

# WHAT IMPACT HAS A BESPOKE SYSTEM OF HOLISTIC EDUCATION (THE HARTLAND DIPLOMA) ON IMPROVING SIXTH FORM OUTCOMES AND UNIVERSITY DESTINATIONS?

**EOGHAN HEFFERNAN**

Hartland International School  
ehaffernan@hartlandinternational.com



© 2025 Eoghan Heffernan, Hartland International School and the Centre for Education Action Research (CEAR). All rights reserved.

This research paper is protected by copyright law. Unauthorized reproduction, distribution, or use of any part of this paper in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author and CEAR is strictly prohibited.

The content within this paper is provided for educational and research purposes only. Any references, quotations, or excerpts used must include appropriate citations and attribution to the original author and CEAR. For permissions or licensing inquiries, please contact ehaffernan@hartlandinternational.com or sfernandes@disdubai.ae.

## Introduction

Holistic education “focuses on “wholeness” and it attempts to avoid excluding any significant aspects of the human experience.” (Mahmoudi et al., 2012) In addition, Noddings (2005) argues that education which nurtures the whole child is more likely to develop resilient, engaged and effective learners. Whilst these ideas are largely unchallenged and actively supported throughout primary and secondary settings, this action research project aims to provide a more focused insight into the effects of a bespoke holistic education initiative, The Hartland Diploma, specifically on post-16 students. Sixth Form students today, in an international landscape, face increasingly intense academic pressure and highly competitive university entry standards. This research study aims to identify whether the implementation of a system of holistic education, with key foci on personal development and community service components, can have a positive impact on student motivation, improved academic performance and increase student success in competitive university admissions processes.

### Background of the Problem

The Hartland Diploma was introduced to ensure our sixth form student body were actively encouraged to lead by example, give back to the school community and further their personal development whilst doing so. The diverse, high-achieving student body at Hartland International School (HIS) prepare rigorously for A-Level examinations and international university applications; evidence by student alumni spread across the globe as far west as California and east as Australia. The Hartland Diploma was designed to ensure that alongside the strive for academic excellence, that a culture of holistic growth and development would also be embedded and further support students to develop a distinct personal narrative to enhance university applications. The Hartland Diploma is now in its third year and student numbers in the Sixth Form continue to grow, making this a good juncture to assess the barriers that continue to exist and identify areas for refinement and enhancement to continue to drive the effectiveness of the framework.

## Literature Review

A wide range of academic research documents the benefits of holistic education. Seligman (2011) argues that well-being and engagement are vital for success, especially in adolescent learners. The VESPA model which forms a key element of the Hartland Diploma is a trusted and well respected framework for improving student habits and motivation (Fanthorpe & Staunton, 2016). Furthermore, studies have shown that extra-curricular engagement as well as community service learning have strong positive correlations with academic attainment and successful university applications (Kuh, 2008).

However, there remains a lack of evidence evaluating the impact of bespoke, school-specific programs such as the Hartland Diploma, particularly those specific to post-16 education and the impact on A-Level results as well as university admissions. While, for example, Durlak et al. (2011) found a positive link between social-emotional learning programs and improved student outcomes, fewer studies assess the effect of such programs on both academic achievement and university admissions. This action research project seeks to address that gap.

## Methods

Action research allowed for a practical and flexible approach to exploring the impact of the Hartland Diploma within a school setting. This enabled the research to be context specific and explored through direct engagement with the students and the school environment.

This research sought to explore the following key questions:

- Does participation in the Hartland Diploma improve value-added A-Level outcomes?
- Does it increase access to top-tier universities and competitive courses?
- Does it positively influence student motivation, particularly at the start of Sixth Form?

## Methodology

This research followed as part of an implementation project to launch and successfully establish the Hartland Diploma as an integral part of sixth form life at Hartland. Therefore, research has been conducted across multiple cycles.

Two cohorts were used for comparison:

- Class of 2024: this student group have completed the Hartland Diploma in full and are enrolled in university, allowing for retrospective data to be assessed on both A-Level outcomes and university destinations and correlated against engagement with the diploma.
- Class of 2026: currently in Year 12 and at the beginning of the Hartland Diploma cycle, allowing the opportunity to assess the impact of the diploma award on student motivation and engagement.

Following the launch of the Hartland Diploma, research has focussed on data collection (including participation levels), ongoing monitoring, students' surveys and reflections, as well as detailed analysis of data to draw conclusions.

## Participants

As identified above, two cohorts were used as the baseline samples to assess the different research questions.

The Class of 2024 was a cohort of 32 students, whilst the Class of 2026 has a currently active participating group of 65 students.

## Data Collection

Quantitative data included:

- Hartland Diploma tracking document, where credits are awarded to students for elements of the diploma they have completed.
- A-Level grades and value-added scores.
- University destination data (e.g., offers and acceptances).

Qualitative data included:

- Student reflections and logs.
- Anonymous surveys capturing motivation, understanding of the diploma, and perceptions of impact.

## Data Analysis

As noted earlier, two sample groups were used to evaluate the impact of the diploma structure. The outcomes for the Class of 2024 were utilised to assess the impact on A-Level outcomes and university admissions data. Whilst the Class of 2026, whose outcomes are as yet unknown, provided insights into the impact of Hartland Diploma on student motivation to engage in the broader school community and develop further skills beyond the classroom (see **Figure 3**).

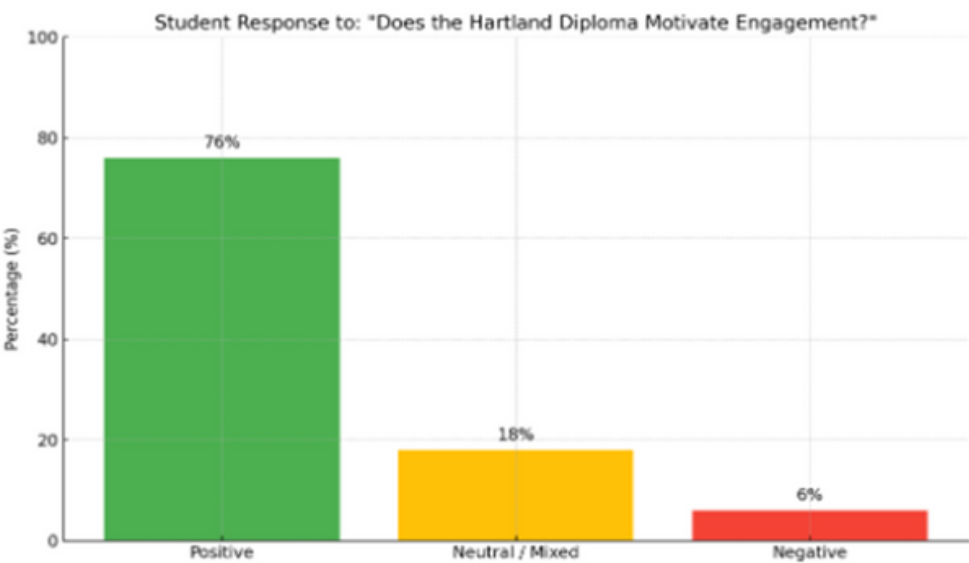
**Figure 3**  
**Percentage of Year 12 (Class of 2026 cohort) engaging with elements of the Hartland diploma by Term 2**

Graduating Class of 2024 Key Data:	
% of cohort engaging with	95%
A-Level Grades (D or above)	98.73%
First Choice University	100%
A-Level grades of students not	75% grade E or below
<u><b>Notable Success</b></u>	<b>Gold Award winner received</b>

**Figure 1**  
**Sample section of Hartland Diploma tracker document**

		Personal enrichment (Maximum of 20 credits)														PE total (20)	Weighted?
Surname	Forename	IP1 Peer mentor	IP2 Academic mentor	IP3 Enrichment provider	IP4 Charity committee	IP5 Student executive team	IP6 Volunteering	IP7 Work experience placement	IP8 Tech Organisation / Speaker	IP9 Project Committee	IP10 Concert performance	IP11 Craft member school production	IP12 EPQ	IP13 Nagai Trip	IP14 Trepador (class of 2025)	IP14 Other	
Student	XYZ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	infinite	1	20

**Figure 2**  
**Class of 2026 responses to whether the Hartland Diploma is a motivational tool to engage with extra-curricular, super-curricular and contributions to the school community, as well as to enhance and develop personal skills.**



**Figure 3**  
**Percentage of Year 12 (Class of 2026 cohort) engaging with elements of the Hartland diploma by Term 2**

How many enrichment activities have you engaged in during Year 12? (teams, school shows, TedX, MUN, societies, clubs, leadership roles, charity etc etc)



**Results**

Findings suggest a positive correlation between diploma engagement and outcomes. While overall value add on a student-by-student basis demonstrated some mixed results, what is evident is the clear disparity in grades for participants in the diploma versus non-participants, as highlighted in the above table. The stark contrast in grades at a D or better for the entire cohort (see **Table 1**) suggests that engagement with the Hartland Diploma can positively impact students A-Level grades. Similarly, students not engaging in the elements of the Hartland Diploma (VESPA, enrichment or community service and the Duke of Edinburgh), suffered significantly less satisfactory outcomes in A-Level grades, with 75% of these students grades at an E or below.

Furthermore, to the question of university outcomes, all diploma participants from the Class of 2024 who applied to universities, secured their first-choice university. The most compelling support for engaging with the diploma program is that of a student with CCB grades earning a full scholarship to a top US institution. This student’s strong engagement with the enrichment aspect of the Hartland Diploma is evidenced in **Figure 1**. This would appear to provide a strong demonstration that holistic profiles can stand out.

Additionally, 95% of students in the class of 2024 engaged to some meaningful extent with the Hartland Diploma, and 100% of those students who applied to universities, gained access to their 1<sup>st</sup> choice university. In this cohort, those top tier Universities included: Stanford, UCL, McMaster, University of Bath, and University of San Francisco. One student who engaged fully with the Diploma also received an offer from Cambridge.

Finally, quantitative data from the class of 2026 indicates that for the majority (94% in **Figure 2**), the existence of the Hartland Diploma increases motivation to engage in a holistic education and contribute to the whole school community.

**Discussion and Reflections**

The research appears to demonstrate that a bespoke or specific system of holistic education in a sixth form setting can contribute meaningfully to student development, particularly in respect of shaping well-rounded university applicants. The study also provided valuable insights into the students perception of the diploma framework and enabled an evaluation of the potential changes to the framework moving forward.

While the question of A-Level grade improvements are not uniformly consistent, there is a clear indication that students actively disengaging with the diploma's core principals suffered less satisfactory grades. This will be further assessed as additional cohorts complete the Hartland Diploma and A-Level grades are accordingly analysed.

Additionally, from the initial two cohorts observed, tracked and monitored, university access and student motivation metrics are promising. Student reflections support the idea that the diploma builds resilience, leadership, and self-awareness, traits valued by top universities (Universities UK, 2021). Outstanding university offers and placements achieved by Hartland students support the importance of the Hartland Diploma in creating a holistic system of education which can be tracked and monitored to enhance our students university applications.

This research has, therefore, identified that the Hartland Diploma framework has a tangible impact beyond the classroom in the development of the whole individual as well positive impacts on grades and university admissions.

However, qualitative feedback suggests that clearer communication and an earlier established cultural embedding of the diploma's value are needed (according to 50% of students surveyed). Reflecting upon the feedback received, changes are required in terms of the launch and timeframes for completion of the Hartland Diploma with incoming Year 12 cohorts. It is estimated that the model will be fully imbedded as an integral part of sixth form life and culture at Hartland International School by the completion time for the Class of 2028. Once sufficiently established in the Sixth Form, a more detailed evaluation of its impacts will again be completed. Additionally, a key focus moving forward is to determine how best to measure impact in a more tangible way. Future cycles of research will focus on refining delivery and improved methods of gathering and analysing data, which will be particularly important as cohort numbers, and hence participant numbers, increase.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research study. A limited number of student cohorts have engaged with the Hartland Diploma since its introduction and hence, A-Level attainment and university destinations are being measured against one graduating cohort only. Further analysis of future graduating classes will be required to support the findings reached (beginning with the Class of 2025 this August). Additionally, qualitative research conducted focussed on the responses of just 25 students (approx. 40% of the class of 2026 cohort). The study, therefore, may lack the depth of statistical data required to draw meaningful, long-term conclusions.

## Conclusion

The effect of a bespoke designed, holistic system of education for sixth form students was explored thoroughly. The data analysed and the responses from students overall suggest evidence of a hugely positive impact on outcomes, university destinations and motivation for post-16 students. This research has offered practical and evidence-based insights into the positive impact of such a framework, whilst acknowledging that it will benefit from further cycles of research and reflection moving forward.

Based on this research, a continued implementation of the Hartland Diploma will be beneficial to sixth form students at Hartland International School, however, some adaptations will be required that will be heavily influenced by student voice to encourage further buy-in, whilst also, there is an ongoing need to raise the profile of the Hartland Diploma through clarity of purpose and demonstration of impact. Finally, once embedded successfully in the sixth form

setting, it is worth exploring whether the model could benefit from further integration into Key Stage 4 to instil values and skills development earlier. This would likely require adaptations to the existing framework in order to ensure suitability to a younger cohort of students.

## References

- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., et al. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.
- Fanthorpe, R., & Staunton, T. (2016). *The VESPA mindset: A student's guide to academic success*. Crown House Publishing.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. AAC&U.
- Mahmoudi, S., Jafari, E., Nasrabadi, H. A., & Liaghatdar, M. J. (2012). Holistic education: An approach for 21st century. *International Education Studies*, 5(3), 178–186. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=E71066819> (Accessed: 1 June 2025).
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- Universities UK. (2021). *Skills for jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth*. Department for Education.