

# Aspect H: assessing PDP

Research indicates that students engage with PDP activities when these are embedded in their curriculum and assessed. This suggests a requirement for relevant learning outcomes, suitable learning activities and assessment using appropriate marking criteria (that is, constructive alignment, in the sense of Biggs, 1996). Assessment of PDP is a relatively new pedagogic activity and methods of assessing process and depth of reflection independent of personal content are required. It is not clear whether a set of generic PDP marking criteria will emerge, or whether context-specific marking criteria will always be required for truly embedded PDP activities.

## Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

### Learning outcomes within the curriculum

H1 What is the institutional or college/faculty/department approach to embedding PDP activities (for example, are they embedded within the curriculum, presented within a core skills module, considered as part of a personal tutor scheme or are they covered within special workshop sessions)?

H2 How are intended learning outcomes used to encourage engagement with PDP? [See also Aspect D: promotion and introduction, page 24, and Aspect F: engaging undergraduate students, page 33.]

H3 How are students supported to connect their curriculum activities to their PDP?

H4 How are curricular activities with relevance to PDP flagged as such to students?

H5 Are elective/optional module choices accounted for in the PDP strategy, so that the possibilities of duplication or omission for an individual student's curriculum are minimised (for example, via a curriculum mapping exercise)?

### Assessment information

H6 How are curricular PDP-related activities structured within the curriculum or programme, and are these routinely assessed?

H7 What proportion of marks is allocated to PDP activities, and is this appropriate to encourage and reward engagement?

H8 What are the opportunities for formative assessment and for receiving feedback from staff or peers on PDP activities?

H9 What PDP-related marking criteria are used by staff and how are these published for students?

### Capturing non-curricular input

H10 How is the relevance of extra-curricular activities to PDP flagged to students? [See also Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55.]

## H11 How is students' involvement in extra-curricular activities supported, recognised and recorded?

### Commentary

Curriculum embedding and consequent assessment are acknowledged as potential influences on the successful adoption of PDP. Both encourage and reward student engagement, and, by motivating students, can help to overcome the initial resistance to such activities (see Atlay, 2005). For many students, taking account of assessment feedback is an important PDP process. For staff too, the process of contextualising PDP may help by indicating suitable vehicles for formative and summative assessment.

An embedded model for PDP activities implies that these are an integral part of the curriculum (see Aspect G: embedding PDP and the discipline context, page 37). Adopting the principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), this suggests that:

- the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) should explicitly reference PDP-related activities (Moon, 2005). These would normally be communicated to students in a module handbook or similar
- the curriculum should include PDP-related activities. This might include formative opportunities to practise and develop related skills
- PDP-related activities should be assessed. This implies the creation of objective marking schemes that align with the ILOs.

### Can we assess reflection?

A key issue in assessment of PDP is whether reflective content can be considered 'right' or 'wrong' in assessment terms, because it is essentially personal in nature and is 'owned' by the student creating it. Although some practitioners worry that the act of assessment may influence the reflective process adversely (see, for example, Atlay, 2005), established practice in assessment of portfolios and reflective writing indicates that it is possible to create an objective set of marking criteria that minimise subjectivity on the part of the assessor and avoid value judgements about content that is personal to the student (see Strivens, 2006b, and Kember et al, 2008). Indeed, Kember et al (2008) go further, stating:

Where courses have as an aim the promotion of reflective practice, it will enhance the attainment of the goal if the level of reflective thinking is assessed.

Many PDP frameworks operate through a portfolio of templates - essentially tables containing a mix of staff and student-generated content, designed to structure, facilitate and organise elements of student reflection and planning. Any assessment scheme for elements of PDP portfolios will presumably operate by considering the student-generated template content, for example, reflective analysis of needs and opportunities, an action plan and, in many cases, a developing CV. Therefore, the goal and methodology of assessment may have an impact on the design of templates.

## Learning objectives and intended learning outcomes for PDP activities

Table 4 lists a set of potentially assessable PDP elements with generalised learning objectives (GLOs) and intended learning outcomes (ILOs). These relate to a complete PDP portfolio; in many cases, only a subset will be assessed in any one module. ILOs would also need to be contextualised in individual cases and specific links to areas of professionalism related to the relevant discipline and its curriculum would be of obvious value. The QAA subject benchmark statements are a potential source of such objectives. The 'core module' approach to PDP may encourage focus but reduce linkage to the curriculum, whereas the reverse may be the case for a fully embedded approach.

Complications may occur in modular curricula where reference to PDP and assessment is made within different modules. Ideally, issues of repetition, omission and coordination would be considered as a part of the relevant degree programme review process under quality assurance procedures. Best practice would presumably involve publication of a mapping table, possibly within the student handbook(s), indicating when different aspects of PDP were treated within the curriculum, and this is indeed an expectation for certain accrediting bodies.

Assessed element	Generalised learning objectives	Intended learning outcomes
1 Completion of templates	To use the PDP resources, tutor guidance and events and materials presented via the curriculum in the process of completing a portfolio (or elements thereof) 'within the spirit' of PDP	A 'complete' PDP portfolio, consisting of all the elements expected, including: [list], incorporating a suitable extent and quality of content
2 Completion of key end products		Specific templates or other outcomes, such as skills audits, development or action plans and a CV, completed satisfactorily according to specific marking criteria
3 Presentation and organisation of template content	To present the content of the PDP in language and writing style appropriate to context	Well-written elements of PDP that employ a suitable vocabulary and writing style matching expectations for each component, and meeting relevant criteria for quality of presentation
4 Evidence of self-appraisal	To use the available tools and 'instruments' to evaluate personal qualities and skills, and to use the information obtained within the PDP	Evidence that indicates that outcomes of self-appraisal have been recorded and that they have been incorporated appropriately into a development plan
5 Evidence of scoping of opportunities for development	To investigate opportunities for personal development and to incorporate these within the PDP	Recorded evidence of scoping of opportunities, such as: visiting careers service, volunteering websites, and so on

6 Effective prioritisation within action plans	To demonstrate the ability to prioritise elements of a personal action plan	Evidence that the importance and urgency of different elements of the plan have been evaluated and that this has been used in prioritising short, medium and long-term goals
7 Language and depth of reflection	To reflect appropriately on past and present status and development needs and to record such reflections within the PDP using appropriate vocabulary	Recorded reflection that meets expectations in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● reality/realism</li> <li>● openness/frankness</li> <li>● writing style/vocabulary</li> <li>● aspects covered</li> <li>● evidence</li> </ul>
8 Quantity and quality of evidence supporting self-appraisal and reflection	To make reference to evidence that supports the 'claims' made within the PDP regarding, for example, level of skills	That the PDP contains the expected number of attachments or links; that each attachment or link is relevant to context; and that the quality of attachments or links meets expectations and matched any claims made in the PDP
9 Evidence of continuing personal development	To demonstrate through past and present personal development plans, a commitment to ongoing improvement/enhancement of skills, achievements, curricular and extra-curricular engagement	Demonstrable personal development evidenced through past and present plans. An indication of which areas have seen most progressive change over a relevant period

Table 4: generalised learning objectives and intended learning outcomes for some assessable elements of PDP.

### Marking criteria and marking schemes

As Strivens (2006b) commented: 'The first step in designing a portfolio for efficient assessment is to decide exactly what is being assessed'. Essential for fair and affordable PDP assessment are explicit and well communicated marking criteria and marking schemes (Atlay, 2005; Moon, 2005). Typical marking criteria and schemes might address factors such as:

- completion of templates 'within the spirit' of PDP
- completion of key 'end products', such as skills audits, plans and a CV
- presentation and organisation of template content, including writing style

- evidence that detailed self-appraisal has occurred
- evidence of scoping of opportunities for development
- effective prioritisation within action plans
- language and 'depth' of reflection, as opposed to its direction
- quantity and quality of any evidence supporting self-appraisal and reflection
- evidence of continuing personal development
- evidence of accreditation or reflection on extra-curricular activities.

In certain disciplines, for example those that are professional/vocational, it might be appropriate to assess the competency level of skills, but in general, it is rather the **process** of development that is being assessed, rather than the specific level attained.

Because assessed PDP elements generally represent a minor component of overall assessment (typically, no more than 10 per cent of the marks available for any module), marking criteria can be relatively 'blunt', in the sense that it would not be necessary to develop detailed criteria covering an extensive scale. For example, for any specific element, the scale could be binary (intended/expected outcome present, or not present) or considered within a four-category scheme such as that of Kember et al (2008):

- 1 habitual action/non-reflection - no significant reflective thought is evident
- 2 understanding - an attempt is made to reach an understanding but this is not reflective
- 3 reflection - an attempt to relate an understanding of concepts to personal experience
- 4 critical reflection - evidence of a transformation of perspective as a result of reflection.

The student and staff workload involved in producing, submitting and assessing output should be commensurate with its status within the assessment profile for any given module. Marking schemes related to the criteria should be easy to operate for large class sizes and might usefully be completed online. Efficient assessment of portfolios was considered by Strivens (2006b), who outlined a number of strategies for addressing this issue. Peer assessment is an option that could be considered, for example.

### **The recognition of extra-curricular activities**

There is potential for extra-curricular activities to be recognised within PDP framework(s). Some HEIs are developing credit schemes for such activities and the report of the Burgess Steering Committee (Universities UK, 2007) noted that while the proposed Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) was intended primarily as an academic document, it had the potential to be used by institutions for formal recognition of a wider range of student achievement, including: 'measuring and recording the skills and achievements that students acquire through extra-curricular activities'. The challenges of such an approach have been outlined by Ward (2007).