



Measuring educational gain: University of Exeter case study

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June 2024

Our approach

The University of Exeter is committed to ensuring outstanding educational gain is embedded both in curriculum design and enhancement and in co- and extracurricular opportunities available to all through our partnership with the Exeter Students' Guild and the Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union. Our intended educational gains are articulated to prospective students alongside other information that helps inform their choice of University, programme of study and future career. We clearly communicate that we are working to create a sustainable, healthy and socially just future and emphasise that, through our education and research, our students and staff can together 'create the possible'. This communication and engagement continues throughout our students' educational journeys and, as alumni, beyond.

Educational gain at Exeter is focused on the development of core graduate attributes. Our Education Strategy defines curiosity, creativity, critical thinking and global understanding as key for life beyond graduation. Informed by our excellent relationships with industry, feedback from alumni and analysis of the global changes in the world of work, we have refined these target attributes in our University Strategy 2030 as intellectual enquiry; problem solving skills; entrepreneurship; digital literacy; cultural competence and global citizenship.

University of Exeter Grand Challenges

Grand Challenges is an innovative annual learning experience where students work in research-led interdisciplinary groups to tackle wicked real-world problems, including climate change, mental health, social inequality and others. Students select which global issue they want to address, with the wide range of topics mapped to the UN Sustainability Development Goals. Top academics and invited speakers share their views and help students apply their skills and knowledge to a real-life problem. Grand Challenges has just been awarded a Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) by Advance HE.

Grand Challenges has been a flagship University of Exeter programme for the past ten years and has attracted students from international partners: University of South Florida, Leiden University, the University of Mannheim and the University of Padova. Run annually in the third term, students work in research-led interdisciplinary groups, supported by top academics and invited speakers, to tackle real-world problems, including climate change, mental health and social inequality. It supports and builds on our interdisciplinary curricular and development of several of the graduate attributes outlined above.

Open to all students, more than 400 take part each year. Feedback is overwhelmingly positive, with over 90% of students reporting that they would recommend it to others. Most frequently, students report developing communication, leadership and teamworking skills, public speaking and presentation skills, improved research skills, time management skills, and confidence. The benefits and philosophy of the programme is summed up in a quote from a recent participant: 'It really sets you up for the world of work, where there will be people from all areas collaborating on one goal.'

Grand Challenges is primarily focussed on students supplementing and building on their curricular knowledge through interdisciplinary groups to develop innovative solutions to real world problems.

Through the Grand Challenges skills training sessions, students are able to develop key transferable skills that look to complement disciplinary knowledge to enhance a student's employability prospects. These sessions are intended to support students after Grand Challenges as they continue on their programme of study and beyond graduation.

The below table shows the increasing positive response to students who feel that grand challenges has improved their confidence in demonstrating skills to their employers, was an innovative experience, and provided them with an experience they would not have otherwise had.

Question	% Positive Grand Challenges 2022	% Positive Challenges Online 2021	% Positive Challenges Online 2020	% Positive Grand Challenges 2019
Grand Challenges has improved my confidence in demonstrating my skills to any employer	82%	78%	77%	81%
Grand Challenges was an innovative learning experience	88%	87%	87%	87%
Grand Challenges demonstrated how different disciplines can work together to address an issue	89%	90%	88%	89%
Grand Challenges provided me with experiences I wouldn't have otherwise had	89%	91%	89%	89%

Challenges Online, ran in 2020/21, during the Covid-19 pandemic was a finalist for the Green Gown 2021 Award in the Tomorrow's Employees Category, and in the global QS Reimagine Education 2020 Award in the Sustainability Category. Our approach to, and evaluation of, Grand Challenges has been published to support others develop similar initiatives.

For more than ten years, Exeter has recognised students' achievement of extra and co-curricular educational gains through our Exeter Award and Exeter Leaders Award, recognising contributions to student leadership. The Exeter Award helps students evidence the development of attributes and skills to boost their competitiveness in the graduate jobs market. In the ten years to 2020/21, an average of 512 students per year completed the Exeter Award, and an average of 77 completed the Exeter Leaders Award. After a pandemic-affected year in 2021/22, we are seeing increasing uptake this year. The Award framework allows students

to choose different pathways, including Sustainability and Entrepreneurship and to capitalise on activities with which they are already involved, with the University, the Guild and the SU.

The University is currently exploring how the Grand Challenges approach can be more comprehensively embedded into the curriculum, through its developing Curriculum for Change initiative.

This Case Study is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project is led by Imperial College London in partnership with Bath Spa University; Imperial College Union; Liverpool John Moores University; London School of Economics and Political Science; Open University; University of Birmingham; University of Cambridge; University of East Anglia, University of Exeter; University of Manchester; University of Plymouth; University of Portsmouth; and University of Warwick. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).