

RGU+- AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO ENSURE CONSISTENCY IN EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT ACROSS ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY



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SUMMARY

Robert Gordon University (RGU) has been sector leading in terms of employability for a number of years. It is a growing and vibrant institution with 16,000 students, 1500 staff, 11 academic schools and an exceptional record in the employability of our students.

Building on the success of existing employability initiatives, we are now launching RGU+ - a framework that will ensure every RGU student has a credit bearing additionality to their programme of study and that the cross cutting themes of sustainable development, entrepreneurship and innovation are embedded throughout all of our courses. Our aim is to optimise student employability skills and develop them as global citizens.

CONTEXT

In 2022, HESA ranked RGU as the top university in Scotland and third in the UK for the employability of its graduates. The reasons for this success are multifactorial. The University has for many years capitalised on its location (situated as it is in the Northeast of Scotland), its partnerships with industry, its innovative, co-created professionally focussed curricula, and its work-based learning framework, to ensure that our students are prepared for employment on graduation.

ROLE OF LOCATION AND INDUSTRY

Our location in the Northeast is unique and the universities in this region benefit from close industry partnerships that originated when the Oil and Gas sector was strong. Large international companies needed a high calibre workforce and attracted employees from all over the world. This workforce needed tailored education and through our close partnerships with industry partners we have co-created courses that benefitted business and the University. The presence of the Oil & Gas/Energy sector in Aberdeen also increased demand for workforce in other sectors – health, law, architecture - and companies sought help from their local universities to help them achieve this. Aberdeen and the Northeast of Scotland is now in the process of repositioning itself as the Energy Capital of Europe with an ambition to capitalise on the wider sector, including renewables, energy transition and decommissioning.

At RGU we have co-developed our curricula with industry partners for many years - we use their expertise to teach students whilst also offering a large number of industry placement opportunities for our students. To facilitate this we created an appropriate infrastructure with a dedicated Business and Enterprise Department (BAED) and Centre for Employability and Community Engagement (CECE). These units coordinate and quality assure this work-related and work-based learning activity. The RGU+ initiative now aims to build on these strong foundations through curriculum enhancements and additional credit-bearing work-related learning activities and opportunities for learning through the lens of sustainability and innovation (see Figure 1).



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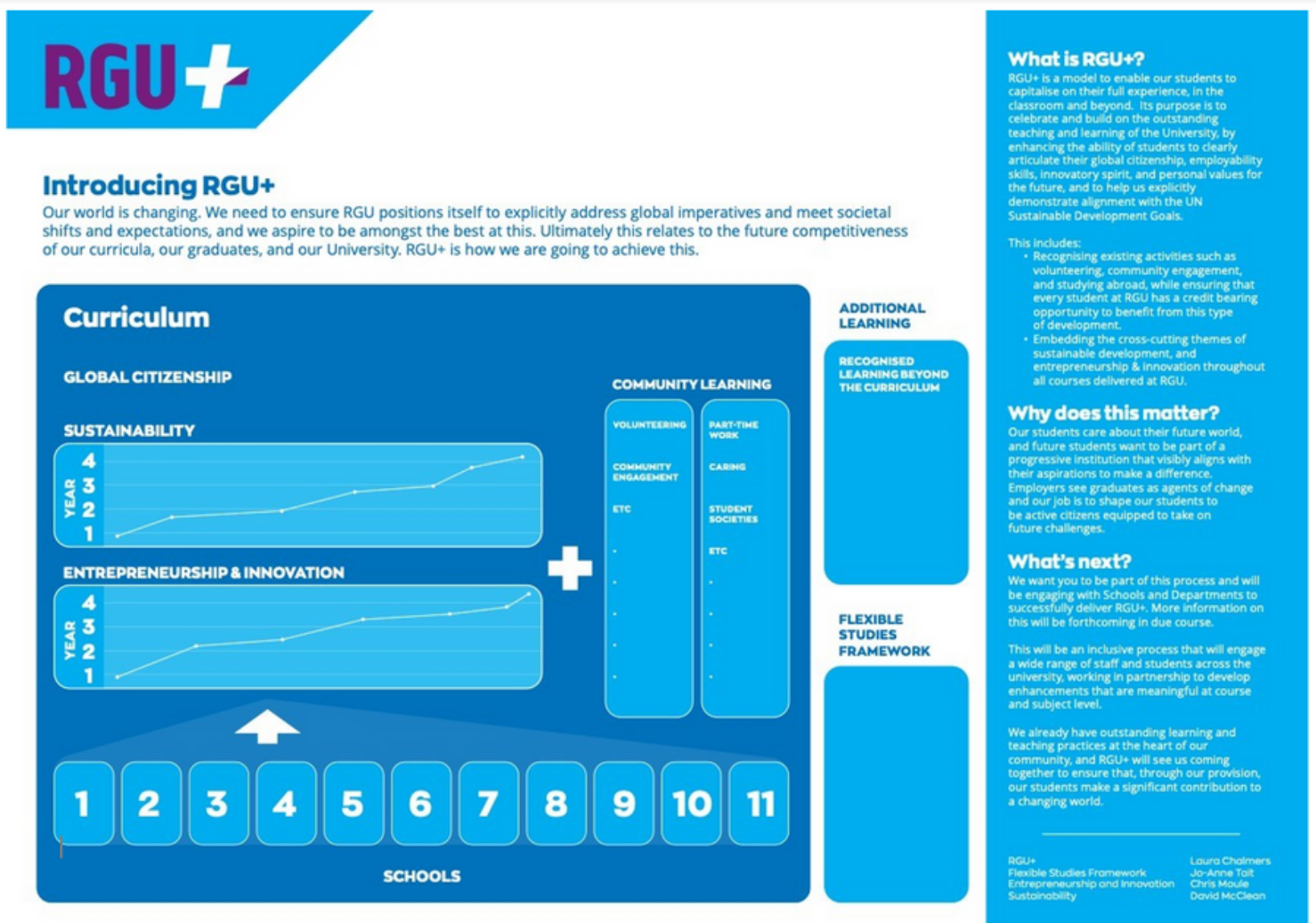


Figure 1: RGU + Overview

The RGU+ framework is informed by and reflexive to national and international job market data and local labour market insights. This intelligence is gathered through our unique (in Scotland) Leaver Survey and is a key deliverable of our newly formed Employer Liaison Team. Their purpose is to gather and analyse this destination data but also local labour market information gathered from a range of sources, including local authority skills surveys, employer forums, professional bodies and our own employer liaison boards represented across the University.

RGU+ is the collective term that we use to describe all of the additionality that students at RGU will experience whilst they study with us. It includes a whole array of additional activity that our students already benefit from – for example, volunteering and study overseas – capitalises on the cross cutting themes of sustainability, entrepreneurship and innovation, which are now embedded across the curriculum. But it also introduces an additional offering to ensure that every student has a credit-bearing opportunity to participate in volunteering, community engagement experiences or placements, student mobility, and public service opportunities – from charity trusteeships to childrens panels. Our aim is to optimise students’ employability skills whilst developing them as global citizens. In so doing, we hope to develop a sense of belonging within the broader global community, and to encourage participation in civic actions which promote a better world. We want our students to champion the universal values of human rights, democracy, non-discrimination and diversity (OXFAM 2022).

RGU+ also builds upon our partnerships with industry. Support for students’ career management and employability journey is threaded throughout the curriculum through close partnership between academic schools and the employability service. Work-based learning placements - whole semester, or even year-long - offer students unique experiences to begin planning their careers with an array of employers of all types and sizes. The creation of rich work-based learning environments to learn and rehearse work skills – from inter-generational working, to interdisciplinary learning - is the foundation of RGU+. Additionally, threaded throughout the RGU+ curriculum are the two broad pillars - education for sustainable development and innovation/entrepreneurial thinking.

RRGU+ would not be possible without the solid employability foundations built up in the institution over many years and which we layout in more detail below.

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METHODOLOGY & IMPLEMENTATION

Industry Board

RGU has built long-term partnerships with a whole array of industry partners for many years. Owners, Directors and specialists are all invited to school and course specific industry liaison boards and maintain regular close communication with the Business and Enterprise department (BAED) and the Centre for Employment and Community Engagement (CECE). Sharing their expertise and insights on developments within their sector is central to course development, internal subject review, revalidation and new course approval and proposals. For example, our Law School is developing a new Doctorate of Law which now recognises the value of learning in the workplace and how this informs research methodology – building on this triangulation of business intelligence, academic centres and the CECE.

Work-Based Learning

There are many undergraduate and postgraduate courses at RGU that have embedded placements. The CECE ensures that these placements remain effective both for students and companies. These close employer relationships and the placements they provide are invaluable in ensuring that our programmes are preparing graduates for the world of work effectively. In addition, the CECE and BAED's regular contact with our industry partners provide constant feedback on the effectiveness and contemporary relevance of our courses, and the extent to which they are producing graduates who are workforce ready. There are a number of case studies that can evidence this. One example, out with the traditional sector of business placements, is within our contemporary arts programme. These Gray's School of Art students are invited to work with industry to produce relevant, creative pieces of art reflective of the current operational environment or the direction of travel for an organisation. In the past, this same programme has included organisations from the energy sector and many others.



RGU has for many years used a “template” approach to ensure that students on placement - who are gaining industry experience, or participating in study abroad etc - have a framework against which they can document their learning through portfolio development. We are currently expanding this “work-based learning template” through RGU+, to ensure every student has a credit-rated experience in their course of study that explicitly supports the development of employability skills and assists them to recognise themselves as global citizens (Bosio and Veugelers 2021).

This particular initiative is being developed by our employability staff within the CECE. To ensure students benefit optimally from these experiences, the team works alongside the students to help them identify the skills they are gaining from the placement and make sure they are prepared to articulate these skills when seeking employment. This process of reflection is aligned with the RGU Employability Framework (see Figure 2). This framework defines the aspects which contribute to successful graduate outcomes and underlines the activities and support structures of CECE in developing student employability and future career success.

As part of the placement review process, employers are asked to provide an assessment of their student’s skills both during and after their placements. This relevant, industry focussed assessment provides students with invaluable evidence for their reflective assignments and feeds into their plans for the next stage in their employability journey – be it further studies or employment. For the University, this information also provides real-time, employer feedback on our students’ abilities and employability development needs.

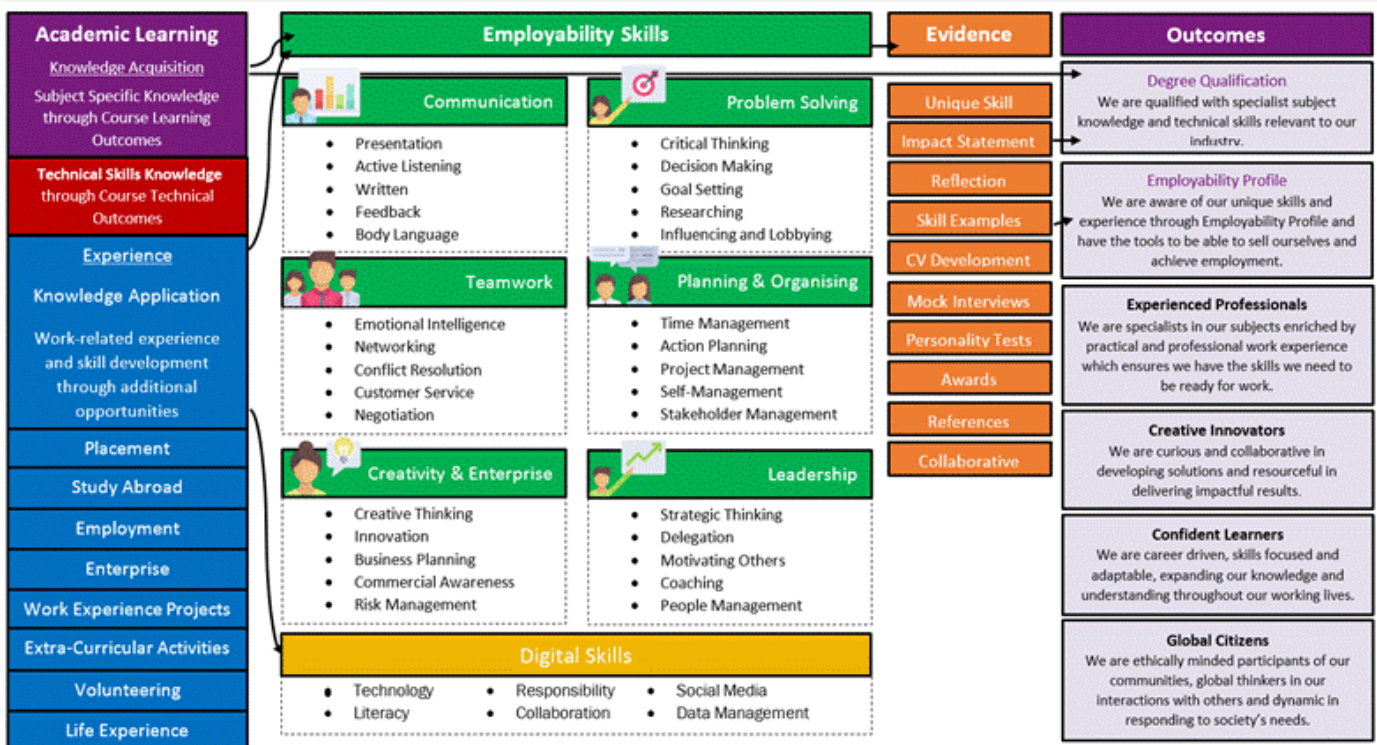


Figure 2: RGU Employability Framework

Role of Career Consultants

Significantly at RGU, Careers Consultants and Placement Officers work as one unified team, liaising with students, academics and employers to provide a consistent and coherent learning experience. Professional synergies are recognised in ‘cognate groups’ where employability staff are paired up with academic schools to offer a complete employability service. The RGU employability framework (see Figure 2) provides an overview of the comprehensive employability journey offered to our students. Significantly, RGU+ also opens up work-related learning opportunities to those studying courses historically lacking in work-based learning opportunities.

Support for Graduate Apprenticeships

Our industry boards and industry partnerships are an invaluable source of labour market information and work-based opportunities for us. Indeed, placement opportunities exist in all of our academic schools. In addition, these partnerships with industry have helped ensure RGU is one of the top three providers of Graduate Apprenticeships (GA) in Scotland, in areas such as course design, support model, mentorship and university/workplace partnerships. Key to a successful GA programme are industry partnerships, strong support infrastructures, and effective collaboration. To ensure a smooth and effective student experience we have created support teams for each GA programme, consisting of a GA student success coach, a course leader and a graduate mentor consultant. It is these kinds of developments that have helped us remain sector leading in this area of employability provision.

Student Employability Support – Study Abroad

Currently, students on the majority of our undergraduate degree courses have the opportunity to study abroad for one semester as a core part of their degree. Coordination of study abroad is incorporated into the CECE as it is recognised that mobility enhances students employability ([Universities UK 2022](#)). Students gain many skills from studying abroad, including the ability to learn in a multi-cultural environment, increased confidence, problem-solving and adaptability skills. On their return to RGU, the CECE works with students to articulate these skills to employers by means of a post-mobility employability workshop. Study abroad and community learning are an integral part of RGU+ and our broader aspiration of developing global citizenship.



ICRGU October 2016

Community Engagement and Learning

Student employability, the development of students' pre-professional identity and work readiness are high on the agenda of almost all HEIs. At RGU, we support these aspirations with a framework for authentic, community-based learning that develops our graduates social intelligence whilst adding value to the communities around our university. Our focus on community service learning ([Marchi and Girotti 2022](#)) embedded in the curriculum provides a platform for students to actively participate in the local economy. At the same time, our students are learning how to be responsive to social change, enhance their leadership skills, and develop the social empathy and engagement they will need in their post-graduation futures. It is through this form of learning that previously unrecognised employability skills are made explicit. A degree is no longer the only key to the door of employment. Instead, practical experience, adaptability, digital literacy, ethical engagement and a broader awareness of the world around them will help our graduates succeed in their future careers ([World Economic Forum 2022](#)).

Through this institutional focus on civic responsibility, and through the support of informed and engaged staff, RGU+ prepares students for transdisciplinary community placement opportunities. As an additional benefit, these placement opportunities often inform the development of students' Year 4 research projects. This preparation and experience provides the cognitive, communication, digital, reflective skills sought by employers, whilst supporting students to explicitly articulate the employability skills they will require for the evolving world of work.

Embedding community engagement and community learning across the University can be potentially disruptive and it is important to note that an inclusive and collaborative approach is essential. By building trust with community partners, a programme of `beyond the classroom learning` is embedded into the curriculum. A wide array of organisations have partnered with the University on these student outreach projects, from charities and local businesses, to our farming community, and the oil, gas and renewable industries to the Scottish Prison Service. Through these partnerships students learn with, from and about the community whilst adding value.

What RGU+ brings to the table

RGU+ is a new model designed to enable every student to capitalise on the full curricular and extra-curricular experience, both in the classroom and beyond. Its purpose is to celebrate and build on the teaching and learning of the University, by offering opportunities that develop students' global citizenship, employability skills, their spirit of innovation and their personal and professional values. At the same time, it aims to enhance their ability to articulate all of these skills. Alignment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the tenants of entrepreneurial and innovative mindsets are also built into RGU+ and sit alongside the community learning experiences offered to students. RGU+ ensures that these themes and skills are fully embedded and articulated within the curriculum and provides our students with a distinctive educational offering.

RGU+ AWARDS

The RGU Innovation Award Programme recognises the additionality offered through innovation and entrepreneurial thinking and is now embedded across the curriculum. Every student in RGU will participate in the first level of the award with opportunities built in to progress to levels 2 and 3. It is planned for the RGU+ Award to be offered to all students that participate in community learning, with the level of award gained matched to the breadth of experience gained and the level of reflection they offer as a result of the experience. The purpose of these awards is to ensure that every student takes part in an accredited learning experience where they are required to think about the future in terms of their ability to `make a difference` in the community

Some of this work is in its early stages of development, and careful and inclusive co-creation with academic staff, professional services and students is essential. A recent review of existing curriculum activity around sustainability and innovation suggests that we are doing well in these areas but also suggests ways that we can further enhance this provision.

Global citizenship is the aspiration of every university – the creation of graduates who have an informed world view (OXFAM 2022). However, this world view cannot be achieved entirely through classroom-based pedagogy. Beyond the classroom learning is essential and volunteering, work-based learning, study abroad and community engagement activities are all central to and credit-bearing within the RGU+ curriculum. This RGU+ curriculum is based firmly on a values-based practice philosophy and recognises that focusing on what matters to the community aids student engagement and development. Our curriculum focuses on enhancing the student experience whilst placing equal value on adding value to the community. We believe this approach enriches our students employability skills at the same time as aiding the communities in which we live and work.

Group1 Law Fair



ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Student Employability Support - RGU Leaver Survey

RGU has for many years conducted an employability outcomes survey, called the RGU Leaver Survey. Despite changes in the sector and the introduction of HESA's Graduate Outcomes survey, RGU continues to run the RGU Leaver Survey and this is a crucial source of labour market information for us. The RGU Leaver Survey was designed to ensure comparatively early destination data was available to provide insights and analysis for the formal university course appraisal process (achieved through Tableau data visualisation dashboards). The survey also provides an opportunity for positive interaction with our graduates through the CECE department.

Should a graduate indicate they have either not found work or their desired next step, careers advice and guidance is provided through personalised in-person or online support. The RGU Leavers Survey is also utilised for the internal analysis of student outcomes, the targeting of information, advice and guidance to leavers, and also for updating of the contact details we supply to HESA.

The survey also provides forewarning of HESA's Graduate Outcomes national employability survey. This applies especially to courses with small cohorts, which, with a low Graduate Outcomes response rate, would likely have no statistically valid information. This is especially important for those accredited courses which require data relating to employment for accreditation and funding purposes. Determining a full destination picture is a crucial part of the feedback loop for our employability service, providing labour market insights that assess our impact on the local and national economy. In relation to RGU+ the leaver survey will provide early indication of areas where student engagement with additionality addressed by RGU+ has had a positive impact on success rates. It allows us to identify areas where student employability may not be as strong as we hoped, therefore allowing us to strengthen the focus of RGU+ contextualised to the specific needs of course areas and students.



KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

As with many HEIs the University has Key Performance Indicators relating to the student experience that provide a stark evaluation of success and this project aligns with three of these KPIs: namely, student success, student employability and student satisfaction. However, it is not just data that we use to analyse and evaluate the success of the project. Formal and informal communication with employers and students provide us with valuable insight to the types of graduates we are producing, the skills, knowledge, and competence they exhibit and how they make a difference in the world. Students can clearly indicate what their experience of being prepared for work was like and what areas of strength or weaknesses need to be further developed or addressed. Student voice questionnaires, Institutional Led Reviews (both internal and external), industrial boards, student staff liaison committees are all used within RGU to measure our impact on student employability.

REFLECTION & CONCLUSION

To date, a broad consultation with all stakeholders has taken place, early framework models have been shared across the University, new working groups have been established and a whole university approach to co-design and contextualising RGU+ across every school is being taken. During 2022/23, we also conducted a mapping exercise of United Nation Sustainability Goals, and innovation and community engagement activities, and created awards to recognise and reward this activity. In 2023/24, will focus on establishing more widespread curricular changes aimed at integrating RGU+ credit-bearing opportunities. By academic session 2024/25, RGU+ will be fully embedded in the curriculum.

Inclusion, collaboration and a shared approach to development has brought RGU+ to the forefront of the minds of the academic teams who are contextualising the pillars of the project within their areas. The constructive disruption being led by RGU+ is proving to be a successful process in opening up new opportunities for students to participate in learning that will provide them with robust and future-proofed skills for employment. These opportunities draw upon the core attributes of community learning and sustainability with an innovative mindset, which we aim to instil within our graduates. The employer partnerships, vocational learning, and our industry informed programmes have always been key to the success of RGU in terms of employability. RGU+ builds on these solid foundations by embedding a wider set of employability skills alongside students degree studies. RGU+ is now widely recognised within the University as a unique offering that will ensure we remain sector leading in terms of employability and it is anticipated that this success will be reflected in our future metrics of student outcomes. However, it is imperative that we continue to expand the networks and opportunities that are available to our students and ensure that our curriculum remains contemporary and aligned with employers needs. To do this we need to approach RGU+ with a lens of continuous improvement.

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- Universities UK <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/topics/international/gone-international-mobile-students-and>
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#)
- World Economic Forum [WEF Future of Jobs 2020.pdf \(weforum.org\)](#)