

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award: A "Simply Brilliant" Program

by Abner Lico

While speaking to Gold Award Achievers in Toronto in 2002, Tony Comper, past President and Chief Executive Officer of the BMO Financial Group, referred to the Duke of Edinburgh's (DofE) Award as a program "so brilliantly simple, it's simply brilliant." This ironic statement has echoed in the Ontario division of the DofE Award ever since.

It was more than the mere minimalism of this message that struck a chord; it was the way it articulated a perceptive plainness from someone with a cursory view of the program. The expression was illuminating as there can be a tendency to overanalyze and intellectualize the DofE Award making its explanation anything but simple.

Certainly the aim the DofE Award is simple: Engage young people to take part in four activities for a prescribed period of time. When complete, recognize participants with an award. There is no competition; participants set their own goals based on their own abilities and everyone who finishes achieves — this is the simple part.

Upon closer examination, however, the DofE Award becomes more complex. Delving below the surface, one discovers that inherent in the award is a whole educative, self-awareness, challenge program. Moreover, the flexibility of the Award results in a personalized approach that caters to the needs of every individual and is thus custom-made for each participant.

The structure of the program comprises four challenge components: physical fitness, skill development, community service and outdoor adventure. Each component fosters self-directed learning and personal development through a participant's ability to demonstrate leadership, civic responsibility, personal achievement, relationship building (through a

mentor/mentee association), teamwork, self-reliance, ecological/environmental acuity, social/global awareness, mental aptitude, physical well-being, a spirit/sense of adventure, time management, reflection and goal setting.

History: Kurt Hahn and Outward Bound

The DofE Award was founded in 1956 by HRH Prince Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh. Prior to the emergence of the program that now bears this name, there were various "tributaries flowing simultaneously . . ." such as the County Badge Scheme, the German Sports Badge, Outward Bound, the British Merchant Navy and Gordonstoun, that came together ". . . to an eventual confluence" as the DofE Award Programme (Peyton-Jones, 1991, p. 3).

One individual that influenced this coming together was Kurt Hahn. Hahn believed "young people must be given the opportunity of self-discovery and that success in the sphere of one's weaknesses is often as great a source of satisfaction as triumph in the sphere of one's talents" (Peyton-Jones, 1991, p. 4). And he agreed with Sir Jack Longland's philosophy that a program of demanding extra circular activities was needed to address four social declines: physical fitness, initiative, care/skill and compassion. Two of Hahn's creations — the Moray Badge (a later version of which became the DofE Award) and Outward Bound — addressed his beliefs and aimed to satisfy four common goals:

1. Perform to standards in a range of athletic events.
2. Undertake expeditions by sea or land.
3. Carry through successfully some long-term project of skill, craftsmanship or research.
4. Demonstrate some kind of public service (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988, p. 4).

Participant Recognition: Granting the DofE Award

Like many adventure-based and experiential programs the DofE Award endeavours to promote a holistic paradigm that, along with school education, enhances the development of the complete individual (Schoel et al., 1988). It is not an organization, but rather a program, in which young people aged 14 to 25 choose to take part on their own time and at their own pace.

The answer to the oft-asked question, “Where is the program?” is “wherever you want it to be.” The DofE in Ontario provides the framework around which participants can organize their activities and offers some arms’ length support, but participants themselves are encouraged to discover the resources and activities within their communities that align with the expectations of the program. Often the participant’s high school serves as the starting block; later other venues may be added, such as religious and community centres that offer activities that fit the award. Parents, teachers and neighbours may become mentors to guide participants through the program. The tangible end product is a certificate recognized in over 120 countries around the world.

The hope is that the DofE Award carries enough prestige in the mind of the participant (and other stakeholders, including parents, teachers, registrars, prospective employers, and so on) to motivate a young person to participate, complete and achieve the award. As an added windfall, participants receive their Gold Award directly from either HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, HRH The Earl of Wessex or, in some cases, the Governor General of Canada.

The Incentive: Why Participate?

By the end of 2007 there were close to 12,000 participants active in the DofE Awards throughout Ontario. Most participants are high-school aged. Anecdotal evidence suggests students embark on the program because they believe it will bolster their application to post-secondary educational institutions and for

scholarships. This belief is accurate and one that is used when promoting the DofE Award among high school students. The Ontario division has written statements from university registrars recommending that students get experience outside the traditional classroom, confirming that “universities look to more than just marks when selecting students” and suggesting to students that the DofE Award is “a great way to demonstrate your commitment to community and your own personal achievements” Further, the Award is also proving to be valuable for older youth — those in their 20s and attending university. These participants are discovering the strength of the Award when applying and interviewing for employment.

The factors that motivate participants to start the Award are different from those that encourage them to complete it. Years of feedback from Gold Award achievers has convincingly established that participating in the program has a transformative effect. Careers have been chosen based on activities; life-long friendships have been cultivated; experiences have been had that never would have occurred if not for the motivation of completing the Award. An overwhelming majority of participants identify the outdoor adventure component as the greatest challenge and the one with the most lasting and positive effects.

The true measure of a quality program is not the number of people who begin it, but, in the words of past Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, Hilary Weston, the number who “show a stick-to-it-ness” and finish.

Since the DofE Award is customized by each participant, and thus caters to their specific needs, there are literally thousands of different reasons young people take part.

From Exclusive to Inclusive

A substantive effort has been made in the past dozen years to bring the DofE Awards to places it wouldn’t instinctively find its way. It is easy to comprehend how the Award fits

seamlessly into organizations such as Scouts, Guides and Cadets (Army, Navy or Air), or even independent schools, as it augments and adds value to their existing programs. In the past the program was considered, and to some extent still is, an exclusive program for elite and/or affluent youth. This view, along with enduring “name-relevance,” continues to confront the Award but is proving to be less of an issue as time goes on. The profile of the Award in Ontario has changed from 4,000 participants in 1995 to almost 12,000 participants today.

Today there is a vast representation from high schools and from broad geographical regions. To a lesser quantitative extent, but with a significant qualitative impact, there has been growth in the participation of many marginalized groups such as Aboriginal Youth, youth with intellectual and physical disabilities, youth from at-risk environments, incarcerated youth and youth living in isolated communities.

Conclusion: Brilliantly Simple?

Through outreach and promotion thousands of students are made aware annually of the DofE Award in Ontario. We get many reactions from young people when they hear what is needed to obtain the Award. Overall most are pleasantly surprised with the minimum standards, the long duration to complete the challenges (participants have until their 25th birthday to log all their activities), the non-competitive nature, the flexibility for choosing activities and that they are either currently involved in related activities or have the resources to accomplish them. Comments such as “that sounds simple” are often heard.

Each participant is on a unique journey so it is impossible to make generalizations about participants’ experiences. While some participants set the bar high, it is probably safe to say that the Award can be made easily attainable when broken into its component parts and levels. The more meaningful measure of the achievement is that of

Educators, students, leaders: If you are interested in promoting the Award at your school or starting a group, please contact us at The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award – Ontario, 14 Adelaide Street West, Suite 201, Toronto, Ontario, M5H 1L6, Phone: 416-203-2282, Fax: 416-203-0676, Toll Free: 1-800-929-3853 or e-mail: duke@dukeofed.org.

High schools and post-secondary institutions are fabulous venues in which to achieve many of the components of the Award through clubs and extracurricular activities. The work students do to fulfill the 40-hour mandatory community service requirement for graduation can also be applied to the community service component in the Award. To read more about the Award visit our website at www.dukeofed.org/on or give us a call.

participants reflecting on their journey and seeing the whole of the work that went into their completing the program. There is a good chance that at this point, standing at the zenith of experiential education, award achievers personally realize one maxim above all others: “There is more in you than you think.”

Is the DofE Award program brilliantly simple? Ask a Gold Award achiever. There is no question, though, that it is simply brilliant.

References

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