



Summer Vacation Activities: An Investigation of Students' Attitudes, Experiences & Perceptions

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Summer Vacation Activities: An Investigation of Students' Attitudes, Experiences & Perceptions

Executive Summary

This report presents Careers Service-led research to discover and understand the types of activities returning University of Aberdeen undergraduates had engaged in during the 2016 summer vacation period. Research was conducted to:

- Understand the range of summer activities completed by undergraduates and their rationale for undertaking them.
- Explore potential new ways to recognise, reward and support students' wider learning through these activities.
- Discover how these experiences have impacted on students' employability and personal development.

Summer activities explored in the research included: internships, placements, study abroad, academic research, employment, volunteering, family responsibilities, travelling and time off.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the 477 respondents via an online survey, student focus groups and student-authored case studies. Key findings from the research include: the importance of personal networks in sourcing opportunities, the diverse range and geographical locations of the opportunities and the strong student awareness of the employability-enhancing value of such experiences.

Recommendations derived from the research which could be relevant to employability development across the UK higher education sector include:

Recommendation 1: Encourage universities to investigate the potential of a credit-bearing course (module) to provide more structured reflection opportunities for students to analyse their summer activities.

Recommendation 2: Further the use of the 'student voice' at dedicated student-led presentation events to share the varied benefits and challenges of summer vacation learning.

Recommendation 3: Deliver a wider range of bespoke, employer networking sessions to help widening participation students to extend their personal networks, and help gain the social capital they need to enter and succeed in the workforce.

Recommendation 4: Establish a longitudinal Summer Activities Survey to help inform the strategic employability direction of universities.

In conclusion, the research has highlighted that in order to appreciate student perspectives on summer vacation learning and personal development, it is important that student feedback is more actively sought, monitored and evaluated. This feedback is crucial to inform employability policy and practice across universities and to improve students' preparedness for their transition to employment or further study.

1.0 Introduction

There is an ongoing need to align Higher Education provision to the world of work in order to enhance students' work place learning and better shape students for the challenges of the job market (Heyler, 2011; Wilson, 2012). With the growing political and economic pressures on UK universities to improve graduate-level employment rates and employability, there is continued discussion and debate about how employability is best implemented and measured (HEA, 2016). Given this agenda, universities are now required to explain to a wider range of stakeholders, not only how they deliver workplace skills, enhance students' employability and professionalism, but also how they can improve the career opportunities of graduates (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2014).

Universities across the UK have an evolving focus on engaging with employers from different sectors and organisational sizes to enhance student employability (QAA, 2014). The University of Aberdeen currently works in partnership with a wide range of organisations to offer year-long, MSci degrees which include an integrated year in industry as well as short academic placements, volunteering and work-based project opportunities. While the University is well positioned to monitor and assess students undertaking curriculum-based employability courses, it has limited knowledge and understanding regarding students' summer vacation activities and how these relate to their wider employability learning and development.

It is well established that the workplace, and other professional environments beyond universities, provide students with valuable informal learning experiences (Thomson et al, 2013). These experiences provide an ideal opportunity for students to reflect on their personal and professional development and to make connections between their degree programme and the world of work (Tomlinson, 2008). The ability for students to self-assess and articulate their strengths and weaknesses, in term of their competencies, is key to employability (Rust and Froud, 2016). Enabling students to assess their skills and attributes, and to evidence a range of qualities that employers look for in graduates, including communication, team working, problem-solving, reflection and professionalism, is crucial to build employability in the student population.

There is extensive literature regarding how universities can help students to realise their potential, to enhance their skills and to become successful employees (Moore and Reddy, 2012; Pegg et al, 2012; Weiss and Klein, 2014). However, there is also considerable potential to value, recognise and build upon students' wider learning experiences, out with their degree programme. This study seeks to address this gap through investigating students' attitudes, experiences and perceptions from their summer vacation activities.

The study was devised to develop the University's understanding of the range of student involvement in summer activities, e.g. work placements, volunteering or personal development projects, both UK and overseas. It also collated students' perceptions from these experiences. This student-focused research was carried out via an online survey, focus groups and student-authored case studies. The findings from this study will inform further developments at the Careers Service by:

- Providing an evidence-based insight into students' summer experiential learning to help guide the University's strategic direction.
- Helping to establish an annual survey system to gain a detailed insight to students' summer activities with a view to monitor potential data trends.

- Enhancing our knowledge of the evolving range of summer activities which are available for students - locally, nationally and internationally.
- Furnishing benchmark information for the Careers Service to use with academic Schools in offering more tailored and bespoke employability support.

2.0 Methodology

A mixed method research approach was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to explore students' attitudes, experiences and perceptions from their summer 2016 activities. An online SNAP survey was devised consisting of 25 open and closed compulsory questions. It was launched for a period of 2 weeks in mid-November 2016 to all returning undergraduates. The Survey collected information under the following broad fields: demographic data, type of summer activity, motivation for undertaking the activity and impact on employability and future career thinking. Quantitative data was analysed by SNAP software and qualitative data was analysed via thematic analysis to collate student responses into specific categories. The Survey was anonymous and any data collected treated confidentially in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

A case study approach was also implemented to establish a rich picture of students' views, perceptions, experiences and/or ideas regarding their summer activities and their experiential learning within this context. Students who self-identified to offer a case study were required to complete a 1-page template before January 2017.

Two, 2-hour focus groups were convened in February and March 2017 to supplement and provide a greater insight to the online data collection. Participants were studying a range of arts, social science, law and science degree programmes. Prior to the focus group, participants were informed about the research project details and given assurance regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Focus groups explored five broad summer activity themes: student engagement, opportunity sources & activity analysis, impact, barriers & challenges and institutional recognition. All pedagogic research conducted followed the quantitative and qualitative survey guidance and the effective practice provided in the *Higher Education Academy (HEA) publication: Getting Started in Pedagogical Research in the STEM Disciplines* (2014).

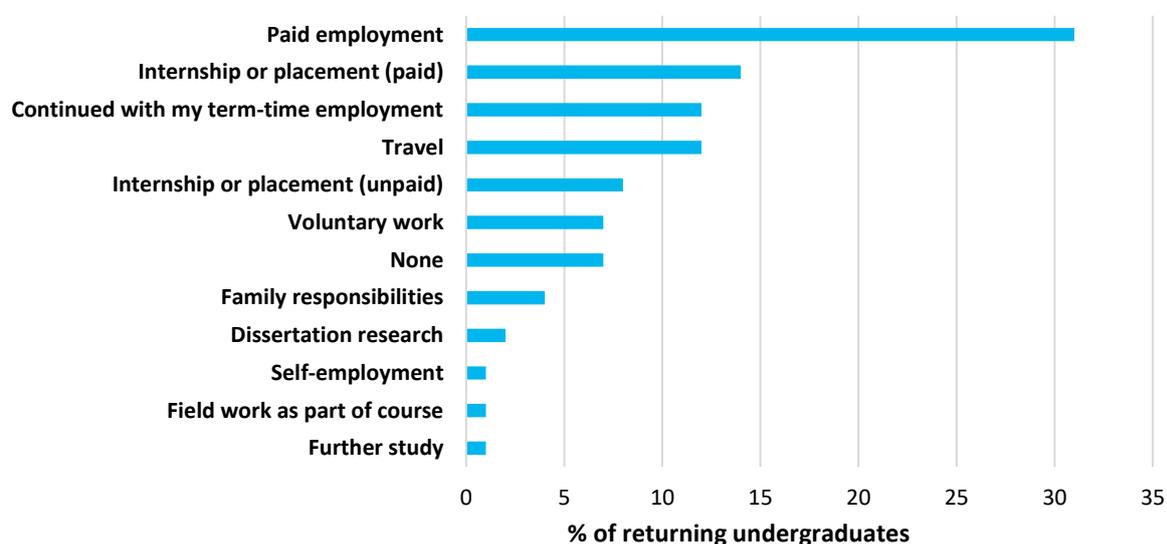
3.0 Key Findings: Online Survey

Findings are presented under the previously given research themes.

Theme 1: Student Engagement

477 students completed the Survey from across all 12 academic Schools at the University of Aberdeen. Disciplines in the academic Schools cover: Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Medicine, Law, Business, Computing, Education, Psychology, Engineering, Geosciences and Natural Sciences. Analysis of undergraduate respondents was as follows: 34% 2nd years; 41% 3rd years; 19% 4th years; 6% 5th years. The majority of respondents were full-time students aged 18-24; notably, 70% of respondents were female.

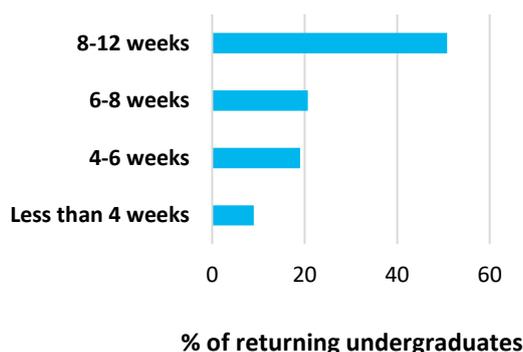
Fig. 1: Illustrates the main activity students undertook in the 2016 summer vacation period.



Note: Students self-determined their main activity.

The majority of students revealed they were in paid employment activities (58%) or travelling (12%) (Fig. 1). Other activities included voluntary work, family commitments, dissertation research or fieldwork. 72% of respondents were engaged in activities lasting from 6-12 weeks in duration (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Length of students' main summer activity.



It was noted via the qualitative survey data that students often completed more than one summer activity to support their personal development and/or to survive financially. Students' survey feedback also revealed a strong focus on building their confidence and experience in a wide range of settings, as illustrated via these students' comments:

"I have proof of employability with a known and respected organisation, and have transferable skills from it."

2nd Year Student, School of Biological Sciences

"I got to improve my confidence as I had to deal with members of the public in person and on the phone."

3rd Year Student, School of Divinity, History & Philosophy

"Travelling helped me develop language, communication skills as well as learning about culture."

4th Year Student, School of Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture

However, some students were less positive about their summer experiences:

"Nothing that had not been learned from previous employment."

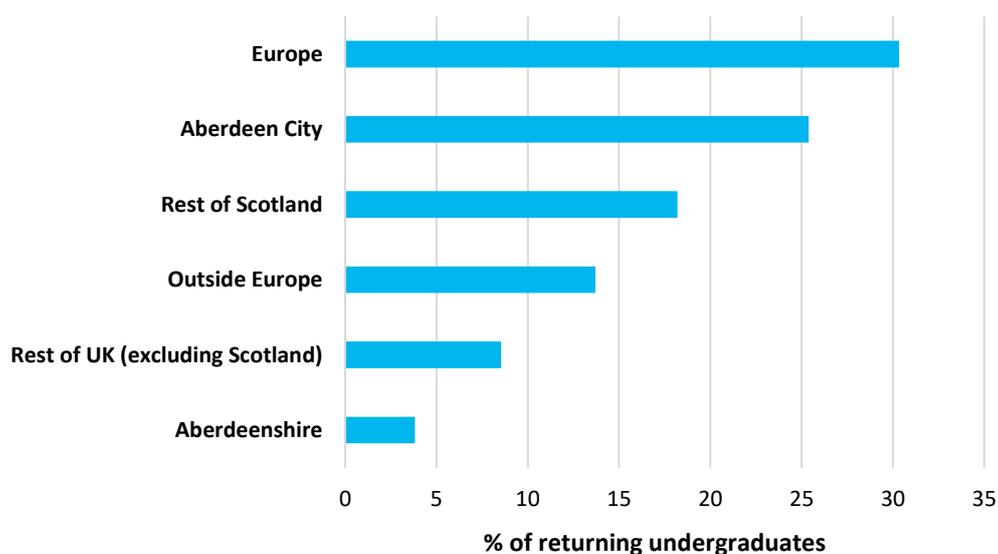
2nd Year Student, School of Natural & Computing Sciences

"Not much different, doing the same tasks I'm always doing. I do not have access to any relevant internships etc. in my area."

4th Year Student, School of Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture

29% of returning undergraduates undertook their activity in either Aberdeen or Aberdeenshire, while others completed their activity in other parts of Scotland (18%), the rest of the UK (9%) or overseas (44%) (Fig. 3). Overseas destinations were extremely wide-ranging, including Brussels, USA and Beijing. Given that 42% of survey respondents were overseas students the data is not surprising. The University of Aberdeen attracts a high population of European students; further detailed analysis is required to determine any linkage between country of origin and location of summer activities.

Fig. 3: Location of students' main summer activity.



For some students the opportunity to travel abroad was particularly appealing:

“It was an enriching experience for me as I was able to live the life of a local in North Africa and was able to interact with the youth of this region.”
3rd Year Student, School of Business

The data also revealed that students undertook employment in a wide variety of sectors from hospitality and events management to engineering & manufacturing, with 38% of respondents indicating they had previously worked for the organisation prior to the summer of 2016.

Fig. 4: Remuneration for students’ main summer activity.

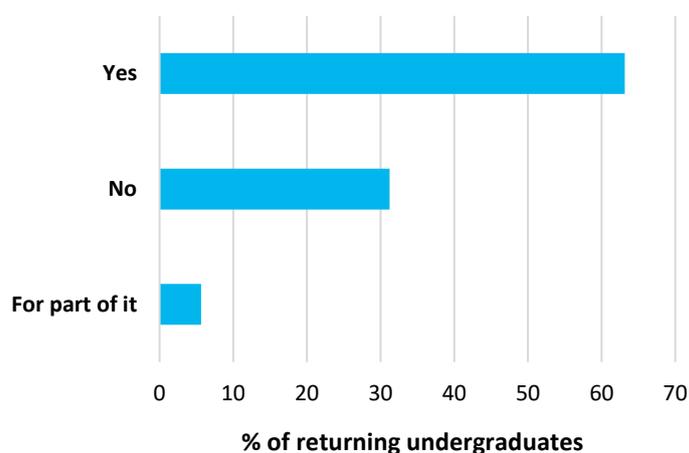


Fig. 4 reveals that most summer experiences opportunities were paid, however 31% of opportunities were unpaid. There is a growing trend in unpaid internships, and students often need to decide if it is a valuable and financially viable opportunity to complete. Unpaid internships are also likely to impact on the location of the experience as students often need to continue with other paid employment for financial reasons.

As illustrated via this comment:

“Sometimes I wish that I was not bound by the fact that I need to earn money to go university. If not, I would love to volunteer abroad or within the UK and do internships that are better related to my degree for future employment.”
2nd Year Student, School of Social Science

Given that the data in Fig. 4 represents a wide range of summer experiences beyond employment (e.g. travel, family responsibilities and dissertation research), these results are, perhaps, less surprising.

Theme 2: Opportunity Source

Employers ranged from well-known multi-national organisations such as Merck, Chevron and Deloitte to smaller bespoke organisations including Historic Scotland and the Royal Cornwall Museum. Many retail names also featured while analysing the data, such as Marks & Spencer, Starbucks and Tesco.

Students revealed that they sourced their summer activities via a wide variety of channels. The main sources were:

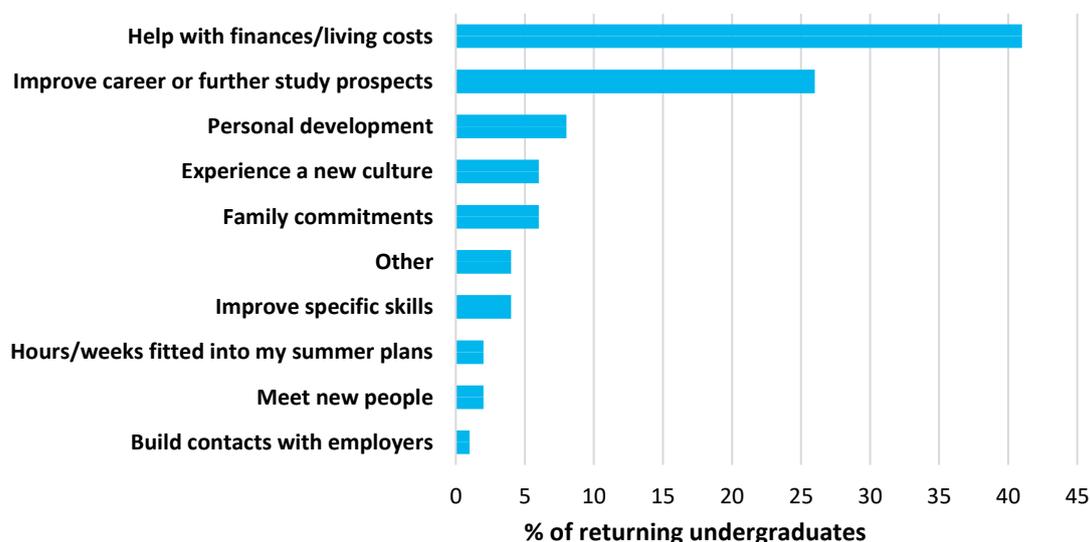
- Personal contacts, including family and friends (28%)
- Already worked there (including previous placement or part-time work) (17%)
- Employer’s website (9%)

Interestingly, social media platforms were not a significant factor in students sourcing summer activities (3%).

Theme 3: Activity Analysis

The research findings confirm how much students learn from their summer activities, and that both the career learning experience and the need to undertake paid employment for financial reasons are often key drivers in motivating students (Fig. 5). Other student comments given in the free text responses indicate the summer activity was required for their degree programme.

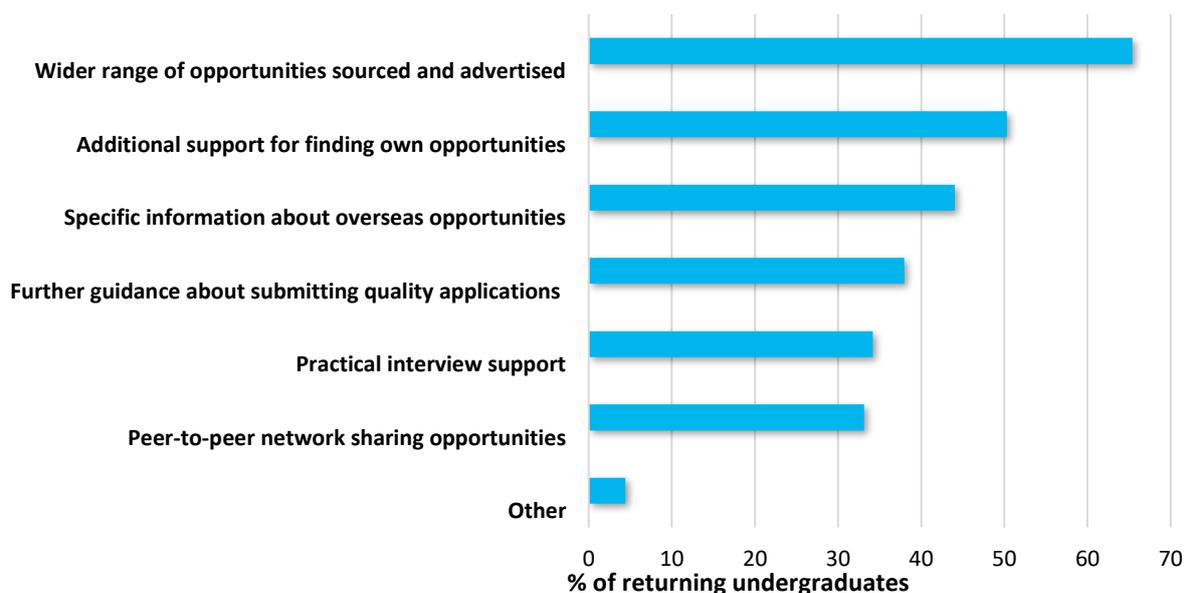
Fig. 5: Illustrates students’ primary motivation for undertaking their summer activity.



Note: 32 students who completed the Survey did not engage in any summer activity.

A QAA Report published in 2013 revealed that across all degrees programmes students are keen to receive further employability support and information. This study echoes the QAA report findings as it is clear that students go beyond their degree to enhance their skills and relevant experience to boost their employability. 312 students indicated (65% of survey respondents) that they would appreciate a wider range of summer activities to be advertised by the University (Fig. 6). Student feedback regarding additional support for summer activities engagement will be useful to help review our current Careers Service provision and to further assist students in these summer transitions (Fig. 6).

Fig 6: Presents the additional support students requested to enable their engagement in summer activities.



Note: Students indicated all statements which applied.

Drawing on students’ summer experience accounts, in peer-to-peer dialogue, warrants further consideration and investigation. Encouraging students to reflect on their own personal development helps bring to life the complex mix of factors that shape a student’s career planning path. This is demonstrated through this study as respondents were able to identify tips, hints and guidance to support their peers regarding their summer experiences, which could be employed to help sharpen other students’ employability decision-making. The shaping of students’ career thinking is illustrated clearly via the following comments:

“Do it, it’s good for you even if it is not related to your degree you may make some money and learn other transferable skills.”

3rd Year Student, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition

“Start early and always have a plan B option.”

3rd Year Student, School of Social Science

“Assess the full range of options before committing. There are a range of positions internationally that can help boost experience, confidence and learning more than an easy local job.”

3rd Year Student, School of Divinity, History & Philosophy

Other comments given in the free text responses mainly indicated the need for a wider range of financial support to be made available to help students participate in summer opportunities as summed up in this remark:

“I get sent internships and volunteering in my field but they all cost thousands of pounds, usually excluding flights. Low cost opportunities need to be sent too- they are out there! Mine cost €300 plus flight.”

2nd Year Student, School of Biological Sciences

Theme 4: Impact

The Survey revealed the wide-ranging impact of students' summer activities on their employability and/or personal development, as illustrated via the following comments:

"It was definitely good! Made me more aware of different countries and the way things work there. Met new people which made me a more cultured and understanding person."

2nd Year Student, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition

"Improved my career and further study prospects."

3rd Year Student, School of Social Science

"Improved my employability skills, networking and improved my understanding about the organisation."

2nd Year Student, School of Geosciences

"Learned how to deal with stressful situations and built my business knowledge."

3rd Year Student, School of Natural & Computing Sciences

Negative impact comments mentioned, include struggling with family commitments and not experiencing a new environment to learn in:

"As I already worked there, it did not add anything beneficial to my CV."

5th Year Student, School of Geosciences

"There is a lot of pressure of balancing work experience and spending time with parents as they don't see me for half a year while I'm at university."

3rd Year Student, School of Engineering

7% of survey respondents did not undertake any summer activities. Students not engaging in activities cite the following broad themes for not undertaking any activities: family commitments, health issues, needing relaxation time and inability to secure an opportunity.

The importance of ensuring 'time out' in the summer vacation period and not working for the entire period was also commented on by students. Summer activities can be stressful and impact on a student's wellbeing as intimated in this remark:

"Make sure you have time for yourself."

4th Year Student, School of Education

Theme 5: Institutional Recognition

Mixed views were gathered from the Survey with regards to formal recognition and rewarding of students' summer learning by the University.

"Make a note in my degree transcript."

3rd Year Student, School of Social Science

"Mentioning all undergraduate volunteers in the school based newspaper."

3rd Year Student, School of Psychology

"I would have appreciated some credits, but oh well."

4th Year Student, School of Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture

There were also clear messages from students that recognition and reward is not necessary.

"I don't need to be rewarded for this, the reward was the participation. Recognition from the University doesn't mean all too much either."

4th Year Student, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition

"In no way, because it was just for the money."

2nd Year Student, School of Psychology

4.0 Key Findings: Case Study Vignettes

The student-authored case studies provide further insights on the perception and value of students' summer experiences. The vignettes presented below portray a snap-shot of a wide range of different summer activities undertaken by undergraduates and confirm the plethora of experiences captured via the online survey. The vignettes also provide a route to exploring and exposing those elements of students' summer experiences that other students seek to understand and learn more about.

Final Year MA (Hons) Politics and International Relations Student Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), Edinburgh

"The wide-range of tasks that I was exposed to during my summer internship made it appeal to me as a perfect insight into the Banking and Financial Services Industry. My summer activities have made me more confident in translating my university activities, whether social or academic, into attributes which might make me more successful in my career. A common misconception is that you can only work in industries which relate directly to your degree but in my experience this is far from the truth, as particularly in the Banking and Financial Services Industry, all degree backgrounds are welcomed. Having successfully completed the internship with RBS I was offered a place on the Graduate Trainee Programme which will commence in September 2017."

Second Year BSc (Hons) Geology & Petroleum Geology Student Volunteer Eco Students Abroad, Ecuador

"My role as a volunteer included manual labour of building sanitation facilities and teaching English and Spanish to children of primary school age. My volunteer experience has helped me develop as a person - it was the best thing I have ever done! I now have a new-found confidence and belief in myself to accomplish anything I put my mind to. This experience will probably impact the way I approach career choices in the future because I will be more open to trying new things outside of my comfort zone."

**Third Year MA (Hons) Finance and Management Studies Student
Aberdeen Intern, University of Aberdeen**

“My internship involved redesigning and redeveloping the University’s ‘Achieve’ online skills resource website in terms of layout and navigation. I also created promotional materials for ‘Achieve’ to raise staff and student awareness of the resource. My professional experience over the summer in both the Careers Service and Student Learning Service led me to understand the importance of planning and time management. As a result, my studies are better organised and less stressful.”

**Second Year BSc (Hons) Biological Sciences Student
Marine Scotland Science, Aberdeen**

“I worked full-time in the molecular genetics laboratory in the science aquaculture research facility. I processed and analysed animal tissue samples for a new experimental vaccine project. The experience enabled me to become proficient in a wide range of laboratory techniques. I loved working in the lab and using different molecular techniques. I now plan to switch my degree to the MSci Genetics (Immunology) programme which includes a 12 month industrial placement. The range of degrees available gives a lot of flexibility, so it is good to complete a placement straight after your first year to amend your degree programme without having to repeat a year.”

**Third Year MA (Hons) Anthropology Student
Volunteer: International Citizen Service – Y Care International**

“Y Care International is the international branch of the YMCA movement, which places volunteers in five different countries (Senegal, Togo, Bangladesh, Liberia and Sierra Leone) to help tackle local development issues.

My placement was 10 weeks in Kaolack, Senegal on the West African coast. I worked with local young people and through peer education and advocacy, my role focused on health awareness. Communication and creativity skills were important in my work as I was involved in delivering different activities aimed at raising awareness of particular diseases and of the Universal Health Coverage Programme. I might want to focus on Senegal for my upcoming final year Anthropology dissertation.

Overall, the experience definitely showed me that I love what I am studying and that the methods we are taught at University are important tools in real life, too.”

**Fourth Year MA (Hons) International Relations and Management Studies
Student
European Parliament Trainee**

“This was a unique experience and I would not have changed it for anything else! I was a summer trainee in the Parliament and served at the European People’s Party Group. I had a broad range of responsibilities and duties to undertake. I attended different Parliamentary meetings, where the MEP I was assigned to had a leading role. I also compiled reports based on these meetings, translated documents in different languages, organised and facilitated events.

The most exciting part was that I was involved in the organisation of a conference dedicated to the Democratic Republic of Congo and its Presidential elections.

My advice to undergraduates is to try and secure an internship and don’t be discouraged by receiving a rejection. Keep going!”

**Third Year MA (Hons) Politics & International Relations – Sociology Student
Executive Board Assistant, Kairos Consulting**

“Kairos Consulting is a small organisation located in Vienna, Austria that undertakes PR work for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charitable causes and political work.

I identified the opportunity through a ‘Google’ search. The Kairos Consulting webpage explained how to go about applying for a possible internship. In small organisations you can gain a lot of experience because you have the opportunity to do a wider variety of tasks. The internship has made me see more clearly what I want to do in the future. I now know what I am most interested in and passionate about.”

A number of common themes emerge from the selected students’ vignettes, namely:

- **Networking:** case study findings allude to the value and benefits of real-world experiences.
- **Skills development:** the vignettes reveal that students have been influenced by their summer experiences to improve their awareness and articulation of their competencies.
- **Career planning:** several case studies suggest students have developed a greater capacity to be able to frame their summer experiences in terms of their career options.
- **Confidence and personal development** are both apparent in these case studies; students also appear to be particularly analytical in their commentaries, further confirming students’ professional development.

5.0 Key Findings: Focus Groups

Volunteers for the focus groups were secured as part of the online survey. 14 students attended the sessions in total. Participants were studying the following degree subjects:

Focus Group 1: Biomedical Sciences; Geology; Economics (x2); Politics & International Relations; International Relations & Sociology; English; Finance & Management; Film, Visual Culture and Sociology.

Focus Group 2: Politics & International Relations; History of Art; Anthropology & Psychology; Biological Sciences; Law.

The mixed-gender sessions comprised 4 second year students, 8 third year students and 2 final year students. Typically, Scottish degrees take four years to complete rather than three years in other parts of the UK, and it was encouraging to secure focus group volunteers from across all returning undergraduate years.

The notes taken allowed for greater insight to the online data collection, from which selected aspects were revealed and discussed with the students. The following research questions were addressed:

Theme 1 Student engagement: What types of summer activities do University of Aberdeen students undertake?

Theme 2 Opportunity Sources and Activity Analysis: How do students source their opportunities?

Theme 3 Impact: What are the impacts from students' summer activities?

Theme 4 Barriers and Challenges: What are the barriers and challenges regarding the summer activities students undertake?

Theme 5 Institutional Recognition: How can the University recognise and reward students' summer learning and achievements?

Theme 1: Student Engagement

A wide range of opportunities was undertaken by focus group participants (including paid, unpaid and volunteering), and often multiple roles were completed consecutively. It was clear from the discussion that students felt there is a grey area between volunteering and unpaid employment.

One student indicated:

"It was unclear where the line is between 'working' and receiving a salary, and volunteering in an unpaid capacity."

2nd Year Student, School of Law

Other students remarked it would be helpful if there could be a clear definition of the difference between the various forms of work experience. It was evident from the views expressed that students were trying to undertake a wide variety of experiences while at university. Students

also commented that individuals who complete unpaid internships can feel exploited, while their less affluent peers were excluded because they cannot work without payment.

Theme 2: Opportunity Sources & Activity Analysis

Many participants had difficulty sourcing paid internships and placements. Students indicated the internship recruitment and selection process was very competitive, that you needed to be proactive and personal contacts were vital to get your foot on the 'internship ladder'.

One participant expressed a common sentiment, shared by the group:

"Securing an internship is tough but worth it."
4th Year Student, School of Business

Another student reported the experience of being an exchange student in the USA, where more students worked on-campus. The student explained there was an internal website which had around 10 jobs posted each day. USA students were also very proud to be associated with the university as an employee. Participants reported that they did not know how to find on-campus vacancies at the University of Aberdeen.

Overall, participants in both focus groups emphasised that, despite the challenges of securing an internship, the value and sense of achievement from undertaking a summer experience activity cannot be underestimated.

Theme 3: Impact

Science student participants indicated their summer lab employment provided in-depth 'hands-on' experience beyond the academic practical curriculum at university. Students believed they could see the difference in their practical abilities when they returned to classes after the summer vacation. Students also pointed out the added value of lab-based internships in showcasing skills to potential PhD recruiters.

Another student who had worked in a fast food chain described how the role had received negative feedback from peers. In contrast to the concerns raised by peers, the student had positive comments about the experience. The student felt the fast-paced environment provided a great opportunity to enhance time management skills and resilience, so the choice of summer employment was valuable.

One student offered a comment that was representative of the attitude from most of the group:

"Internships make you grow up and grasp opportunities when you return to university."
3rd Year Student, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition

That said, the discourse of focus group participants also acknowledged that personal circumstances and juggling multiple roles can have an impact on a work-life balance.

Theme 4: Barriers and Challenges

Nearly all focus group participants described starting early in the academic year to secure an internship as crucial. Many participants questioned the rationale for this approach. Participants also talked about the demands of application processes. Others remarked it was helpful to

speak to individuals who have been through the process. The end result of these challenges was summed up in the following way:

“It is a really thin line – enhance my chances of employment or focus on my course to get good grades.”

3rd Year Student, School of Social Science

Theme 5: Institutional Recognition

Focus group participants frequently referred to the need for more university support to help identify and secure internships and placements. Different forms of support were explored, which included launching an academic employability champion network across the University to help advise students. In addition, rolling out the well-established, third year bioscience placement preparation course in other subject areas across the University was discussed. Participants also talked about a credit-bearing course to recognise and reward students' summer learning:

“Recognition would be nice, submit a reflective statement after the internship.”

4th Year Student, School of Business

However, other students argued that recognition and reward is not necessary, as illustrated through the following comment:

“I don't think I need rewarded for having worked during the summer, I think it's a normal thing to do and wouldn't expect to need to have some incentive to do so.”

3rd Year Student, School of Social Science

6.0 Discussion

The findings from the online survey, focus groups and case studies suggest that a significant number of returning undergraduates benefit from their summer activities. It is apparent from students' written comments and their discourse that they are well aware of their skills and professional development realised from their summer endeavours. Students commonly cited in their survey responses how their summer experience developed their transferable skills. For example, students referred to improving their transferable skills such as communication, IT, organisational, problem-solving and time management skills. 'Improving skills' or 'skills development' were stated generically numerous times. Interestingly, higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking, negotiation and emotional intelligence rarely featured in students' responses.

A key aim of the University of Aberdeen's Graduate Attributes Framework is to help ensure students develop a critical awareness and understanding of their knowledge, skills and competencies (Perkins and Pryor, 2016). It appears there is more work to be undertaken for students to make sense of the concept of skills and employer competencies, especially as Aberdeen Graduate Attributes were not commented on explicitly by students in the online survey. Perhaps students' learning could be enhanced by providing more structured reflection and self-assessment opportunities for individuals to analyse their summer activities.

In the current Higher Education employability climate, it appears that development of personal and professional transition skills, gained during summer activities, is worthy of further investigation, potentially by creating the framework of a credit-bearing course (module). Lucas et al (2004) noted that student reflection and dialogue should be at the heart of the implementation of a graduate attribute framework, to help empower students in their career planning. These experiences can make a very valuable and important contribution to students' wider learning and achievements (Stuart et al, 2011).

Although the number of online survey respondents not undertaking any form of summer activity is rather low (7%), this area still warrants further investigation. What is the impact of students deciding not to undertake any summer vacation activities? Are students feeling stigma, guilt/shame or a sense of relief? Increasing numbers of students are reporting feeling anxious and under considerable pressure regarding the demands of university and their employability prospects (Pitt et al, 2017). What can Careers Services offer to help students transition into summer internships, placements, volunteering or personal development projects? A student securing a lucrative summer internship or placement is often considered by staff and students as the successful student. This can lead to their peers feeling a sense of failure, having negative thoughts and resulting in low self-esteem. Using the 'student voice' to share across the University the varied benefits of summer vacation learning is important. However, it is perhaps more important to help individuals realise successful students also encounter failure. It is vital for students to hear these perspectives from their peers to help inspire and raise student aspirations.

The study has confirmed and identified a vast array of student summer activities undertaken by returning undergraduates, both in the UK and overseas. It is clear from the research that students were extremely proactive in sourcing, applying for and securing summer opportunities worldwide. The role of intercultural experiences in the development of students' transferable skills and employability is well documented (Jones, 2013). Going forward, there is also scope for the project to be extended to a longitudinal survey and for more detailed research to be directed to the influence of students' summer learning on graduate career choice (Jackson, 2015).

The gender bias, (70% of respondents were female) in the Survey is a research limitation. It is essential moving onwards that we aim to broaden the range of 'student voices' to help ensure the summer activities research is representative of the entire student population. The University of Aberdeen community consists of 120 nationalities, 49% men, 51% women and 12% mature undergraduates. Overall, the research revealed a wide range of personal and practical factors which predict students' ability to secure summer experiences, including personal networks, motivation, financial security, and health. To help students to fulfil their potential it is important for the University to equip all students with the professional networks to succeed, regardless of their social or financial background.

Experiencing learning beyond the classroom is vital to develop students' employability. In O'Leary's study carried out in 2016, most graduates welcomed employability to be tailored, embedded, and with a subject-wide focus. This research advocates that academic engagement in students' employability development is crucial and supports the holistic approach to embedding employability in the entire student experience.

Over the past decade, the University of Aberdeen's Careers Services has taken a much more active role in supporting students' employability through partnership working with academic colleagues. This approach has included a menu of opportunities to help support students' summer employability development. However, it is clear from the research results that students would welcome further University provision regarding the number of summer opportunities sourced and advertised, additional practical application advice, and peer-to-peer networking opportunities for students to share relevant summer employability learning. There is also further scope for the Careers Service to explore and understand barriers to summer activities (e.g. financial, social, and motivational) in order to maximise student participation in rewarding summer experiences. Discovering more about the students' summer experiences and the roles they transition into, as this study has begun to do, is a first step in understanding how best to achieve this.

A number of other key messages emerge from the research. The length of the summer experience activity is likely to determine, to some extent, the range and scope of the work undertaken by the student. In this project, the maximum length of placement investigated is 12 weeks and this might explain students' overall rating of the summer experience as the complexity of the work undertaken is often limited in short-term placements.

In this study, only 68% of respondents rated their summer experience as either good or excellent. Work placements are often viewed as one key mechanism for improving graduate employability, yet there has been a decline in the uptake of year-long placements by students (Little and Harvey, 2007). 12 month placements are often seen as the gold standard of internships as they offer the opportunity to gain substantial experience and make influential contacts (Bullock et al, 2012). Students need to understand their rationale for selecting a specific short, summer experience opportunity and to ensure their selection meets with their expectations, especially if a 12 month placement does not feature in their career or academic study plans.

In conclusion, this research has broadened our employability knowledge regarding the learning potential of student summer activities and offers valuable insights to students' summer transitional endeavours. This project also indicates the need for further research to explore how the range of summer activities identified in this study impact upon graduate outcomes. Given the complex nature of the graduate labour market and postgraduate study opportunities in the UK, this is predicted to be challenging to explore and understand.

7.0 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed to address the key findings which emerge from the research project:

Recommendation 1: Encourage universities to investigate the potential of a credit-bearing course (module) to provide more structured reflection opportunities for students to analyse their summer activities. Providing an accredited course would also help ensure students receive university recognition for their wider learning and achievements.

Recommendation 2: Further the use of the 'student voice' at dedicated student-led presentation events to share the varied benefits and challenges of summer vacation learning. Survey results indicate students would value this type of session and that they are happy to get involved to share their experiences. This approach would also enable students to be meaningfully involved in shaping a university's employability provision.

Recommendation 3: Deliver a wider range of bespoke, employer networking sessions (online and face-to-face) to help widening participation students to extend their personal networks, and to help students gain the social capital they need to enter and succeed in the workforce. Building social capital through enhancing and extending co-curricular and extra-curricular activities is also crucial to raise student aspirations.

Recommendation 4: Establish a longitudinal Summer Activities Survey to help inform the strategic employability direction of universities. This would allow greater depth and breadth of analysis over an extended period.

8.0 Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Online Survey

Section 1: About You

Q1 Please indicate which year of undergraduate (UG) study you entered in the academic year 2016/17:

- 2nd year UG
- 3rd year UG
- 4th year UG
- 5th year UG

Q2 In which academic School is your major area of study? (NB. If you are studying joint honours, please select the primary/major School)

- Business
- Divinity, History & Philosophy
- Education
- Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture
- Law
- Social Science
- Engineering
- Geosciences
- Natural & Computing Sciences
- Biological Sciences
- Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition
- Psychology

Q3 Which degree are you studying?

- BD
- BDS
- BEng
- BMus
- BSc
- LLB
- MA
- MBChB
- MChem
- MEng
- MGeol
- MSci

Q4 What is your current student status?

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Distance learner

Q5 Before you started University where did you live?

- Aberdeen City
- Aberdeenshire
- Rest of Scotland
- Rest of UK (excluding Scotland)
- Europe

- Outside Europe

Q6 How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- Over 45

Q7 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

Other

Q8 During the 2016 summer vacation period which one of the following was your main activity?

- Continued with my term-time employment
- Internship or placement (paid)
- Internship or placement (unpaid)
- Paid employment
- Family responsibilities
- Carer
- Field work as part of course
- Dissertation research
- Self-employment
- Further study
- Voluntary work
- Travel
- None

Section 2: Your Summer 2016 Activity

Q9 On average how many hours a week were you engaged with this main activity?

- Up to 10 hours
- 11-20 hours
- 21-30 hours
- 31-40 hours
- More than 40 hours

Q10 How long did your main activity last?

- Less than 4 weeks
- 4-6 weeks
- 6-8 weeks
- 8-12 weeks

Q11 Were you paid for this activity?

- Yes
- For part of it
- No

Q12 Where did your activity take place?

- Aberdeen City
- Aberdeenshire
- Rest of Scotland
- Rest of UK (except Scotland)
- Europe
- Outside Europe

Q13 If you completed a period of employment, placement, internship or volunteering in which employment area was your activity based?

- Accountancy, banking and finance
- Business, consulting and management
- Charity and voluntary work
- Creative arts and design
- Energy and utilities
- Engineering and manufacturing
- Environment and agriculture
- Healthcare
- Hospitality and events management
- Information research and analysis
- Information technology
- Insurance and pensions
- Law
- Law enforcement and security
- Leisure, sport and tourism
- Marketing, advertising and PR
- Media and internet
- Performing arts
- Property and construction
- Public services and administration
- Publishing and journalism
- Recruitment and HR
- Retail
- Sales
- Science and pharmaceutical
- Social care
- Teaching and education
- Transport and logistics
- Not applicable

Other, please specify the business area

Q14 Thinking about your employer, did you work or volunteer for this employer before the summer of 2016?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Q15 What was the name and location of the organisation you were working for? (e.g. KPMG, Leeds)

Name of employer _____

Location _____

Section 3: Summer Experience Motivation & Benefits

Q16 What was your primary motivation for undertaking your main activity?

- Help with finances/living costs
- Improve career or further study prospects
- Improve specific skills
- Experience a new culture
- Meet new people
- Hours/weeks fitted into my summer plans
- Personal development
- Build contacts with employers
- Family commitments

Other, please specify

Q17 How did you first find out about this activity?

- University of Aberdeen Careers Service
- University of Aberdeen Lecturer or Personal Tutor
- University of Aberdeen website
- Employer presentation
- Media (e.g. newspaper/magazine)
- Online social networking sites
- Employer's website
- Work/Professional contacts
- Recruitment agency
- Recruitment website
- Approached organisation, position not advertised
- Already worked there (including on placement/previous part-time work)
- Personal contacts, including family and friends
- Not applicable

Other, please specify

Which website/networking/social media was this?

Q18 Do you have any comments about the impact of your summer activity on your employability or personal development?

Section 4: Looking Back & Looking Forward

Q19 What was the main reason for NOT undertaking any of the above activities?

Q20 What advice would you give to a current student considering undertaking a summer activity?

Q21 How would you like the University to recognise and reward your summer activity learning?

Q22 What additional provision would you welcome from the University to support your engagement in summer activities? (Tick all which apply)

- Wider range of opportunities sourced and advertised
- Additional support for finding own opportunities
- Further guidance about submitting quality applications
- Practical interview support
- Peer-to-peer networking opportunities for students to share relevant experiences
- Specific information about overseas opportunities

Other, please specify

Q23 Please describe any barriers you encountered regarding undertaking your summer activity.

Q24 How would you rate your overall main summer 2016 activity?

Poor Excellent

Q25 Would you be willing to provide a case study of your summer experiences? If you agree please provide your name and E-mail address in the box below. Please note your responses will continue to be treated anonymously.

Appendix 2: Case Studies – Student Prompt Questions

Students were invited as part of the online survey to contribute a case study regarding their summer experience. The following prompts were given to support students.

- What was your role, and the name of organisation?
- Please briefly describe your employer (e.g. size of organisation, location) and the employment area you worked in.
- How did you find out about your internship, placement or volunteering opportunity?
- Describe your main duties, tasks and responsibilities.
- Is there one part of your internship/placement/volunteering that really stood out for you? Why?
- Which Aberdeen Graduate Attributes did you develop?
(www.abdn.ac.uk/graduateattributes)
- How do you feel your summer activities have impacted on your university studies?
- What advice would you give to other students who are thinking about completing an internship, placement or volunteering in this area?
- How do you think this experience will impact on your future career choices?
- Any additional comments?

Appendix 3: Focus Groups

HECSU Focus Groups: Facilitators' Notes

Summer 2016: Student Experience Survey

<p>Time</p> <p>12.30-12.50</p>	<p>Welcome & Introduction</p> <p>Introduce facilitators, remind the students why the session has been organised, the session format and how their views will be used to enhance the Careers Service and the University curriculum/co-curriculum provision. Allow time for lunch/refreshments.</p>
<p>12.50-12.55</p>	<p>Focus Group Guidelines</p> <p>Cover:</p> <p>Housekeeping – refreshments, toilets, fire alarm</p> <p>All views are valid, there are no correct or incorrect responses, the Careers Service/University is just keen to find out what you think.</p> <p>All students are encouraged to contribute.</p> <p>Notes will be taken, names will NOT be assigned against specific comments.</p> <p>There will be an opportunity at the end of the session to raise any other points that relate to the discussion.</p> <p>Confirm focus group start and end time. Explain the data summarises selected findings from the online student survey.</p>
<p>12.55-13.00</p>	<p>Focus Group Icebreaker</p> <p>Ask the students to introduce themselves in less than a minute – name, degree programme, year of study and briefly what they did in the summer of 2016.</p>
<p>13.00-13.50</p>	<p>Focus Group Questions</p> <p>Focus group questions are based on the 5 research questions which underpin the design of the Summer 2016: Student Experience Survey. The questions cover the following themes (aim to spend approx. 10 minutes per theme):</p> <p><u>Theme 1: Student Engagement</u></p> <p><i>What types of summer activities do University of Aberdeen students undertake?</i></p> <p>Show students the results from the survey question: During the summer vacation which one of the following was your main activity?</p> <p>Prompt question: Which parts of the data do you as students find most interesting or surprising? Why?</p> <p><u>Theme 2: Opportunity Sources & Activity Analysis</u></p> <p>How do you think students source their summer opportunities?</p> <p>Prompt question: Can you suggest some of the ways students find out about summer opportunities?</p> <p>Reveal data for the survey question: How did you find out about this activity?</p> <p>Prompt question: Which parts of the data do you as students find most interesting or surprising? Which sources as a student have you not considered before now? Tell me more about why you had not considered them?</p>

	<p><u>Theme 3: Impact</u> <i>Do you have any comments about the impact of summer activities on students' employability or personal development?</i></p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Can you give me an example from your own experience?</i></p> <p><i>What are your thoughts regarding if the internship or work experience is not related to your degree subject?</i></p> <p>Many students source their own summer activity, many students receive payment and others do not receive payment. Can you tell me what do you think about <u>unpaid</u> summer opportunities?</p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Can you help me understand the issues about unpaid opportunities from your perspective?</i></p> <p><i>What advice would you give to a current student considering undertaking a summer activity?</i></p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Can you give me an example of what you would say? What impacts are you able to list? Can you tell me more about your list?</i></p> <p><u>Theme 4: Barriers & Challenges</u></p> <p>Are there any trends regarding the summer activities students undertake?</p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Is there a difference between the summer activities students undertake at different stages of their degree programme?</i></p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Can you provide any examples of challenges from your own experience?</i></p> <p><u>Theme 5: Institutional Recognition</u></p> <p><i>What institutional provision is needed to help students understand the significance and value of their summer experiences?</i></p> <p><i>i.e. How would you like the University to recognise and reward your summer activity learning?</i></p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Can you give me some examples of how you feel this could be developed at the University of Aberdeen?</i></p> <p>Prompt question: <i>Would you like to receive academic course credits for placements or internships you source yourself? What would such a work placement course look like? When would it be offered?</i></p>
13.00-13.55	<p style="text-align: center;">Summing Up</p> <p>Summarise the main points raised and ask if this covers all the points mentioned.</p>
13.55-14.00	<p style="text-align: center;">Additional Student Points</p> <p>Encourage students to raise other points related to the discussion.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Thank you and close</p>

Appendix 4: Project Dissemination

Dissemination of project findings and learning have been integral to the research and include:

External Events

- Presentation: *Vacations and Vocations: Learning from Our Students' Summer Experience Survey* at the 3rd International Enhancement in Higher Education Conference, Glasgow (6-8 June 2017).
- Poster at the AGCAS Scotland Annual Conference, Glasgow (21 June 2017).

Internal Events

- Poster at the Centre for Academic Development Annual Symposium (27 April 2017).
- Volunteering case study: School of Medical Sciences Student Newsletter (September 2017).
- School of Social Science Employability Leaflet: Provided student case studies to offer internship insights for potential and current students (July, 2017).
- Final report disseminated to Positive Outcomes Task Force members across all 12 academic Schools at the University of Aberdeen (October, 2017).
- Poster at the Annual Learning & Teaching Network Event (29 November, 2017).