7STEPS
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7 Steps to:
Engaging Students with Personal Development Planning

Overview

The requirement for universities to support students in their Personal Development Planning (PDP) was established in 2001 (QAA, 2001). Engaging in PDP helps students get the most out of their time at university - academically, personally, and in terms of their employability (Adenekan, 2010) by supporting students in their ability to plan, take action, monitor, and reflect on their time at university and the skills and knowledge gained (NCIHE, 1997; QAA, 2009). However, planning and reflection are not easy (e.g. Clegg and Bufton, 2008); nor is identifying what is most valuable about an experience; nor is articulating this in meaningful ways – ways that would make an employer take notice (QAA Scotland and Universities Scotland Joint Working Group, 2007, p2). This is why structured support and encouragement is worthwhile and necessary.

The main reason students cite for attending university is to improve their job prospects (Sodexo, 2016). Students who actively engage with PDP think about their future plans, are pro-active in taking action to develop, and get used to articulating what they have to offer. All of these aspects contribute to refined CVs, improved preparation for interviews, and better readiness for functioning in the workplace. PDP may also contribute to enhanced engagement in what their degree course has to offer. Given the significance of employability metrics in the standing of degree programmes (e.g. TEF), the pillar that PDP can offer other employability related activities in and beyond the curriculum, is of significance to any programme's employability strategy.

In the UK, the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) plays an important role in supporting staff in their PDP practice. They highlight that PDP is likely to be most effective when: it is embedded within taught programmes; undertaken regularly; supported and valued by staff; and supported by institutional structures and resources (such as e-portfolio) (Strivens and Ward, 2010). Under these conditions, PDP is more likely to be undertaken by learners. As a comprehensive starting point, the QAA Scotland (2011) provide a toolkit on PDP for staff and institutions that is especially useful in terms of auditing, planning, designing and evaluating PDP practice.

1. Establishing a structure

PDP works best if it is regularly incorporated into the curriculum through planned activities (QAA, 2009). There is no one way of doing this, but models either incorporate PDP activities within 1) personal/professional tutor schemes; 2) career planning activities/modules (e.g. Geography GGX2202, Hospitality and Tourism HTMP100); 3) academic/study skills provision (e.g. Law LAWGEAR1-3); or 4) incorporated into assessment / learning achievements (e.g. portfolios) (QAA Scotland, 2011, p17). PDP systems may combine elements of all or some of these. Further detail on PDP models and case studies are provided by Clegg and Bradley (2006), Gosling (2003) and the CRA. It is as important for staff as it is for students to have structure for PDP. Good practice is that in which everyone is aware of the process, opportunities for, and support for PDP. The NUS (2015) provides a useful Personal Development benchmarking tool for staff, to help evaluate their structure and provision.

2. Communicating and reinforcing the need for PDP

Sometimes PDP can get lost or relegated within the curriculum; PDP may go unrecognised or may get left out. Students benefit from knowing: what PDP is for, its benefits, what they can expect, what is coming up next, and the tools they can use to plan and record, i.e. it is helpful if they know the bigger picture, but that they are also supported in the individual steps. It is therefore important that information on PDP should be available and flagged to students in appropriate places. Students should be pointed to tools to support and link to PDP, whether this be the university e-portfolio (Pebblepad) and Plymouth Compass, or more specific tools designed and used at local level. Plymouth University exemplars are available on the PDP, Personal Tutoring and Employability TLS pages. The QAA (2009) recommend that PDP should be 'formally recorded and linked to assessment processes'. Therefore, where PDP activities take place within modules its importance may be emphasised through assessment. Some programmes make the completion of PDP a progression requirement.

3. PDP's role in getting off to a good start

When they first come to university, students have great enthusiasm for being here and for the subject they have chosen to study. PDP has a role to play in engaging students and capitalising on this early excitement and motivation. This is the time for questions such as: Why have they come? What do they want their degree to lead to? What are their academic goals? Outside of their course, what do they want to get involved with that university has to offer? By prompting development ideas through questioning and discussion, tutors can flag up opportunities and encourage students to get involved in extra curricula activities such as those available through the UPSU and catalogued in Plymouth Extra.

References

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4. Giving PDP a disciplinary focus

Clegg and Bradley (2006, p72) emphasise the importance of embedding PDP within 'disciplinary and professional traditions' (such as is common in Health and Education disciplines) and it is generally accepted that generic PDP models are not motivating for students or staff. Providing a disciplinary context helps complement students' academic development and their career intentions. In the early stages of their programme, students can be encouraged to reflect on what types of careers they think their degree leads to. Such conversations will surface interesting ambitions but possibly also misconceptions. Later in their course PDP activities might involve students identifying a discipline relevant job advert and developing a CV targeted at that position, or an internship or placement opportunity. Creating an action plan (templates can be found in PebblePad) using guided questions can help direct students to the next steps to achieve their targeted goal(s). Action plans that cover varying lengths of time can also be useful tools to help students analyse their personal motivations and foster a sense of achievement as goals are achieved. The university pages on PDP provide some excellent examples of how the discipline can be used to contextualise and motivate students in relation to their subject study and career goals ('Building a Professional Plan', 'Social Media for Scientists').

5. Reflection and action planning

Structuring and encouraging students to plan is a key element of what PDP is all about. But planning (and acting on these plans) is not straightforward. For example, people can find it very difficult to identify their weaknesses (e.g. they lack good quality work experience); they find it difficult identifying specific plans (e.g. they don't identify how to go about getting good quality work experience) and they find it difficult to identify achievable and realistic plans (e.g. they may plan to undertake an unrealistic amount of extra-curricular work at the expense of their degree attainment). Staff can play an important role in getting students to reflect on their position and where they want to get to, both from an academic achievement perspective, and a career related perspective (e.g. see the university pages on PDP – 'Plan B – Everyone needs one'. It is also useful to get students to use a self-analysis framework of which there are a number of different template options available in the e-portfolio.

6. Academic progression and success

PDP isn't all about employability. Getting students to reflect on their academic progress is equally important. Tutors can help students recognise what they need to do to achieve academic success – be this better grades, skills development, widening academic experiences etc. This can be achieved through a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). Greater student engagement in the process can be achieved if staff lead by example. Academic staff can create their own SWOT analysis and share it with students within their discipline. This not only provides direct relevance and talking points, but also enhanced buy-in from students. A SWOT analysis used in conjunction with the Plymouth Compass can help foster this continued dialogue around a student's degree programme. Used together, these tools can provide critical insight into student progression and development..

7. PDPs role in the transition to being a graduate

As students approach the final stages of their studies, this is when they should find that their previous and sustained engagement with their PDP really starts to play dividends. Whether leaving university and entering the workforce or going on to further study, they should now be used to reflecting on their progress and articulating their experience and skills. They should have a comprehensive record of achievement which can be used to select from when writing CVs and job applications. In planning and being proactive about their academic and employment development throughout their time at university, on leaving, students will see this reflected in a healthy looking Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). If you are looking for ideas on to how to give PDP an explicit employability focus then the QAA and Universities Scotland (2007, p10) provide extensive ideas for employability related PDP questions.