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Introduction to Personal Development Planning

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Introduction to Personal Development Planning

Grace Clifton

Academic Lead, Enhanced Employability and Career Progression

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Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2009) defines PDP as 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."*

The emphasis here is on PDP as a reflective and continual process for the benefit of the learner, supporting both learning and employability[1]. The underlying theory is often connected to interpretations of Kolb (1984), and Boud and Walker's (2002) work on active learning cycles and experiential learning in working and learning environments.

The learner activities involved in the PDP process generally include, but are not limited to:

•   identifying existing skills, strengths & experiences

•   identifying the goals & skills that they wish and/or need to develop

•   planning how to develop the skills

•   taking action to realise their plan

•   recording, reflecting on and evidencing their progress

•   reviewing how far they meet their plan before starting the cycle again.

Why is it important for OU students?

76% of Open University students are in employment on entry to the OU (Open University, 2017). Community of Practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998) offers a way of understanding this more complex lived experience of the part-time learner. Naturally, a part-time learner brings their home and personal experiences to HE study, as well as, for many, their experience of being in the world of work. In some programmes of study, a learner may be actively encouraged to bring together their Communities of Practice of work and study, for example through vocational and/or professional programmes such as Nursing.

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[1] For a full discussion of the meaning of the term 'employability' please refer to the Introduction to Employability, available on the Employability Hub

The key for part time HE is to bring these Communities of Practice together for all students and, in addition, to enhance the student experience further by making the most of the students' third, and final, community of practice, their home/personal life. PDP offers a vehicle for bringing together all areas of a student's life in order to "create learning opportunities which foster 'deep learning'" (Fuller and Unwin, 2003:412).

Stevenson and Clegg (2010) suggest that being able to envisage a future self helps people to articulate their goals and recording one's own narrative/personal story can be the start of this process.   There is a close association between reflecting on learning and PDP. PDP and reflective activities can make connections within and between modules that enrich student learning through making sense of the qualification as a whole and building transferable skills for use in other contexts. It is a way of helping students to make sense of their own sense of self, their beliefs and values and is a powerful tool in helping them to articulate their employability.

Why is it important for the OU?

Since 2001 a number of reviews and practice guides have been published, and whilst the current QAA position is less prescriptive about the terminology around PDP, the relationship between the students' reflective planning and goal setting process and the requirement placed upon universities to provide guidance and support for this process remains explicit. The QAA (2014) code of practice (B4) expects that:

> "Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential."

And the guidance goes on to explicitly discuss this in relation to academic, employability and career management skills.

We know that students choose to study with the OU for all sorts of reasons. 38% of students cite career and personal development equally as motivation for study, 16% cite employment reasons behind their decision to study and 17% cite personal development alone as being behind their decision to study. Of the students who consider career development to be important to them, 50% consider themselves to be career changers, 44% are career developers and 6% are career starters (Open University, 2015). PDP offers the institution a way of supporting students' individual aspirations and motivations for study, by helping them

to clarify their goals and become confident lifelong learners. Research (Beigel, 2005) also suggests that students who engage with PDP are more likely to progress in their studies.

In the four nations

The QAA code applies to all the UK nations, however QAA Scotland have undertaken some specific work to support PDP as part of the Enhancement Themes work across Scottish Universities, with PDP featuring prominently in the work around employability (2004-6) and Graduates for the 21st Century (2008-11). The QAA Scotland Toolkit (QAA Scotland, 2011) is of particular interest and has informed work across HEIs throughout the UK. The [Welsh Government policy statement on Higher Education](#) (2013) identifies the importance of PDP in relation to developing graduate employability and likewise, in Northern Ireland ['Graduating to Success. A higher education strategy for Northern Ireland'](#) (DELNI, 2012) locates responsibility for the personal development of students with higher education providers, industry and the individual students themselves.

What are the issues and questions?

PDP can sometimes be misunderstood and confused with other HE activities. For example, many institutions have introduced a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) which is an electronic document providing a broad record of student achievement during their period of study. In addition to an academic transcript, the HEAR provides evidence of verifiable activity including academic and extra-curricular work. In addition, colleagues can sometimes blur the boundaries between e-Portfolio and PDP, assuming that one equates to the other. It is important to understand that, although an e-Portfolio can provide the technology to support the collection of evidence which may help to build up a PDP, it is essentially only an empty box. A fully supported PDP pathway will help a student to fill that box.

The extent to which universities, through academic and student services support, should become involved in, and take responsibility for, students' wider life goals, for example, employability is a matter of ongoing debate. A critique has emerged about the individualisation and instrumental nature of PDP (Clegg 2004, Moir 2009). Briefly, the argument is that generic approaches and the individualisation of responsibility for career trajectories, economic and cultural capital leads to a lack of critical thinking about the wider political and economic context within which our lives take place.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

A key issue in this work has been the difficulty of engaging students in undertaking formal PDP activities. Students engage best where they see the relevance and benefits of PDP at an early stage and teaching and learning about PDP needs to engage with the relevance to students in the context of their studies. Clegg and Bradley (2006) identify how a flexible approach to PDP across institutions can facilitate teaching staff in considering PDP in relation to disciplinary, professional and employability goals. Atlay (2009) identifies different ways in which PDP can be connected to the curriculum with a variety of models for institutional provision ranging from 'discrete' to 'extended'.

The main issue for teaching and learning remains the difficulty of supporting reflection and the pedagogy for PDP, which varies with discipline, context, cultural experience, life experience, etc. Set against a backdrop of part-time students who are particularly time poor, explaining the real benefit of carrying out a PDP and integrating this into the curriculum is essential if these part-time students are to engage with PDP at anything other than a superficial level (Little, 2005:14). Essentially any pedagogy for PDP relies on reflection (on learning, on life, on the future), planning and taking action. Work on reflection and reflective practices can be found in both the literature on teaching and learning, in disciplinary literature relating to professional practice, and more recently in the literature supporting career development (Bimrose, J et al. 2008). Innovative work has been promoted by the CRA and the Higher Education Academy (see links below).

What is the OU doing?

PDP forms part of our institutional approach to employability. Enhanced Employability and Career Progression (EECP) is one of the OU's six institutional priority areas and whose work focuses on achieving seven inter-related objectives:

- Systematically tracking what career objectives each student is seeking to achieve through study and how well we are helping to achieve that throughout their journey with us.
- Embedding employability skills more explicitly in the curriculum.
- Providing a sustainable institutional infrastructure with clearly defined roles and responsibilities ensuring that there is appropriate cohesion and effort across Faculties and supporting units to deliver enhanced employability and career progression.

- Identifying and maximising the distinctive benefits that derive from students combining OU study with their own world of work.
- Enhancing and increasing personalised support according to the career goals of the student (to start develop, or change their career).
- Bringing the employer perspective more directly into the University.
- Increasing staff engagement in employability and incorporating into staff development, and research and scholarship.

Up until 2017, PDP has been supported across modules at the OU, generally at level 1. However, as part of EECP, and in response to evidence from our HEA Employability Review (Cole, 2017), we are piloting a qualification level approach to PDP, offering a supported strand of reflection and PDP activity to students from pre level 1 entry to just before graduation. The results of this will be analysed and disseminated across curriculum teams.

Support for student PDP is also provided via the Careers and Employability Advisors linked to Faculties and in direct contact with students via Careers and Employability Services. All students can self-refer for one to one careers advice via Student Home and the Careers and Employability Services website.

Staff can find further information, resources and case studies at the Employability Hub.

Links to people, tools and information

The Employability Hub
https://learn3.open.ac.uk/site/employ-hub

Enhanced Employability and Career Progression strategic area
http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/strategy/students-first/strategic-objectives/enhanced-employability-and-career-progression

Careers and Employability Services intranet
http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/student-services/main/access-careers-and-teaching-support-acts/careers-and-employability

Careers Advisory Service Student internet (external)
http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/help/topic/careers

Acknowledgements

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