Aspect P: work-based learning

Work-based learning (WBL) allows employee-students to undertake professional qualifications or degree studies using their **own work context** for learning and assessment. PDP is a process that can enable and support that learning, promoting reflection and recording key outcomes. PDP in the context of WBL can help to bring a coherent curriculum together from a variety of different learning activities and/or experiences. The learning contexts include pre-qualifying, qualifying and post-qualifying opportunities with a range of employers, including government bodies, large corporations, and small businesses. The following cases are not included in our definition of WBL:

- HE institution courses that send students out on block placement [see Aspect O: placement learning]

- students taking an internship module within industry as part of their degree.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

Purposes of PDP in WBL

P1 Who identifies learning needs and learning outcomes in WBL (for example students, employers, managers, university, professional body) and how are they identified (for example audit, appraisal, test, self review)?

P2 How is PDP tailored to the individual's learning needs in WBL?

P3 How will the student tailor the PDP for presentation to different audiences (for example self, employer, university, professional body)?

P4 How are the wide range of WBL needs (for example short, medium or long term, related to personal growth, professional body requirements, career plans, promotion or employer tasks) accommodated within the PDP?

Learning opportunities

P5 What is the range of opportunities for learning: in-house courses (which can be credit rated), external courses (which need time off and fees), distance-learning programmes, shadowing, coaching, projects, team work, volunteering?

P6 Are the opportunities to develop and measure reflection, soft skills, generic attributes and 'distance travelled' in WBL easily linked to PDP?

Assessing and recording learning

P7 Who monitors progress, provides formative comments on the PDP, assesses practice, assesses theory, assesses reflection, assesses praxis?

P8 How are assessment criteria for PDP made explicit to managers in the workplace?

P9 Who measures progress in WBL? Can the PDP record be used to link to other processes (for example self-evaluation, appraisal and promotion)?

P10   How are WBL achievements recorded in the PDP portfolio?

P11   How is the PDP framework used to organise the record of WBL?

P12   Is the PDP electronic or paper-based and if it is electronic, where is it stored (for example on the university server)?

Implementation

P13   How is the process of using PDP in WBL (for example finding learning opportunities, providing support, giving feedback and gathering evidence) implemented and managed?

P14   How is the use of PDP in WBL evaluated and quality assured by all stakeholders, including PSBs?

Commentary

Work-based learning and PDP: the confluence of two ideas

The WBL experience was described by Ball and Manwaring (2010):

> Work-based learning (WBL) provides the reality of an authentic context for learning which also produces the currency of transferable credit. It can enrich student learning, create a well-qualified workforce and open up new markets for HEIs. The term work-based learning includes a wide range of provision where the focus is on situations where the main location for the student is the workplace. The curriculum meets the needs of both HEI and employer and is jointly planned, delivered and assessed. It uses the immediacy of the work context to provide practice and to encourage reflection on real issues leading to meaningful applicable learning.

Higher Education Academy (2011) described PDP 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. PDP embraces a range of approaches to learning that connect planning (an individual's goals and intentions for learning or achievement), doing (aligning actions to intentions), recording (thoughts, ideas, experiences, in order to understand and evidence the process and results of learning) and reflection (reviewing and evaluating experiences and the results of learning).

This reciprocal relationship where PDP and WBL come together strengthens and enhances both processes. The ways in which PDP can add value to WBL are discussed below.

As highlighted in Aspect L: employability and employment, most employers see the benefits of employees reflecting on their experiences, and as a result making stronger connections between theory and practice and to application and competence on the job. The value of PDP in WBL is even more significant, as in many situations it will be the single place where the employee-student can collate and synthesise all their learning experiences. It can become:

- the repository for evidence of competence and its associated underpinning knowledge

- the mechanism for recording personal and professional thoughts, feelings and reflective accounts

- the place where mapping of knowledge, skills and experiences against current and future career aspirations is located

- the location where connections are made for the individual employee

- a vehicle for assessment.

PDP in WBL can serve many different purposes for all parties, including the university, the employer and the employee-student. Certain elements of it could also be used as evidence of growth, development and capacity building for sponsors and external funders. In WBL contexts, employee-learners are engaged in complex real-world scenarios where solutions often require inter-professional collaboration and cross-disciplinary thinking and these do not always easily fit into the deconstructed, modular nature of many university programmes. PDP is a useful mechanism for 'making sense' of both worlds. It introduces the possibility of a joint venture, a co-constructed approach to learning and a different tutor-learner relationship in both the work and university setting.

PDP and WBL as means to enhancing employer engagement

Brennan and Little (2006) highlighted that, if workplace learning is to expand on a 'distributed' basis, where there is sharing of the learning process between higher education and employers, then there must be changes in the traditional roles of many academic staff and workplace supervisors. The effective use of a student or student-employee's PDP could be used to support the links between academic learning and workplace application. This point is well recognised and reinforced through the Scottish Skills Strategy (Scottish Government, 2007) which explicitly recognises the importance of utilisation, not just acquisition, of skills and knowledge. Clearly this reinforces the partnership between the student-employee, the university and the employer and the need for all parties to appreciate the complexities of working environments (JISC, 2011). Such understanding may then lead to a greater two-way interaction between employers and universities, resulting in better knowledge exchange, relevant module content, employer-led teaching, staff exchanges, research opportunities and innovation on both sides, and possibly increased employability and internship opportunities. **PDP can play an important role in establishing these possibilities as no one should see the connections better than the student at the centre of the process.**

PDP and WBL, flexible learning and collaborative teaching, however blended with on-campus or off-campus or in-country interactions, provides real opportunities for universities together with employer partners to develop responsive, engaging and relevant learning. If this is offered through collaboration with employers and other institutions, it can deliver quality and cost-effective provision. WBL comes in many different forms with some employer-led models drawing on experienced staff to act as tutors, mentors or coaches on the job and making reference and links to university-created learning resources through the distance-learning or technology-based virtual learning environment. Approaches of this type are attractive as they can be scheduled around key production times and predictable busy periods.

Employee-students are often highly experienced individuals with all sorts of qualifications and experiences of learning, many of whom have not studied in a formal setting for a number of years. PDP provides a way of reflecting upon and making sense of this prior

learning within a more structured academic framework like the SCQF. This opens up the idea of customised flexible provision to suit the employer and the employee-learner. This flexibility inevitably brings its challenges to the university in terms of monitoring, record keeping and quality assurance processes as this flexible type of learning may not easily fit within the prescribed curriculum. PDP can be used as a mechanism for mapping experiences for different purposes and to different audiences.

Resolving tensions between employer needs, student needs and university needs

It is essential for everyone involved to have a shared understanding of learning needs and assessment criteria. Since the student is primarily a paid employee, the tasks should be pertinent to the goals of the workplace. The skill is to identify opportunities or create activities in the work context that satisfy the employer's needs and the student's learning needs, and meet the academic requirements of the university. A three-way meeting based around the PDP process and using the standard frameworks can help to resolve this issue (Williams and Thurairajah, 2000). Chan et al (2005) have developed a suite of mobile communication tools owned by the student yet offering interoperability so it can support PDP in the workplace.

The student's first responsibility is as an employee and they must fit their own personal and professional development needs into their work as an employee. The work context is less constrained than a traditional on-campus course, but the student must work harder to prove the relevance of learning from work activities to university requirements. The employer needs to provide appropriate activities and the university should be creative in its interpretation of assessment evidence.

The roles of supporters

The key player in the process is clearly the student, but the role of supporters is crucial. In WBL the student will probably have a range of different supporters and should be encouraged to develop a support network. This network can include formal and informal relationships from the workplace, university and personal life. It can help if the student lists potential supporters and their roles for each part of an action plan. NHS (2008) includes a useful model and example of how the different supporters link to the PDP process in a WBL context. As Gray (1999) explains 'The very openness of work-based learning requires that structures are put in place to support the learner.' These structures include both the supporters and the frameworks within the PDP. The PDP record can provide a focus for constructive dialogue as well as empowering learners and enhancing motivation (University of the West of Scotland, no date). It is important to clarify the roles that key stakeholders (for example student, peers, colleagues, workplace supervisor manager, clients, mentor, university tutor) play in finding learning opportunities, providing support, giving feedback, gathering evidence and ensuring learning experiences map to required criteria.

Assessing and accrediting student's WBL activities

Learning outcomes have an important place in the PDP and WBL processes. Raelin (2008) describes in detail how journaling and creating a portfolio of evidence can be

valuable parts of PDP within a work context using a wide range of work-related activities. Skinner et al (2010) present a case study of a shell framework and support materials that enable universities to accredit informal learning and WBL. Edwards (2005) explains how soft skills from the PDP portfolio can be used to measure the competences of employees and can contribute to their career management. The National Centre for Volunteering (2001) lists the many advantages of an employer-led programme of volunteering, including the development of key transferable skills in the volunteers. This is endorsed by the Higher Education Academy (2005) in a summary paper which includes a sample PDP framework.

The PDP portfolio (adapted from London Deanery, 2011) can serve many functions, for example:

- charts the learning journey

- acts as a framework for learning agreements

- provides a dossier of evidence of achievements

- demonstrates the learner's progress in breadth and depth

- serves as a reflective log which can be shared with supporters

- acts as a repository for work-based assessments

- assists the learner in making decisions and plans.

The PDP portfolio can contain a wide variety of items gleaned from WBL, for example:

- audit of existing skills and knowledge

- targets (personal, career, professional body, employer, university) identification of needs

- action plans

- work-based activities to meet needs

- evidence of learning from the workplace

- reflective journal, ideas, dreams, links between theory and practice

- references to literature

- witness statements

- applied assessment tasks: assignments, reports, products, distance travelled; assessment reports: marksheets, observation, appraisals.

Implications of WBL for PDP

Both the process and the record of PDP can be invaluable in WBL. Key ideas are summarised below.

Aspects of WBL	Implications for PDP
Student's prior learning	PDP process allows student to recognise, evidence and value their wide range of existing skills, knowledge and experience.
Student's needs	Learners are employees so getting a job is not the key purpose (though promotion may be an aim). It is a plan for life, not a CV. Learning needs may be short, medium and long term. Some plans may be private.

Links between theory and practice	Can become a critical process where the student reflects on the links and learning becomes explicit. The student should map ongoing experiences to specified criteria.
Authentic context	Identify generalisable transferable skills from specific employer jobs, practices and protocols.
Support network	Will workplace supporters understand requirements of university and professional bodies? Will university staff appreciate the richness of the workplace?
Remoteness from university	PDP can pull together different aspects in order to understand and organise different aspects.
Employer timescales	Busy times at work may prevent the student from attending sessions at the university, but the flexibility of PDP allows the student to reflect and learn at different times and in different ways.
Technological differences	University electronic PDP templates may not be accessible in the workplace due to firewalls or the use of different platforms and software. If possible, these barriers need to be removed. However, the PDP process can be applied and used within the employer's systems even if the technology is different. See JISC (2010).
Partnerships	The structures and questions used within PDP provide an excellent agenda for partnership meetings to clarify the needs, opportunities and progress of the student.
Assessment	PDP can store assignments and marksheets as well as individual and personal evidence of competence and learning. Matching to learning outcomes, levels, criteria, implications for structuring evidence. Reflective accounts link to praxis.
Curriculum design	The student's learning needs (which may include meeting the academic and professional body requirements as well as personal aspirations) can be the starting point for a curriculum plan of appropriate activities, challenges and assessments.
Quality assurance	Recognising courses, APL, APEL. Application from employer or employee. Must collect and match experiences to credit points using the SCQF.
Multiple purposes	The PDP record can be used for personal growth, professional development, career progression and lifelong learning. PDP here is process, praxis and product. Employee needs to recognise the filters applied by the employer and ensure they capture key aspects for each situation. PDP is a resource from which different CVs for different audiences can be constructed, for example CV for job or voluntary work. Employees must know what counts.

Table 8: aspects of WBL and its implications for PDP.