Did I hear you shout “Nothing!”? Most colleagues with experience of delivering PDP would, I suspect, describe getting students to engage as a challenge. Yet PDP, if we can get it to work for students, has the potential to enhance the student experience by making it what it should be - personal. PDP can show the individual student how to make the most of their learning by applying the personal development model (setting personal goals; planning and taking action to achieve them; recording the outcomes and reflecting on their experiences). Most importantly, PDP relates individual learning and achievements to life beyond university, particularly to future employment. At its best, it encourages a positive attitude to lifelong learning, builds self-confidence and gives focus. Students who know why they are studying their subject, and can articulate how their degree from MMU will help them get the employment they want, are surely more likely to engage with study and complete their course.

This article is based on the conclusions drawn from an evaluation of three different approaches to PDP delivery for stage 1 students in MMU, undertaken as part of a Fellowship in Academic Practice. The conclusions as to what makes PDP work are drawn from feedback from over 750 students across the university, mostly gathered from questionnaires, but including feedback from focus groups. It is supplemented by comments from 26 academic staff.

PDP at MMU

PDP is defined as:

“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 the HE Progress Files – PDP. May 2000)

In MMU, PDP delivery has developed slowly and to a variety of diverse models, according to the needs, commitment and resources available in individual departments. Some departments:

• Adhere closely to a Faculty-wide scheme, using consistent materials and delivery methods.
• Adhere to a Faculty-wide scheme, but are free to adapt materials and delivery methods within flexible guidelines.
• Have developed their own scheme in accordance with their students’ needs and staff interest, including embedding PDP within an appropriate assessed unit.

The “ideal” PDP delivery model is usually presented as making personal development central to the unit syllabus i.e. the starting point for curriculum design is to identify which skills students need to develop in order to study, successfully, the academic content within each unit, make clear links between these skills and employability, and build teaching, learning and assessment activities around these decisions.

In MMU PDP at stage 1 is mostly delivered either

• within a unit that either “hosts” the activity, or, more usually, has a personal or skills development element within it already
• within a dedicated unit designed to deliver PDP, sometimes along with other skills, such as IT
• as an “add-on” activity, sometimes part of the regular timetable, but often as an occasional activity.

All PDP schemes require students to record their development in varying degrees of detail, and all provide guidance, information
and exercises to help with that process.

Given such a range of approaches, I considered how the Careers Service could contribute information and expertise to PDP in the area of employability and career development, which would be flexible, relevant and useful to both students and academic colleagues. The Fellowship application came out of this interest.

The Project

The project aimed to support PDP for stages two and three by designing and developing a range of e-learning and classroom materials. More information about these is given at the end of this article.

It also included a research element to investigate the students’ PDP experience and their perceptions of successful outcomes. I was interested in finding out whether students believed PDP had developed their “personal, educational and career development”, and to assess which PDP interventions were considered to have had, or to be likely to have, the greatest impact. Additionally, staff feedback was collected wherever possible. The findings would inform the design and development of the materials for PDP at stages 2 & 3. The rest of this article is a brief summary of the conclusions drawn from evaluating the responses gathered.

The Research

The research was conducted collaboratively during the spring term 2006 with three groups of students: Foundation Year, stage one Combined Honours, and stage one students studying at MMU Cheshire. The following summarises the PDP evaluation undertaken with these students. I would like to thank colleagues in Foundation Year and Combined Honours who allowed me to add questions to their own evaluation questionnaires, and at MMU Cheshire for allowing me access to the extensive evaluation data they had collected on their PDP scheme, known as SDF (Student Development Files).

The approaches used were:

**Combined Honours:** The Learning & Employability Unit (L&E) - Within L&E all PDP materials are in WebCT, and students are supported in a structured process in the classroom to plan their own learning and personal development, recording the evidence in a PDP journal, saved electronically. PDP is embedded within the unit and contributes to 50% of the assessment. The unit was new in 2005/06, taken by around two thirds of the Combined Honours cohort, and was evaluated using questionnaires (80 responses), focus groups (8 students) and tutor feedback (8 attended a meeting), and through this process detailed data on PDP was gathered.

**Foundation Year:** PDP is delivered to Foundation Year students embedded within Academic Methods (AM), a core unit. The unit is equally split between traditional classroom teaching and fully supported WebCT on-line learning. Comprehensive evaluation of the Foundation Year programme is undertaken, including completion of a student questionnaire. In 2005/06, the questionnaire included questions specifically addressing PDP. Forty six percent of the cohort responded (305 Manchester-based students).

**MMU Cheshire:** PDP is delivered via the Faculty SDF scheme. All students are provided with a smart, dedicated ring-binder file containing information and assignment worksheets to support structured PDP activities introduced in Freshers’ Week and reviewed during the year. Students are encouraged to work, independently or with friends, on their files between reviews. In 2005/06 the SDF scheme was extensively evaluated both at Faculty and departmental level by the PDP development team through questionnaires, (372 faculty responses), complemented by focus groups at departmental level, and staff feedback (18 responses).

Perceptions of PDP

**The Positive:**

“When I started I thought well, what’s the relevance to me? But the more we get into it, and the more I speak to other people, it is actually quite helpful”

Stage 1 students find the concept of PDP, and its relevance to their own lives, very difficult to understand. This leads to

- Low levels of engagement, unless PDP is assessed.
- Negative views about the value of PDP

Student feedback from all groups demonstrated a good understanding of the concept and process of PDP. However, all three delivery methods used a consistent approach and set of supporting materials, and that is likely to have impacted positively on understanding. Students’ understanding of the value of PDP is a more complex issue. The inferences from
qualitative comments suggest that valuing PDP is a progressive development, evolving through regular exposure to the concept throughout the academic year.

‘Having time to consider PDP in a unit is a good idea’ (two thirds of responses to L&E questionnaire).

However, data from MMU Cheshire also demonstrated some students recognised a benefit from PDP, despite not being a curriculum provision.

There is evidence that some students gained focus. One student commented,

“When I started at Uni...I thought university was like, for other kinds of people, not me. But doing PDP, - it kinds of shows you what you can do”

“Realised what I was hoping to gain from university”

A significant majority of students became more aware of their development needs than when they had started university, particularly in identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, and stated they would now use their time at university differently.

“I’ll take every opportunity to learn a new skill, talk to as many different people as possible to further develop my social skills. Get as much experience as I can in fields other than university.”

PDP was less successful in helping students make the leap between considering PDP and applying it. However, a significant minority (between 22-33% depending on the group) could identify specific action they had taken as a direct result of PDP.

“[I have] recently started volunteering at a youth health project in Manchester which allows me to use the skills I have developed in L&E”

In addition, some students commented on the way in which PDP had enabled them to identify personal achievements and successes, in a context other than that of an academic nature, mainly in terms of independent living:

“... has covered ways to manage your time, manage money, where to get help if needed. Things that students aren’t necessarily aware of when first leaving home”

The Negative

Not all students found PDP to have been useful. Across all three groups there were negative comments from approximately a half of respondents. The more time allocated to PDP the more positive comments were recorded, but there is clearly much work still needed to achieve good feedback.

Some students felt that PDP should be an optional, rather than a compulsory, activity. Those who felt that PDP had not been useful tended to give one of the following reasons:

• Repetition: students are increasingly addressing PDP at college, and if they did not engage with it there tend to be immediately dismissive of it here.

• Lack of perceived relevance: students need help in making the links between PDP, academic success and employability. “I knew what I would do before I came and I’m sticking to it”

• Time pressures: students often find time management an issue and see PDP as an intrusion into the time available for meeting assignment deadlines.

Staff also contributed feedback, and views were mixed, often reflecting the same concerns voiced by students. WebCT received positive feedback as a support to delivery, but with a plea for more interactivity and greater variety in teaching approaches. Experiential learning opportunities are also considered very important to supplement on-line learning and engage students by facilitating “light bulb” moments, where the personal relevance of activities becomes clear. Concerns particularly included the lack of commitment by some staff, and insufficient time allocation for activities and discussion.

Conclusions

It would not be appropriate to draw any conclusions about the “right” approach to PDP delivery. All three approaches to PDP delivery had recognised benefits, both for their departments and for students, but all also had attracted some negative comment. However, reading all the evidence gathered during this project, and from other sources (see References) I have attempted to pull together a list of “best practice” - those features of the different schemes that seem to be key to successful PDP delivery.

So, what would make PDP work for students?

Successful PDP is –

• Explicit – spells out clearly exactly what PDP is, how it relates to all aspects of student life and beyond university, and how, where and when opportunities exist to apply it to the student’s own needs.
• **On-going** – many students find the value of the concept difficult to grasp, and regular opportunities to consider their PDP helps significantly. Embedding PDP within the curriculum is the most successful approach for encouraging students to value and apply PDP to their own lives.

• **Tutor commitment**
  - students do not engage unless they believe tutors are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about PDP. This is an identified major weakness of the “add-on” model of PDP delivery, and there is a serious staff development issue here to be addressed.

• **Relevant** – PDP activities should be directly linked with the students’ subject of study, their work experience and other aspects of the student experience. A range of approaches to recording activities, and helping students apply PDP should be offered. PDP is personal, and students want flexibility within schemes of delivery to make them relevant to their own needs.

• **Progressive** – students currently do not understand that they will be addressing PDP throughout their university careers and beyond, and this reduces the value they place on it. When they understand this, at stages 2 & 3, students want to build on and develop their skills in a progressive and coherent manner, and to record their progress in a continuous process.

• **Assessed** – at stage 1, students are significantly more likely to engage in the process if PDP is assessed, or is part of an assessed unit. They do not want rushed sessions; off-timetable sessions; too much on-line learning.

• **Interesting** – students find talking and writing about PDP boring. They like varied and interactive approaches to delivery, and the opportunity to discuss their own issues one-to-one with a tutor. They do not like – group work (it is easier to hide personal weaknesses rather than address them); discussing their weaknesses in front of others; too much reflection.

As MMU refocuses as a University for World-Class Professionals, the importance of giving students many and varied opportunities to consider and improve their employability demonstrably and personal competencies will grow, and successful PDP delivery can make an important contribution to meeting that goal. Engaging students will continue to pose a challenge, but as they begin to understand that lifelong learning is now expected in the workplace, students themselves are likely to begin to expect strong PDP support at university, rather in the way they expect strong IT support now. I hope the checklist above will be a useful tool to help colleagues meet the challenge.

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### Employability and PDP – how the Careers Service can help you with PDP at stages 2 & 3.

At stage 1 most students are concerned with doing well on their courses and settling into university life. They are not ready psychologically to consider what happens when they leave – they’ve only just started. However, experience suggests there is more interest near the end of the year, when they seem more open to considering how they will spend the summer vacation; the implications of their second year option choices etc. The Careers Service would encourage some gentle awareness-raising of employability at this point. However, there is strong evidence from the research that students welcome employability and career development input from stage 2 onwards. L&E students, when asked to choose from a menu of PDP activities for stage 2, voted “enhancing employability” and “career planning” the most relevant and important. Separate research from the Careers Service, involving annual analysis of over 1000 responses from new graduates, suggests that students are considering their employability earlier. In 2005, 65% stated they had considered their career plans before their final year; in 2006 this had risen to 73%. (See references for further details)

Based on this feedback, the following resources have been developed. They are available free for use as part of a structured employability or PDP activity for stage 2 & 3 students. Please contact Pauline Hearn (p.hearn@mmu.ac.uk) for further details.
• Three WebCT tutorials

1. Making Application
2. CVs and Covering Letters
3. All about Interviews

These tutorials are interactive and one includes a streamed video. Each includes an activity that could be assessed or included in evidence of engagement if required.

The choice of these topics was informed by the research. Students want information and help on job search when they have an immediate need e.g. when they need to write a CV for a job they want. The advantage of on-line help is, of course, its availability 24/7.

• Four workshops packs – have been developed.

1. Applications, CVs and Covering letters
2. Interview technique
3. Assessment Centres and Psychometric testing.
4. How to make the most of work experience

These are complete 2-hour workshop plans, consisting of a timed lesson plan with tutor notes, a PowerPoint presentation, and a student handout. The emphasis is on student interaction, with minimal lecturing or advance preparation. Again, the choice of these topics was informed by the research, particularly in discussion with staff. These subjects are sometimes covered within the curriculum, but staff may feel they lack expertise to deliver up-to-date advice and don’t have time to do the necessary research.

All the above materials will be maintained and up-dated by the Careers Service as part of our commitment to supporting academic colleagues.

References

QAA: “Guidelines for the HE Progress Files – PDP. May 2000. Available at www.qaa.ac.uk

HE Academy: “Personal Development and Employability”. Edited by Professor Mantz Yorke. Learning & Employability Series 2

“The 2006 Careers Service Survey of Graduates”, Julian White. MMU Careers Service. (This is not the annual “Destinations of Leavers” report)

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