Universities in Australia: University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Southern Queensland, Charles Sturt University, James Cook University, Southern Cross University, Central Queensland University, University of New England and Federation University Australia. This project seeks to understand the current student experience of undergraduate student populations of regional universities in Australia. We want to identify what may need to change to ensure regional students have positive study experiences. We anticipate that new information and key practices will be discovered. Resources will be made available to the sector for immediate use. As a result, regional universities will be enabled to provide the environment for a successful time at university.</p>
<p>Your participation</p>	<p>If you agree to take part in this project, you will take part in a one-on-one interview in which you will have the opportunity to discuss positive, helpful and challenging aspects of your experience. The interview will be conducted at a mutually convenient time and location and will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of the discussion. The interview should take between 30-45 minutes. If you would like to receive a short summary of aggregated finding / outcomes please email Alicia Zikan (azikan@une.edu.au) with your request.</p>
<p>Risks and benefits</p>	<p>There are no specific risks involved in this interview. No information that identifies you as an individual will be reported as an outcome of this project. You will not receive any direct benefit as a result of taking part but your information will help improve the student experience in regional universities.</p>
<p>Your consent to participate</p>	<p>Your participation is voluntary. You may discontinue at any time without penalty. Prior to taking part in the interview and when you have sufficient information about the project and your involvement, we will ask you to sign a consent to participate form. Your consent is for your contribution and the information you provide to this project as well as any future related research projects.</p>
<p>Confidentiality and results</p>	<p>The interview will be audio recorded. The recording will be transcribed and any individual identifying information will be removed. The audio recording will be destroyed five years after completion of the project. The non-identifiable and aggregated results of the project may be presented at external or internal conferences or meetings, or by publication.</p>
<p>Use of information</p>	<p>Information collected from the survey will be combined with that collected from our University partners and presented in a report to the Australian Government Office of Learning & Teaching.</p>
<p>Approval</p>	<p>This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of</p>

New England (Approval No HE15-258 , Valid to 01/11/16.

Complaints

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at:

Research Services
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Tel: (02) 6773 3449 Fax: (02) 6773 3543
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**CONSENT FORM
for PARTICIPANTS**

Research Project: Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities

I,, have read the information contained in the Information Sheet for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. Yes/No

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time. Yes/No

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published using a pseudonym. Yes/No

I agree that I may be quoted using a pseudonym. Yes/No

I agree to the interview being audio recorded and transcribed. Yes/No

I am 18 years of age or older. Yes/No

.....
Participant Date

.....
Researcher Date

Appendix 2

Context of Case Study

The New England Award (NEA) program is designed to encourage, recognise and reward students' personal and professional development through participation in extra-curricular activity. It is open to all UNE students, and is targeted at 'whole person' development. A collaborative framework incorporating internal and external partners provides development opportunities to UNE students, unifying otherwise unrelated activities under one 'umbrella'. The NEA provides students with a structure within which to plan and reflect upon their learning and development. The NEA contributes significantly to student development and personal growth, and provides learning experiences that have a positive impact on student engagement. The distinctive co-creation of the NEA fosters a community of learning, through which participants support each other and participate in the program's evolution. The resultant 'sense of belonging' contributes to student engagement, influencing success at University. The underlying philosophy of the NEA acknowledges that well-rounded graduates have accomplished a combination of academic achievement, real world experience and personal growth. The program has evolved over the last decade through regular evaluation and feedback, satisfying the needs of UNE's diverse student population, and is agile in its capacity to respond to the opportunities and aspirations of each individual student.

The University of New England serves a diverse and distributed student population, many of whom would be considered 'non-traditional' in the Australian Higher Education space, with more than 80% studying by distance. They come to university with life experiences and responsibilities that influence the ways in which they are able to incorporate traditional co-curricular and extra-curricular campus-based participation. This diversity has created a dynamic environment in which to develop and test initiatives like the NEA, which require participant feedback and involvement in order to grow whilst remaining relevant and responsive. The original aim was to provide a vehicle for recognition of participation in the vast array of extra-curricular activities available to on-campus students, already recognised as contributing to the development of the desired attributes of a UNE graduate. The pilot program, established in 2004-5, was developed in the early years through a modified action research approach. Each element of the program was reflected upon, evaluated and assessed according to the stakeholder perspectives. The transparency around this process, and the conversations that ensued, led to an increased awareness of and interest in, participating in the program, both from the wider student population and the organisations that provide opportunities for students. As a result, the NEA was piloted with distance education students in Semester 2, 2007, and launched as a fully integrated offering in 2008. The organic growth of this program has resulted in a distinctive and coherent program that remains true to its original purpose of supporting the development of well-rounded graduates.

The NEA encourages students to actively plan their personal development through selecting and, importantly, sourcing appropriate activities, setting goals, recording their progress, and reflecting on their learning and development through non-academic activities, within the broader context of their pre-existing commitments. It brings together otherwise disparate activities to provide student learning and development opportunities within a coherent framework. The program is **deliberately structured to enable each participant to achieve** the program goals, while **accommodating the opportunities and aspirations of the individual**. The NEA has three categories of extra-curricular activity: non-accredited learning and training, professional development (including paid work), and community contribution. Students earn NEA points for demonstrated commitment and success in their activities, with all activities requiring independent confirmation of successful completion. When students self-register, they are given access to a personalised e-portfolio (MyNEA). Students

develop an individualised plan of future activities, based on their aspirations and the opportunities available to them. They seek guidance and non-directive support on their proposals from the NEA Program Manager. Discussions take place primarily by email, but also in person and using technologies available to the student. Video recordings are available in the LMS, along with 'Frequently asked questions'. The discussions use coaching 'interviewing' techniques, rather than direct instruction, with the aim of encouraging the participant to reflect on their reasons for participation and empowering them to take ownership of their development path. UNE01¹ related *NEA helps work out your values rather than your goals – change of focus* and

the thing I liked about the New England Award is that it's not compulsory, and you can choose what you want to do, so I've tried to do things that are a bit more challenging as time goes on, but also adds variety to my course.

These discussions are not 'one-off' but take place whenever the participant needs/ wants to review their plan, or seeks support or validation. Participants record their activities in the MyNEA portfolio, and submit confirmation from the activity provider (for distance students these are employers and community organisations in the students own communities).

When submitting an activity, the student reflects and self-identifies the graduate attributes, and employability skills they believe have been enhanced through the particular activity. These are recorded in the MyNEA portfolio, and form the basis of a developmental record, which contributes to the final reflective practice work required for completion of the program. This also has the advantage of providing the student with a reference point when they come to complete the final reflection, often several years later. Students appreciate the ability to recall and reflect on each activity, especially as their reflective practice skills develop over time. The richness and depth of reflection is understood by participating students to be a valuable life skill...*the writing up of the final report... was tough because it was not a skill I had before...Turning the focus back on oneself isn't something that we really make time for, and that was a good exercise, definitely* (UNE05). This approach ensure that the objectives of the program are foregrounded and clear at all times and students don't lose sight of their goals for personal and professional development. The ultimate aim is to assist them to develop as well-rounded individuals. Throughout the duration of the program, student experiences of the NEA have been investigated through ethics-approved surveys and focus groups with an emphasis on outcomes related to personal and professional growth, and engagement with the University. Results have been disseminated in a range of national and international publications, conference presentations and through collaborations with other institutions, nationally and internationally (see **References**).

As a result of this research, the NEA has been continually enhanced to more effectively satisfy the changing needs of students, and realise the overall aim of fostering personal and professional growth to produce well-rounded graduates. A dedicated online LMS facilitates discussion among distance students, and creates a sense of community, with participants supporting each other's endeavours:

As an external student you do feel quite removed from the University however being able to participate [in the NEA] and meet other students online and face to face really felt that sense of connection that you don't get if you purely focus on studying, as a distance student at UNE. I highly recommend getting involved to meet other people (UNE04).

¹UNE01, UNE02, UNE03 are current UNE students, UNE04 and UNE05 are UNE graduates and NEA recipients. UNE06, UNE07, UNE08, UNE09 and UNE10 are staff or institutional stakeholders

Coinciding with enhancements has been the development of a sophisticated database to manage the NEA and to provide an online student portal, MyNEA and the launch of a dedicated online learning management system to facilitate discussion amongst distance education students, with discussion *generated by the students, for the students...* (UNE07) and peer support for each other's endeavours *[T]hey can assist one another, they seek assistance from each other* (UNE07). This constant evaluation process also led to the modification of the final reflective practice exercise. While students are excited and motivated to participate in the program, qualitative research among students who participated, but did not complete requirements to receive the NEA, indicated that a major barrier for some students was the requirement to submit a 5,000 word reflective journal. Due at the time when the majority of students are submitting their final academic assignment, or struggling to submit Honours or PhD theses, the additional burden of the 5,000 word reflective journal was a barrier to completion. The NEA Program Manager investigated other options and consulted with all UNE School Teaching and Learning Committees, seeking their input into the most appropriate way in which students from different disciplines might demonstrate their reflective practice, and which would be purposeful for the student. Student feedback was also considered when designing alternative reflective practice tasks. This consultation resulted in additional options being introduced in 2014. Students are now able to demonstrate their reflective practice by submission of a short application and up to date CV, followed by an interview. The traditional reflective journal remains an option, with students also able to request other presentation formats to suit their own development requirements.

The New England Award is purposefully designed to be robust and adaptable to each student's aspirations, personal and professional development requirements, and opportunities. Self-determination is critical to the program's success and students are encouraged and supported to take ownership of their own program of development – to plan activities which will enhance their experience and address their areas of interest; to reflect and review these plans, and to investigate and source activities which meet their requirements within their own communities. Student feedback and self-assessment, and research into student experiences and outcomes demonstrate the program directly and indirectly enhances student growth. Specifically, it contributes to self-knowledge and personal and professional development (Muldoon, 2008a; 2008c) and it increases confidence and enhances engagement with the institution (Leece & Muldoon, 2009). By focusing students' attention on others through activities involving community service, the NEA also enhances desirable personal qualities such as altruism, community spirit, personal responsibility, empathy and citizenship. These are typical of the types of personal attributes, attitudes and human qualities being increasingly expounded in the graduate attribute literature (Rooke, 2003; Barnett, 2004; Barrie, 2005).

Self-determination is critical to the program's success and students are supported and encouraged to take ownership of their own program of development. It contributes to self-knowledge, personal and professional development and increases confidence and enhances engagement with the institution. By focusing students' attention on others through community service, the NEA also enhances desirable personal qualities such as altruism, community spirit, personal responsibility, empathy and citizenship *Anything that makes you feel like you're giving something, not just to yourself but to others, is really positive* (UNE01). Participants reflect that this is one of the greatest benefits they acquire from participating in the program. The portfolio and reflective activity components of the NEA encourages critical reflection on students' personal journeys, turning experience into learning. *The fact that the New England Award really asks you to think about the activities you are doing and how that contributes to yourself as learner, and yourself as a person – it makes you analyse what you are doing* (UNE02). Self-assessment and self-directed learning is an important but often underestimated part of both the learning process, and development of life-long

learning skills. They are essential features of cooperative learning climates in which learners are encouraged to take responsibility their learning (Andresen, Boud et al. 2000).

The NEA contributes to the development of the UNE graduate attributes (communication skills, global perspective, information literacy, lifelong learning, problem solving, social responsibility and teamwork). Development of interpersonal skills, confidence and self-regulation are common outcomes. Increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of undertaking challenging and new experiences is also widely reported by participants, with UNE03 noting that *I started stepping out of my comfort zone...Definitely a positive impact on my confidence* and *...it made me more involved in the Club in a leadership role...which is something I wouldn't have done had I not been involved in the award at Uni.*

Each year, feedback such as this reaffirms the philosophy of the NEA that well-rounded graduates are the product of a rich and varied overall student experience. Positive student experience is known to directly impact on student engagement and retention (Tinto, 2009), and the NEA is pivotal to this end. Our research demonstrates that by focusing students' attention on others through activities involving community service, the NEA enhances desirable personal qualities (Muldoon, 2007a; 2015). NEA students report many benefits that imply a growing sense of social responsibility (a UNE Graduate Attribute): *Overall the community thing has been really valuable because it has made me stretch myself outside my normal areas of comfort. And to say what I could give to the community* (UNE01)

Most participating students believe that the NEA experience enhances their employability (Muldoon, Evans & Zikan, 2014): *They [employers] don't want someone who is going to be isolated, they want someone who is going to participate and engage with others, and engage with the community that they have to work in* (UNE02). Some participants in this study registered to participate based on their perception that it would positively impact on their current and future employment – and this is reflected in their experiences. *I was invited to go as a non-executive director or XYZ* (UNE01). These views have been borne out by the experience of NEA graduates. UNE05 notes that *...I was able to leverage the NEA to get some different work experience opportunities...some of the links I made...I have maintained in my current work role.* And recently *I definitely think it helped me in a recent series of interviews.* Employers agree that *it shows me...they can think outside the box, they know how to work with people, it enhances their life enormously* (UNE06).

An unsolicited email from a UNE student completing his PhD (February, 2015) eloquently summarises his experience participating in the New England Award:

After completing a Bachelor of Economics via correspondence through the University of New England, I felt no real connection with the University and the area. In fact, this troubled me as I yearned for more than just a study experience. Moreover, I yearned for the community experience and to take part in and to give back. After doing some research and wishing to improve upon past experience, the decision was made to complete the New England Award. As a result, I now I feel that I have achieved all that I set out to do, and make this study experience truly holistic. The many required activities facilitate and push the individual to become highly involved in the community and university, enabling essential services such as tutoring, mentoring, student bodies and events to take place. In sum, I now feel part of and proud of my contributions to the University and district that has provided me with the tools and education to be successful throughout my personal and professional life.

The structural influences on the development of the New England Award at UNE are recognised by staff, institutional stakeholders and students. *With this award we [UNE] can show that we*

differentiate ourselves, we produce graduates who are not only academically ready, but graduates who have some nouse, shown leadership, know how to work with people, they are more than work ready (UNE06). Evidence of institutional recognition, and embeddedness, is the prominence accorded it at UNE Graduation ceremonies when NEA recipients are distinguished by being congratulated by the Chancellor of the University on their achievement (www.une.edu.au/current-students/graduation/new-england-award Graduation Ceremony for New England Award recipients). At the graduation ceremony they are asked to stand while their achievements are recognised by the University community – they literally ‘stand out from the crowd’. They are further distinguished following the ceremony when they are introduced to the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor and have official graduation photographs with both. New England Award recipient is also noted on the Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement, and recipients receive a letter congratulating them on their outstanding achievement. Students appreciate the institutional recognition of their achievements. *Last week I graduated from the University of New England and I was also privileged enough to be awarded with the NEA. First of all thank you so much for the kind words and the wonderful reception that we received during the graduation ceremony. It was a great honour to actually receive the award. Also thank you, and your team, for your continual dedication and hard work that allows this program to be so successful, it truly is remarkable* (UNE Graduate and NEA recipient, email, April 2011).

The NEA is a co-created program which has been developed through collaboration with educators, employers, not-for-profit and other national organisations and, most importantly, students. It has shown that it is resilient and agile over the past decade, and accommodates and welcomes catalysts for change. While many participants begin the program and plan a transactional approach to their development, participants overwhelmingly recognise the transformational change they undergo through participating in the program. It is clear that NEA students recognise and value the personal and professional growth they experience through participation in the program. It fosters a sense of belonging, which enhances participants’ feelings of engagement. *I found it was really, really motivating because as an external student you are quite disconnected from the student body and the campus, so this kept me thoroughly engaged with the student body...so it was really motivating in that regard* (UNE04) and *I felt the NEA was a way I could be engaged but at my own pace* (UNE05).

There is little doubt that the NEA has made an outstanding contribution to the quality of student learning and the student experience at UNE. The following quote articulates the benefits that NEA participants have consistently reported over the life of the program:

The New England Award has been a very positive experience for me during my time at UNE. The program has fostered a sense of belonging, to both the UNE and Armidale communities. Above and beyond being just another student with a number, I now know myself better as a person, feel more sure of where I am going and, importantly, have developed a better understanding of the best ways to get there. Aside from the obvious enhancement to employability stemming from the extensive development of personal and professional attributes intrinsic to the award requirements...the New England Award acts to foster a lifelong orientation toward positive, progressive development both at the level of the individual participant and the wider community. I commend the University for investing the time, money and effort into such a meritorious value-adding educational opportunity for motivated students (UNE Graduate and NEA recipient, 2011).

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Staff/ stakeholders

UNE06: long term senior level supporter and sponsor during the implementation of NEA program, and current institutional sponsor.

UNE07: UNE graduate, NEA recipient and current NEA Program Manager. Involvement with NEA from 2007 as a student, and from 2010 as staff (Administrative Project Assistant, then as Program Manager from 2011).

UNE08: UNE graduate, member of UNE Residence Senior Common Room (community support for residents of residential colleges), UNE Alumni relations and long term provider of NEA activities for on campus students (predominantly)

UNE09: NEA program founder, and program manager until 2011. UNE graduate, member of UNE Council

UNE10: UNE Academic Skills lecturer. Pathways lecturer.

Word cloud generated from staff and institutional stakeholder interviews

