University of Essex

Smart Guide on PDP
What is this booklet about?

This booklet has been put together by the Learning and Teaching Unit to provide staff with some quick information and ideas about personal development planning (PDP).

Why PDP in particular?

The aim of personal development planning (PDP) is to enable students to take a proactive approach to their learning and to assist them in recognising the value of self-awareness and self-reliance in achieving both academic and career success. A university education has always encouraged students to become independent critical thinkers, to question, to respond to feedback, to plan and to reflect. As students increasingly face competing pressures and priorities these qualities are perhaps even more important to emphasise.

With so much going on it is easy for students to lose sight of the bigger picture; to become solely results driven and to view their academic learning in isolation from their self and career development. Effective PDP can complement and support academic success, helping our students to make sense of their learning experiences and equipping them with the necessary skills and qualities to go forward confidently to the next stage of their lives.

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Seeing the words ‘personal development planning’ (PDP) used to strike fear into the hearts of many students, and academics for that matter. For students PDP was often perceived as a burden and something that got in the way of their studies. I’m glad to say that this is now becoming a thing of the past with many institutions putting the ‘personal’ back into PDP and recognising the importance of the broader student experience.

PDP is an opportunity for reflecting on what has been achieved, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and highlighting what skills need to be developed. It helps students to find direction and articulate what they have learned during their time at university whether as a result of their academic studies or through their participation in volunteering, sports clubs and societies. Even if students leave university not knowing exactly what career path they wish to follow, those that have engaged with PDP should at least have a good understanding of what they have to offer any prospective employers.

The recruitment of the SU Trainers to support their peers with PDP and the recent launch of myLife are both exciting new initiatives at the University. I am really pleased to be able to take an active role in supporting student development during this time.

“...the focus upon ‘the ability to be self-directed’ [is] one of the most frequently mentioned requirements of jobs, and one of the aspects of undergraduate education and experience most often sought by employers and drawn upon on a day to day basis. Ward, in PDP and Employability (2006)”
The concept of personal development planning (PDP) has gained prominence in Higher Education following the Dearing Report (1997) where it was recommended that all UK universities implement a two part Progress File for students consisting of both a transcript and a component for recording and reflecting on personal development.

According to the QAA guidelines, personal development planning is “… a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development” (QAA Guidelines for HE progress files 2001).

The University’s approach to PDP is to continue to build on existing good practice while at the same time identifying new and creative ways to engage students. Our aim is to promote PDP as a flexible, holistic process that encourages students to get the most from all the learning opportunities they have available to them throughout the duration of their studies.

PDP can assist students in:

- improving their confidence in understanding and planning their learning
- developing the ability to set short, medium and long-term goals
- gaining a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses
- making connections between the different areas of the student experience (academic, vocational, social)

For staff and the institution the benefits of PDP include:

- the ability to promote a proactive approach to learning among students
- relating subject knowledge and skills more closely to future study and employment
- encouraging an awareness of student progress and targeting support effectively

“I think [PDP] is useful for me as it gives me direction and it makes me more effective”. Postgraduate Student, Department of Law
Approaches to PDP

There are many ways to integrate PDP in the curriculum which allow for the differences between courses to be taken into consideration.

Janet Strivens (2005) has identified three models that are commonly used by university departments for implementing PDP:

- **Embedded in the curriculum** – integrating PDP into discipline-based learning or as part of a core generic skills module.

- **External to the formal curriculum** – using PDP as a mechanism for informing dialogue between students and staff in personal tutorials; as part of the student induction process; and when students are planning module choice or progression to the next level of study.

- **Mixed economy** – blending a combination of the above two models.

PDP is most effective when its aims and purposes are clearly stated and where students are able to see its relevance to both themselves and the curriculum. Opportunities for students to engage in the process already exist in many departments. The challenge is to make the connection between PDP and other forms of learning more explicit.

PDP is evident in all of the examples below:

- Projects and Dissertation writing
- Enquiry-based learning
- Formative assessment
- Professional skills modules
- Group work
- Peer review
- Presentations
- Portfolio-based assessment
- Research methods modules
- Reflective journals/essays
- The use of feedback
- Work-based learning, placements, work experience
- Career management modules

“Learning does not sit in isolation from context – like a subject, a problem, an opportunity, a challenge or a test. Neither is it isolated from motivation – need, desire, interest or compulsion. PDP gathers meaning when it is enacted within a particular context which includes the motivational forces”. Jackson (2006)
Linking PDP to the world of work

Many of the key skills students are encouraged to develop at university are also similar to those sought after by graduate employers. In addition to commercial awareness and customer focus, employers list the following as essential: flexibility and adaptability; self-management and drive; analytical ability and decision making; interpersonal and communication skills; team-working; organisational skills; initiative and creativity; determination, and leadership.

Making a direct link between PDP and employment is another way to engage students and emphasise the value of the process and its long-term benefits.

At the University of Leeds, Pauline Kneale has developed a series of activities looking at the role of PDP in the workplace.

Interviews with real employees from three different sectors form the basis for the activities. The interviews give details from the employee’s perspective of the role of PDP within each of the case study organisations. Students are asked to discuss what insights they have gained from the interviews and to reflect on how these fit in with their own ideas of what PDP is. They are also asked to consider how these insights might be used by their university to develop PDP and how as individuals they might use what they’ve learned to improve their own PDP. Other activities included creating a PDP model for a fictional small business and interviewing other students, friends and family members who were using PDP processes at work.

Students developed their own questions and explored with the interviewees their experience of planning and reflection in relation to their own workplace development.

The activities provided students with the opportunity to look at PDP in a different context and for some of the students it was the first time that they had connected personal development with employment and ‘real life’.

In her evaluation Kneale found that students fell into two distinct groups and that attitudes towards the sessions related directly to individuals’ own experience of PDP. The first group who she calls ‘postponers’, were shown to have had little exposure to work or PDP and considered the process to be something that they didn’t need to worry about until they got a job in the future. The second group, who were more enthusiastic about PDP and could see its long-term benefits, tended to also be those who had been exposed to the process in a work setting. Kneale comments that overall, even the most reluctant of the students took something positive away from the sessions and felt more inclined to look at PDP in a positive light.

The full article can be read in Academy Exchange, Issue 6, Summer 2007
www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/publications/exchange
This study conducted by Dominic Micklewright in the Department of Biological Sciences investigated student perspectives on PDP. The purpose was to gain greater insight into factors likely to improve participation in PDP, without recourse to assessment or other incentives, so that learning environments and support arrangements might be optimised.

An initial sample of students was interviewed. The data were used to construct a questionnaire (PDP-Q) based on the ‘Theory of Planned Behaviour’ (TPB) social-cognitive model. The PDP-Q was then tested and retested for validity and reliability as a method of predicting the intentions and likely engagement of individual students.

The study found that the PDP-Q is reliable and can be used to support students throughout the PDP process in a number of important ways such as identifying individual PDP needs, providing tailored individual PDP support, monitoring change and re-evaluating individual needs.

The PDP-Q is a useful source of information that can be used to profile students and tailor PDP support. The purpose of using the PDP-Q in this way is to adopt a targeted approach to promoting a favourable shift among students in their beliefs, attitudes and intentions towards PDP which will hopefully result in increased levels of PDP participation.

In most further or higher educational institutions PDP is usually a voluntary activity that is not summatively assessed and, despite the fairly convincing learning and employment benefits of PDP, students often fail to engage in the process. One of the challenges is to be able to recognise, at the earliest opportunity, the variety of PDP needs within a student intake and to identify those individuals who are least likely to engage in PDP and will therefore need the most support, either at an individual level or at a group level based upon shared PDP needs.

The project outcomes have so far been disseminated through several conference presentations and publications through both the Higher Education Academy and the Centre for Recording Achievement. Informal feedback from other PDP practitioners has been positive, including numerous expressions of interest in using the PDP-Q at other institutions. One possibility is to set up a PDP-Q database where FE and HE institutions across the UK can incorporate the PDP-Q into their programme and contribute their results to the study. Potentially this could lead to a huge database of PDP-Q and PDP behavioural data from a variety of contexts which would make a significant contribution to the pool of PDP evidence.
Run a key skills day

The Department of Mathematical Sciences holds a key skills day as part of a first year introductory course. The purpose of the day is to help students to recognise the key skills that they are gaining through their degree and to place these skills in a business context. The day consists of a number of exercises based on a business scenario and includes input from an external speaker in the financial sector. Students practice skills in group work, problem solving and presentation. In addition the students complete a reflective questionnaire evaluating their experience of the day.

Embed key skills in undergraduate teaching

All first-year undergraduates in the former Department of Computer Science take a compulsory course, ‘Professional Development and Practice’, in the autumn term. The main aims of the course are: to introduce students to the professional issues that underpin the subject, for both study and future careers; and, to provide opportunities/facilities for training in key skills.

The major intention of the key skills component is to raise awareness. Students are encouraged to use Personal Development Planning, visit the Key Skills Online website, and purchase either The Study Skills Handbook or Skills for Success by Stella Cottrell.

After the autumn term, students are well-equipped to become self-regulated and independent learners who understand the importance of ongoing skills development. Because the course is accredited and assessed, the skills content is taken seriously.

Include elements of PDP in a group project

Teaching staff in the Department of Art History have embedded key skills and PDP into a new first year group project. Students work in small groups and carry out independent research which is then presented to a panel made up of both departmental and external assessors. Through the project the students gained confidence, undertook research, developed project management, team working, presentation and budgeting skills and also formed social alliances with their peers. Feedback indicated that the employment of key skills as part of the undergraduate provision improved student learning. Staff also learned that by demonstrating the ways in which key skills are embedded within the curriculum they were able to offer their students a more complete learning experience.

Collaborative work online

In the Department of Biological Sciences a lecturer has used a wiki within myLife to encourage collaborative learning and reflection. Students work in small groups and compile a resource that can later be shared among the whole class and subsequent
classes. In order to complete the coursework successfully students have to discuss and organise the tasks and evaluate together the information they gather. In addition students are required to reflect and evaluate their own and their team’s performance by completing a questionnaire.

- **Get students to keep a learning journal**

Teaching staff at Insearch have introduced learning journals as part of an academic skills module for first year students. Students are provided with a number of prompt questions relating to a specific area of academic skills development and are required to record their thoughts electronically using a dedicated page on the myLife system. Staff reported that the students were much more open and their comments more in depth than they typically were in a classroom or one-to-one setting. The journal also provided students with a tool for reviewing their progress and highlighted the importance of advanced planning. For staff the process provided an insight into the learning issues affecting their students and in response led to some changes being made to the curriculum.

- **Using one-to-one meetings to support PDP**

The Department of Government is among a number of departments who are using PDP as a framework for one-to-one meetings with first year students. The meetings are aimed at encouraging students early in their courses, to take a proactive approach to their skills and career development and to recognise the transferable skills they are gaining through their degree. A series of open questions are asked relating to the student’s career plans, their current skills and the skill areas they wish to acquire. A summary of the student’s responses to the questions is agreed by both parties and a copy kept by the interviewer and the student.

- **Use the Students’ Union Trainers**

A group of 20 PDP Student Trainers have been recruited by the Students’ Union (SU) to support their peers with personal development planning, to provide training on the myLife system and to deliver a series of generic skills workshops. As well as these ‘open’ sessions the PDP Trainers are also available to work with departments directly.

Why not:

- invite a Trainer to an induction session to talk about their own experiences
- arrange for them to be involved in your study skills programme
- refer your students to the trainer-led workshops
- get them in to demonstrate the myLife system

To find out more contact Jenny Anslow, the SU Training Manager, janslow@essex.ac.uk.
myLife

myLife (https://mylife.essex.ac.uk) is the University’s ePortfolio system and is both a central resource where institutional or departmental PDP tasks, activities, documents and resources can be placed as well as an individual private space where students can record and monitor their academic, personal and career development.

As well as its use for collaborative work and reflection (see case studies pages 8 and 9) myLife can also be utilised to support learning communities and to share information.

An example of this is The Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies. The Centre makes extensive use of their myLife research community area to keep students in touch with the activities of the department through a PhD research forum, a discussion board and a regular newsletter. It has proven to be a very useful resource and one vital to maintaining the department’s contact with students it rarely sees on site.

Staff interested in using myLife as a learning resource should either contact Claire Revell csrevell@essex.ac.uk.

Training in using the myLife system will be provided by the Learning Technology Team, ltt@essex.ac.uk

Good Practice Database

The University has launched a new searchable online Good Practice Database (www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice). It is home to many ideas, innovations and examples of good practice across the University many of which are relevant to PDP. These are also available in PDF format as a series of five guides.

See the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) website, www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/resources.

PDP Discussion Group

If you would like to contribute to any discussions on PDP please email the PDP discussion group at PDP@essex.ac.uk
You may find the following articles and resources interesting.


Jackson, N. “Developing and valuing Student’s Creativity; a new role for Personal Development Planning”. *SCEPTrE Scholarly Paper 2: January 2006*

Madden, Tracey, *Supporting Student e-Portfolios, A Physical Sciences Practice Guide*, Higher Education Academy Physical Sciences Centre, September 2007


Higher Education Academy, *Personal development planning and employability*, Learning and Employability, Series Two, December 2006.
External Resources
A new project investigating the impact of PDP on the student experience is being funded by the Higher Education Academy:

- The National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio

Further information
- The Centre for Recording Achievement
  The CRA promotes good practice in PDP across sectors. The website includes case studies, a resource for PDP practitioners and current news and events.
  www.recordingachievement.org.uk
- The Higher Education Academy
  www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/pdp
- The Effective Learning Network
  An initiative set-up by the HE sector in Scotland to support institutions in implementing PDP.
  www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF
- The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)
  Supports and reports on innovations in ICT including ePortfolio developments
  www.jisc.ac.uk/

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs)
There are also a number of CETLs that focus on PDP, employability and enquiry based learning.

- The Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning, University of Manchester
  www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceebl/
- The Centre for Employability in the Humanities, University of Central Lancashire
  www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/cfe/ceth/
- The Centre for Career Management Skills, University of Reading,
  www.rdg.ac.uk/ccms/index.php
- The Bridges Experience, University of Bedfordshire
  www.beds.ac.uk/cetl

Contact details
For more information on anything in this booklet, please contact Claire Revell (csrevell@essex.ac.uk) in the Learning and Teaching Unit.