Aspect N: engaging postgraduate students and postdoctoral staff

PDP activities for taught postgraduate (PGT) students, research postgraduate (PGR) students and postdoctoral staff (PDS) will probably differ from those undertaken by undergraduate students (UGs): the institutional PDP policy, framework(s), guidance and branding should reflect this (see other Aspects). PGTs with first degrees from the UK will probably have some experience of PDP, whereas international students may not, and induction events should take differing experiences into account. The needs of PGT students are varied, reflecting the range of different modes of teaching and assessment used, and the different experiences of PGT students. In general, they are likely to be highly discipline-specific and more focused on employment and employability in the context of the particular qualification, so a stranded approach may be necessary. PDP activities for PGR students may be linked closely with the planning of project work, including, potentially, thesis monitoring schemes and generic skills training. PDS PDP schemes are likely to be focused on career development as a university teacher or researcher.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

General postgraduate

N1   How are the general PDP needs of PGT and PGR students and PD staff differentiated from those of UG students?

N2   In what ways has interoperability between UG and PG PDP frameworks been considered, both for students transferring within the institution and for students from elsewhere? [See also Aspect M: linking PDP and continuing professional development, page 63.]

N3   What is the nature of the progression in PDP activities from the UG framework(s) through PGT, PGR and PD levels?

N4   How are PDP induction needs of different cohorts of students dealt with at PGT, PGR and PD levels, particularly for international students?

N5   How do the PGT, PGR and PD frameworks assist students/staff at these different levels with career planning and employability?

N6   What are the implications of cultural and linguistic differences in a diverse student body to PDP implementation?

PGT PDP specifically

N7   In what ways are the discipline-specific needs of PGT international and home students taken into account in stranded approaches to induction, tailored PDP activities and guidance?

N8   Within the PGT PDP framework(s), how are discipline-specific training aspects (such as specialist skills) accommodated?

N9   How does the PGT PDP framework(s) assist students in planning for thesis project work and writing, if relevant?

N10   To what extent are the links between PDP and CPD made explicit to PGT students studying for vocational qualifications?

PGR PDP specifically

N11   Within the PGR PDP framework(s), how are thesis monitoring (or similar) activities integrated with action planning?

N12   In what ways are supervisors, thesis monitoring committees (or equivalent) or research line managers involved in PDP guidance for PGR students and PDS?

N13   Within the PGR PDP framework(s), how are the research skills outlined in the UK Research Councils' Joint Statement of Skills accommodated?

PDS PDP specifically

N14   In what ways does the PDS PDP framework articulate with university CPD frameworks and/or personal review schemes?

N15   How are staff introduced to the PDS PDP framework?

N16   What forms of encouragement or reward, as appropriate, are in place to support staff engagement with the PDS PDP?

N17   How does the PDS PDP framework link to aspects of CPD schemes operated by likely employer groups?

Commentary

This aspect covers three radically different groups of people: taught postgraduates, research postgraduates and postdoctoral staff. In fact, the latter group are employees, rather than students, a point that emphasises the differences. Even within each grouping, there are major differences in teaching or training approaches among the disciplines, and sometimes among degrees within a subject. Moreover, the groupings contain people with a wide variety of prior experience of education in general and of PDP. This commentary sets out to explore what factors need to be taken into account in designing a PDP framework for each type of user, and how each group can be engaged in the process, acknowledging that generalisations may be necessary and that there is sometimes little published work to support the assertions made.

PDP for taught postgraduates

The explicit (and sometimes implicit) expectation within the *Code of practice* (QAA, 2006b) and *Personal development planning: guidelines for institutional policy and practice* (QAA, 2009) is that this group are treated in a broadly similar fashion to undergraduate students.

However, the following 'special' factors need to be taken into account with this disparate group:

● students generally study for shorter periods of time than standard undergraduates, so there is less curriculum time to embed and follow up PDP activities

● the teaching curriculum may foster a very wide range of advanced postgraduate attributes and skills, ranging, for example, from surgery techniques to critical analysis

● the students may have widely differing backgrounds, including international students with no experience of PDP and cultural difficulties with bringing personal feelings and reflection to the fore, mixed with UK students, some of whom may have experienced the institution's undergraduate PDP framework

● degrees may have a vocational or advanced training element that may assist with students' motivation to engage with career-orientated PDP frameworks.

Taking these points into account, it seems inappropriate simply to shoehorn the group into the undergraduate PDP framework without tailoring it in significant ways. For example, if a major writing component is involved in the degree, then PDP might be used to support thinking on dissertation proposals and ethical issues, and the planning of research and writing. In addition, students might be expected to require a more advanced treatment of some of the 'standard' PDP activities, such as personality analysis and assessment of skills.

In terms of engagement, it has already been noted that this group is likely to be incentivised to engage with PDP. A focus on career planning might capitalise on this factor. On the negative side, some students may have established careers and associated CPD schemes that they will be returning to, so may find themselves patronised by a 'university PDP'.

There is anticipation of future work in developing PDP tailored to international taught postgraduates, from the Scottish Funding Council, HEA in Scotland and QAA Scotland through the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN).

PDP for research postgraduates

The provision of some form of PDP framework is an expectation within the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* (QAA, 2004), in particular via Precept 20, which states 'Institutions will provide opportunities for research students to maintain a record of personal progress, which includes reference to the development of research and other skills'.

The emphasis in PDP frameworks tends to be varied, as indicated by the data in table 6. 'Personal planning and review' appears in all frameworks and a CV focus is present in the majority, as with many undergraduate PDP frameworks. The key differences here are the

inclusion of research logs and research planning, while at least one framework is linked to an internal 'thesis monitoring' process that tracks student progress. The emphasis on skills assessment, training needs analysis and training planning is undoubtedly connected with HEI activities following the 'Roberts' Report' *Set for Success* (Roberts, 2002) especially the ensuing notion of postgraduate generic skills. These elements are generally built around the Research Councils' Joint Skills Statement (2001) or simplified derivatives of this.

Regarding engagement of postgraduate research students, it seems likely that the interweaving of PDP frameworks with both 'research log/thesis monitoring' and 'research skills training' aspects will provide an impetus. It is also commonplace that such research students think deeply about career directions as they progress - this may mean that they more readily identify with tools that assist in this process. Difficulties with engagement may occur due to the wide geographical dispersion of students, differing modes of study and lack of willingness on the part of supervisors to offer support.

Component (UKGRAD phrasing)	% institutions with component as a focus of PDP practice
Personal reflection and review	100
Skills assessment	94
Training needs analysis	94
Collecting CV information	88
Research log	82
Planning training	76
Research planning	59
Input into HEI transcripts and institutional records	24

Table 6: components of research postgraduate PDP frameworks. The data was compiled from 17 case studies highlighted on the UK GRAD website (as was) at November 2008. Other components, not noted here, included: thesis monitoring, career planning, professional presentation, signposting tools and resources, and student-supervisor relationships.

Postdoctoral staff

There is little published information regarding PDP for postdoctoral staff. In many respects, their needs in this area may be covered by appraisal and CPD schemes operating in their HEI. Some research postgraduate PDP frameworks (UK GRAD, 2008) are designed to include postdoctoral staff. It might be expected that this group would be highly motivated by career planning aspects of PDP.