

Employability Skills and Personal Development Planning: A Resource for Academic Staff

The context: why do you need to know about employability skills and personal development planning?

Following recommendation 20 from the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education (the 'Dearing Report'), the government sought to introduce a policy that all HE Institutions offer the opportunity to develop a Progress File to every student. This would contain an institutional record of learning and achievement (Transcript) and the individual's personal record of learning, achievements, progress reviews and plans (Personal Development Record). See [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Guidelines%20for%20HE%20Progress%20Files%20(2001).pdf) 'Guidelines for HE Progress Files' (2001) for more information. The Guidelines have recently been updated (see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressfiles/guidelines/pdp/pdpguide.pdf> 'Personal development planning: guidance for institutional policy and practice in higher education'). The 2009 document builds upon the original document while recognising developments in the UK HE sector since 2001 and the changing context within which PDP practice operates today. The basic tenets of PDP are the same, however, and expressed as follows:

"PDP is a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process, open to all learners, in all HE provision settings, and at all levels.

Effective PDP improves the capacity of individuals to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning and to understand what and how they learn. PDP helps learners articulate their learning and the achievements and outcomes of HE more explicitly, and supports the concept that learning is a lifelong and life-wide activity."

Keeping a Personal Development Record (PDR) will help students to reflect on their learning experiences and build upon them - a process known as Personal Development Planning (PDP).

Through PDP students should be encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

- How well am I doing?
- What are my strengths?
- What are my goals?
- What could I do better?
- What academic support or skills do I need?
- What skills do I need to gain or develop further?
- What extra-curricular activities will help me towards my career goals?

Usefulness to academic staff and departments:

- Elements of the PDR can provide a useful tool for writing references.
- Engaging in PDP can provide focus for personal tutorials, helping students to identify gaps in their skills and find strategies for addressing these.
- 'PDP can have a positive effect on students attainment and approaches to learning', see Gough *et al* (2003). Students able to reflect on their learning are more likely to make a fuller contribution to their studies. They should be able to make more informed choices for optional modules.
- Evidence from the *Futuretrack Survey 2005*, Purcell *et al* (2006) shows that improving career prospects features high in students' reasons for going to university. The introduction of fees means more students entering HE courses will expect a degree to increase their chances of securing a graduate job. PDP helps students work on the skills that

attract employers and employability is one measure used for university league tables.

Your department may include PDP in tutorials, giving the tutor responsibility to explore relevant issues. Alternatively, your institution may have online PDP provision, which students are invited to access. If your students wish to undertake this reflective process and would like some professional input, please encourage them to visit the careers service. If your department doesn't currently focus on this area and you would like some advice on how to proceed, the careers service will also be able to offer assistance.

What are employability skills?

Employability skills - also known as competencies - are abilities, aptitudes and qualities developed in any context that can be applied to an occupation or career. Higher Education students might develop employability skills as a result of the teaching and learning process, from extra-curricular activities (eg volunteering or participating in a student society) or from work experience.

For many employers of new graduates, a good degree is an essential entry requirement. In order for graduates to remain competitive in today's labour market, they need to have additional skills to complement their academic achievement.

AGR, the collective voice of graduate recruiters, periodically publishes a survey identifying the qualities that are most lacking in new graduates. In the *Graduate Recruitment Survey 2007: Winter Review*, the following skills were found in short supply:

- 'softer' skills such as team-working, leadership and project management
- awareness of their chosen industry sector; commercial awareness and business/organisation understanding.

More than 70% of AGR members use competency-based selection methods and stipulate their requirements in recruitment literature. Graduates lacking these qualities, or evidence that they have them, will find it more difficult to secure graduate jobs. It is not only the world of graduate employment that demands these attributes. Doing a PhD and carving out a research career will also require the skills below. Even less obvious areas such as commercial awareness have a place when writing bids or collaborating with industry.

Some examples of skills and qualities sought by employers:

- adaptability/flexibility
- analytical ability
- business/organisation understanding
- commercial awareness
- initiative
- interpersonal sensitivity
- IT skills
- leadership qualities
- numerical skills
- planning and prioritising
- presentation skills
- project management
- self-awareness
- self-directed learning
- teamwork
- written communication

Ideally students will continue to develop these skills throughout university and their careers. PDP is designed to

prepare students to progress throughout their working lives and encourage them to embrace life-long learning. Many organisations and sectors now have continuing professional development programmes; these are becoming more important as job security is reduced and individuals have to become more responsible for managing their own futures.

HOW STUDENTS CAN GAIN EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Through academic study

Students need to become aware that the learning process they go through during higher education has value in other contexts. Writing a dissertation, for example, involves using the skills of research, analysis and time management, as well as overall planning and project management. Similarly, many students have to make presentations throughout their academic career - a valuable skill in many work situations. There might also be other contexts (for example, discussion and seminar/tutorial groups related to a student's course) which would provide opportunities for developing a range of employability skills, and these opportunities should be highlighted to students. You can help students to ensure that they are getting the maximum benefit from their studies by encouraging them to reflect on their performance and contribution and to work on areas of weakness.

Through work experience

Vacation work and industrial placements provide an ideal opportunity to develop useful skills. Language students on their year abroad should be encouraged to reflect upon employability skills developed or enhanced, eg showing initiative, demonstrating resilience, learning in depth about another culture. Students could be encouraged to try to identify which skills they'd like to develop and then choose an appropriate context in which to work. For example, a student who wants to develop commercial awareness could work in any business setting but could take the initiative to suggest improvements or consider why particular business decisions are made. Project management skills can be developed through high-level exposure on an industrial placement or something simpler such as reorganising the stockroom database for a small retailer. Communication is fundamental to most jobs, but a student who has had to deal with distressed people, work with a difficult team or persuade someone to take on their idea will have more to offer than someone with basic interpersonal skills.

During leisure time

Joining university clubs and societies is an excellent way for students to take on positions of responsibility and to develop personally. Many students have acquired lots of marketable skills by doing voluntary work, but don't always articulate this because of the incorrect assumption that voluntary work 'doesn't count'. Being involved in community groups and carrying out family responsibilities can also develop employability skills. Here are some examples of how leisure-time activities can boost employability:

- leadership qualities will be developed through being president of a university society
- organisational skills can be developed through bringing up a family while being a full-time student
- commercial awareness is improved through being treasurer of a local charity

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR STUDENTS

Tutorials and seminars

Tutorials can be used to encourage students to think about the process of learning as well as the learning itself. Varying the mode of learning is useful for developing a range of skills.

Encouraging students to engage in group exercises and make regular presentations can develop a range of skills and qualities, including the ability to:

- make an impact
- summarise information
- develop self-confidence
- think under pressure
- listen effectively
- work well in a team
- be assertive

It's also possible for students to develop sought-after skills such as commercial awareness by doing group exercises. For example, asking students to decide how to spend the budget for the university library would be one way to get them to think about the financial implications of decisions. After group exercises and presentations, ask the students to reflect on why the group did or didn't work well together and why the presentation went well or badly. This will help them to develop the skills of reflection and evaluation and also enable them to identify some of the keys to effective teamwork and presentation skills.

AVOIDING SKILLS CLICHÉS

Students need to present their employability skills to employers effectively. Simply listing skills on a CV or covering letter, or even in an interview, will not be particularly convincing. Employers are used to students quoting such skills but they may amount to nothing more than clichés unless they are specific and backed up with evidence. A statement along the lines of 'I possess excellent communication skills' is virtually meaningless. Much better to state: 'During my time working for Sales International, I developed strong communication skills. I had to make regular presentations to groups of 30 or more people and had to use my negotiating skills when trying to reach a deal with clients'. Encouraging students to record evidence of their skills as they develop experience will provide them with a portfolio of examples to draw upon when making job applications.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- <http://highereducation.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability/what-are-employability-skills/>. Employability skills as defined after extensive collaboration with business by the CBI.
- www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/ps/documents/practice_guides/ps0071_developing_employability_skills_aug_2004.pdf. The Learning & Teaching Support Network, part of the Higher Education Academy, document on Developing Employability Skills.
- www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/pdp contains information about PDP, along with PDP-related links and a resources database
- www.recordingachievement.org promotes awareness of recording achievement and action planning processes. It includes PDP case studies, evaluation guides, surveys and examples of implementing PDP
- www.rsc.org/Education/HEstudents/usr/index.asp The Royal Society of Chemistry's undergraduate skills record. Although created for chemistry students it is a useful workbook for any discipline, particularly if your institution does not already have its own PDR in place
- www.qaa.ac.uk The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education contains a full explanation of Progress Files.
- Gough DA, Kiwan D, Sutcliffe K, Simpson D, Houghton N (2003). A systematic map and synthesis review of the effectiveness of personal development planning for improving student learning. In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Available online at <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=309>
- Purcell K, Elias P and Behle H (2006) Futuretrack 2005: Higher education choices and future plans. A report on the findings from a survey of applicants for Higher Education who applied through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to study on full-time courses. See www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/glmf

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