

Aspect L: employability and employment

The notions of PDP and employability are closely aligned. Both aim to produce graduates with the skills, understandings and personable attributes, valued by both academics and employers. PDP can be used to facilitate student understanding of graduate attributes and skills and notions of graduateness, employability and professionalism. This may include such activities as: auditing personal transferable skills; making informed module or programme choices (where possible); learning the language used in self-description when applying for jobs; understanding and refining applications and CVs; scoping internships and placements and understanding their relevance to employers; investigating wider opportunities for enterprise and self-employment; and preparing for meetings with careers service staff and potential employers. PDP can be a structured means of planning, recording and reflecting on incremental development, with the 'employability' agenda contributing a context and a focus in terms of employment, as well as enhancing generic, transferable skills for lifelong learning.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

Employability within the curriculum

- L1 In what ways do the institution's relevant strategies integrate PDP and employability activities? For example, if the institution has an employability strategy or similar, how does this make reference to PDP, and how does the PDP strategy, where present, refer to employability?
- L2 How far are the employability aspects of PDP an integral part of effective teaching?
- L3 How does PDP assist in the assimilation of the 'language of employment and employability' and vice versa? [See also Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55.]
- L4 How could employability skills and attributes be more clearly articulated and embedded in the PDP process?

Graduate attributes and skills

- L5 In what ways does PDP promote the audit of personal transferable skills or graduate attributes? [See also Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55.]
- L6 How could PDP help to promote students' 'graduateness' or acquisition and development of graduate attributes (for example, critical thinking skills, reflection on learning styles, ethical behaviour, ability to be an independent, lifelong learner)?

CV development and career planning

- L7 How could PDP promote early consideration of career planning and potential career paths, and in what ways?

- L8 How could the learning resources associated with PDP provide links to internal and external resources related to career planning?
- L9 How could PDP encourage the development of tailored CVs to specific job or course vacancies from more general CVs?
- L10 How could any employment or work experience-related activities and resources, linked to PDP, better assist students in their job-seeking strategies?
- L11 To what extent are PDP processes and/or outcomes tailored for those leaving the institution with a certificate or a diploma?

Commentary

In considering the role of PDP in relation to employability and employment, it is important to appreciate that: 'employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a "graduate job" or otherwise' (Yorke, 2006). However, because developing an effective CV can be a tangible student benefit from some PDP models and is directly concerned with job acquisition, it is helpful to consider PDP in relation to both terms. For a range of perspectives on employability, on evidence linking employability and effective student learning, and the role of higher education in graduate employment, reference should be made to the Employability and Enterprise section of the HEA website.

Aligning PDP to employability and 'graduateness'

Employability (as opposed to employment) has been emphasised as a process rather than a state, according to Rob Ward's introductory section of the key reference publication *Personal Development Planning and Employability* (HEA, 2007). A commonly used definition of employability in higher education is: 'a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2006).

As a process, it is supported by PDP which can help learners reflect on, articulate and evidence knowledge, skills and experiences gained from higher education. PDP can be the framework or structure through which students can recognise and articulate these. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) (2004) endorses this description and notes that this definition of employability is concerned with the individual student's personal development, rather than external factors such as the labour market:

Employability is not the same as employment. Helping learners to enhance their employability is not only about helping them to develop the knowledge and understandings needed for specific jobs, or helping them to write effective CVs. What people need, if they are to pursue their chosen occupations more effectively, also involves developing their ability to learn and to apply what they have learnt to positive effect in new and unfamiliar contexts. The skills and attributes which can help to enhance a person's employability (for example, communication, team working and critical thinking) are entirely consistent with the outcomes of what we might call 'good learning'.

Working definitions of 'graduateness' come from the HEA and Subject Centre 'Student Employability Profiles' produced in collaboration with the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) (HEA, 2009f). Each profile identifies skills that can be developed through the study of a particular discipline, based on subject benchmark statements. These skills have been mapped against input from CIHE Employer membership regarding the employability skills, competencies and attributes that they value in recruitment. The student version of these includes reflective questions which can be used to underpin PDP.

The link between PDP and employability will be further strengthened by the SFC's allocation of four year (2007-11) strategic funding to higher education to develop graduate employability. This work is being coordinated through the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN) and PDP is a specific area of focus in a number of institutions (HEA, 2009d).

Personal or professional development planning?

A number of institutions and/or specific subject disciplines have chosen to use 'professional' instead of, or together with, 'personal' in the title PDP. This reflects a specific approach in vocational degrees in particular, which may stem from the involvement of a PSB or be a way of engaging students by using recognisable terminology. This is the case in Heriot-Watt University, for example. In the context of postgraduate research students, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA, sets out the expectation that learners will take 'responsibility for their own personal and professional development'.

The employment context

In general, employers welcome students who have engaged with PDP. In this context, Edwards (2005) commented that:

Most employers put strongest emphasis on the process of PDP rather than the documented outcomes. In other words, the process is key because it adds value - by helping students reflect on their experiences and improve their ability to articulate and demonstrate resulting competencies during recruitment activities. If the process is continuous rather than fragmented or piecemeal it is felt to be of even higher value.

Institutions and programmes can and will decide for themselves when and if it is appropriate to introduce links to employers in their PDP approach. As seen elsewhere (for example, Aspect K: benefits for students, page 55), this link can be a driver for student engagement.

Edwards (2005) further explains how PDP can help students prepare for and understand the employment competencies they will meet in employer applications and interviews, and Kumar (2007) gives useful suggestions and materials for staff to assist students in improving their ability to relate their learning and achievements to employers' interests and needs and, ultimately, gain employment. Kumar's SOAR (Self - Opportunity - Aspirations - Results) approach opens up possibilities for PDP to be contextualised within disciplines, and personalised by individuals, as an overarching model for the delivery of benefits to students in the broad and generic sense.