

Aspect F: engaging undergraduate students

Experience suggests that students are not readily convinced of the merits of PDP. The process appears to work well for students when they appreciate its relevance to them personally, consider this type of work as integral to their curriculum, understand the benefit of reflective practice, and realise the value of career planning from an early stage to enhance their employability. It is vital that students perceive that staff are committed to the ethos of PDP. Engagement of students may be promoted via the PDP model used by delivery mechanisms, and through institutional approaches to induction and embedding, including the use of well-constructed scenarios and the involvement or endorsement of graduate students and employers or professional associations.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

Promotion/induction

- F1 How and when are students provided with a clear vision of what PDP can help them achieve (for example, during PDP induction sessions, in discussion with a personal tutor or careers advisor)? [See also Aspect D: promotion and introduction, page 24.]
- F2 How are more experienced students and alumni involved in explaining the merits of PDP as part of induction or PDP support (for example, during induction, as tutors, via exemplar portfolios and commentaries, or through the involvement of students' association officers or class representatives)?
- F3 In what ways does PDP encompass career planning aspects (for example, during induction sessions)?

Support

- F4 What forms of support are available to maintain student engagement or reduce barriers to engagement (for example, technical support, additional tutoring or constructive feedback)?
- F5 Which staff members have responsibility for promoting and supporting PDP engagement among students and how do they discharge this duty?
- F6 How are employers or professional associations used to make the links from PDP to continuing professional development (CPD)?

Embedding/assessment

F7 How is the workload expected of students for PDP integrated into module or programme workloads and is it proportionate?

F8 Are students adequately assessed and 'rewarded' via marks, credit or certification for their engagement in PDP and PDP-related activities? If so, how? [See also Aspect H: assessing PDP, page 42, and Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55.]

Evaluation

F9 What evidence is there that the mechanism of delivery of the PDP and associated portfolios is convenient for students to use, and that the language used is easily comprehended?

F10 What evidence is there that the student/PDP 'interface' is attractive, accessible and clearly written?

F11 What demonstrable outputs arise from PDP activities (for example, a CV for vacation work, hints for teamwork, making informed choices about degree pathways)?

F12 In what ways are students and their representatives involved in the review of PDP? [See also Aspect C: evaluation, review and quality enhancement, page 20.]

Commentary

An essential element in the effective deployment of PDP will be the extent to which students are prepared to engage with PDP from the outset. It is common to receive feedback from graduating students along the lines that they would have been keener to engage with PDP at an earlier stage if they 'knew then what they know now'. At early stages, many students adopt a strategic approach to their learning and experience suggests that their approach to PDP is no different. If students recognise from the outset that:

- PDP is of personal relevance to them
- engaging in PDP activity is an integral part of their learning experience (see also Aspect G: embedding PDP and the discipline context, page 37)
- reflective practice is directly beneficial and that early career planning can be of value to them (see also Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55)
- they will be 'better prepared for the demands of continuing progression and career development in professional and academic careers' (QAA, 2008)

then they are more likely to willingly engage with PDP. Thus, QAA (2008) recognises that:

Students do not participate in such processes for altruistic reasons: they have to perceive the investment they make will be valued.

Significant contributory elements towards this goal include:

- the respective extents to which academic staff have themselves engaged with the PDP process (see Aspect E: engaging academic staff, page 28). As Quinton and Smallbone (2008) commented: '...successful implementation requires...internal staff champions...and the promotion of a PDP culture which engages both students and staff'.

- whether the PDP mechanisms and processes appear to students to have relevance to their particular disciplinary context (see Aspect G: embedding PDP and the discipline context, page 37)
- how PDP develops as students progress through their programme of studies (see Aspect J: progression and academic development, page 51).

A range of mechanisms can be deployed to facilitate and encourage student engagement and the blend of measures adopted will and should reflect the particular contextual approach for PDP which has been adopted for the particular cohort of undergraduates being targeted. Some measures, such as those which promote and induct, can be categorised as 'pushing' or encouraging students towards PDP use. Others, such as assessment reward, can be thought of as 'pulling' or attracting students towards engagement. A further strand of mechanisms provide guidance and support for students to consolidate their use of PDP.

Promotion and induction

Students can be encouraged or 'pushed' towards the use of PDP by the effective use of promotion and induction measures. If students are uncertain from the outset as to why PDP is being deployed and what it is meant to achieve from their perspective, then it is highly unlikely that they will engage effectively.

Issues to be considered as part of the promotion and induction processes are as follows:

- the induction process must be clearly planned and contextualised. For example, is PDP introduced as part of separate induction processes at each level of study and presented as an integral part of the level activities, or is PDP dealt with in isolation as a standalone induction process?
- how does the information delivered at induction fit with other information released over the academic year? Is the combined effect one of information overload or is there an imbalance or gap in information delivery? Are all materials of the same high quality?
- is the PDP framework well designed and have students been involved in the design process?
- have all issues of access and reliability been addressed before launch and induction?
- is there an ongoing and balanced use of announcements and reminders about the value of PDP use?
- are efforts continuously made by staff to promote the embedded or contextualised nature of PDP?

Attraction of PDP for students

One of the strongest drivers for effective uptake of PDP at an undergraduate level is its appeal to students. If students are attracted towards using PDP they are far more likely to continue to use it over their entire academic experience. Key drivers to be considered include:

- strategic focus - students are drawn to PDP if they recognise the role it

can play in areas such as enhancing employability, supporting the development of an effective CV and aiding in effective career planning. Edwards (2005) suggests that: 'In implementing and supporting students in PDP activities, HEI's [sic] should highlight and include activities to emphasise the longer term benefits in relation to "life-skills" for self-career management and maintenance of employability in the modern commercial world'.

- assessment - many students will engage in a different and potentially more focused manner if PDP is assessed (see Aspect H: assessing PDP, page 42).
- case studies and role models - worked examples or case studies can be used to provide direct evidence to students as to how effective PDP may be. Student role models, for example class representatives, can be used to personalise support for, and champion, case study examples.
- links to personal tutor and advising schemes - PDP can be linked to tutorial and advising schemes as another example to students of how PDP can be effectively used in a supportive context.
- references - some institutions have considered linking the use of PDP to the provision of meaningful employment references.
- extra-curricular activities - PDP can be exemplified as a means for students to effectively incorporate and blend a meaningful record of their co-curricular activities with their mainstream learning experiences.

Support

The most effectively promoted and potentially appealing PDP may still prove unattractive to students if it is poorly supported. There are many ways in which PDP can be supported in a manner which is reassuring to students:

- technical support - some students may have problems with the technology required to access an online PDP framework, but increasingly this is a minority difficulty. Issues of unreliability or difficulty of access may be of more concern. Clearly, if an online PDP system is unreliable then students are less likely to use it. If it is intended that PDP is to become a core student activity then technical support must recognise it as a core function.
- online support - many students will be happier, and will be more ready, to access online support rather than approach a member of staff.
- relevant personal support - if PDP-use has been linked to a personal tutor or advising scheme then it is important that tutors and advisers are seen as readily accessible first points of contact in relation to PDP. If others, such as careers advisers, are identified as playing a central role in the PDP then they should be equally accessible.
- targeted groups of students - students entering study at non-standard entry points or other groups, such as international or mature students, may have differing support needs which should be recognised from the outset.