Personal Development Planning in Practice
A series of case studies
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Personal Development Planning in Higher Education (Scotland) Group would like to thank Scottish Qualifications Agency, Scottish Executive, Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education and all contributors to the publication.

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In December 1999, a consultation seminar on the forthcoming guidelines on Progress Files was jointly organised by the QAA in HE and the Personal Development Planning in Higher Education (Scotland) Group. The seminar, hosted at the University of Strathclyde attracted Higher Education policy makers, senior administrators, academic and related staff involved with teaching and the support of learning. While most Higher Education Institutions already provide graduating students with a transcript of attainment, albeit in different formats, not all HEIs have well formulated policies and practices relating to the provision of Personal Development Planning opportunities integrated into programmes of study. A clear outcome of the consultation seminar was the need to provide for policy makers and practitioners, models of Personal Development Planning which have already been embedded within academic programmes of study and other learning pathways.

In response to this stated need, the PDP in HE (Scotland) Group commissioned practitioners across the Scottish Higher Education sector to provide individual Case Studies, highlighting good practice in providing, implementing and supporting Personal Development Planning opportunities for learners.

These Case Studies reflect the variety of potential contexts for PDP, including work-based learning contracts, disciplinary based processes linking learning with personal and professional development, credit bearing modules, web-based and paper-based recording formats.

Common features of the Case Studies include emphasis on reflection, key skills, professional and disciplinary based skills. Almost all of the Case Studies address the complex issue of assessment of personal development planning, with many successful initiatives focusing on learning, development and formative feedback as well as the support required to underpin aspects of PDP. On the other hand, there are successful examples of credit bearing modules, credit being awarded on the basis of the processes of reflecting on learning and linking learning with personal development.

While this series of Case Studies provides only a snapshot of the variety of initiatives already embedded in programmes of study, all of them sit well with the QAA Guidelines relating to the Personal Development Planning aspect of Progress Files. Also, a Case Study from the SQA has been showcased here to highlight the move towards a seamless transition for learners moving through different sectors of the Scottish Education system with respect to Personal Development Planning opportunities.

These Case Studies are premised on the systems, processes and ethos of the Scottish Higher Education system, but they are clearly relevant to HEIs throughout the UK and beyond. It is for this reason that the PDP in HE (Scotland) Group has worked in collaboration with QAA to provide these models of good practice from across the HE sector. We hope that all relevant HE staff can build upon these case studies, adapting and remodelling them where appropriate to fit particular learning contexts but always bearing in mind that the personal/individual benefits derived from engaging in the process of PDP are generally more crucial than the framework or procedures used for recording PDP, whether utilising traditional paper based systems or the increasingly popular electronic media including the world wide web.

**FOREWORD**

Lorraine Stefani  
Chair, PDP in HE Group Scotland
WHO SHOULD USE THESE CASE STUDIES?

These case studies demonstrate the use of PDP in a variety of contexts in higher education. They should be of interest to individuals in a range of roles within and outwith the sector. For example:

- Policy makers and senior managers in higher education will gain insights into how PDP works and will be able to make informed judgements about how the process can be supported;
- Discipline-based lecturers and tutors will find examples of PDP integrated into specific disciplines;
- Tutors supporting work-based learning will find examples of PDP used in work-based learning;
- There are examples drawn from educational and careers guidance contexts;
- Some case studies feature the use of IT for those interested in making greater use of IT in supporting learning;
- Students will gain an increased awareness of the importance of reflection and becoming a self-directed learner;
- Employers will see how students are encouraged to develop these skills which will be essential to them in continuing professional development in their future careers;
- Reflective practitioners, regardless of discipline, profession or vocation will find different approaches to the process of PDP.

With the emphasis on lifelong learning for the twenty first century these case studies should have something to offer a very wide audience.
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PLANS FOR ACTION, TIME FOR REFLECTION:
an experiment with time, action and personal development

Paul Maharg
University of Strathclyde

Summary

This paper describes the implementation of a student development planning document or action plan for law students in the department of Law and Public Administration, Glasgow Caledonian University. First, the theoretical background to the implementation is described, followed by a description of the plan itself; and then the initial feedback obtained, via action research, from students who used the plan. Finally, some key points and resource issues are highlighted.
Context to the Action Plan: pre-existing counselling arrangements and documentation

Recently in the department of Law and Public Administration, there existed a system of counselling or advice which is a variant of what exists in other departments in the university and probably in other institutions as well. Under this system, students were assigned to staff in their first year, and there was a requirement for staff and students to meet each other at least once during this first year, and preferably more than once. In subsequent years of their academic career, students were allocated an academic counsellor in the department, but there was no requirement to meet with him or her.

In the department, counselling sessions tended on the whole to be occasions in which staff gave advice on a range of matters to do with academic affairs — student option choices, attendance at seminars, etc. Students learned that their advisor was there to be contacted should they have any problems at home which could affect their academic work, and should they encounter problems in their academic work in the university. On occasion, students would consult with their counsellors regarding these matters, and it was then there was the possibility that the sessions could take on more of the sense of real ‘counselling’, rather than discussions of options and the like.

In one form or another, this system is prevalent in many universities; but the term ‘counselling’ draws attention to some drawbacks in it where it exists in the form described above. In the first place, ‘counselling’ is not strictly descriptive of the content of such meetings. Moreover, staff are not trained in counselling or advising techniques; and if students come to them with major domestic or personal problems they are generally referred to counselling services elsewhere within the university. Secondly, such counselling regimes tend on the whole to be reactive only. Counselling academics act when they become aware of their students’ problems, and students come to see their counsellors only when they encounter problems, and are seeking short- or longer-term solutions that require the help of a member of staff. Moreover, some students are sometimes reluctant to come forward unless in extremis because of the presence of the power relationships that inevitably exist between staff and students. Seldom is there any emphasis on the proactive role of a counsellor, mainly because of the definition of the role.

Third, the role of the counsellor is strictly bounded within the curriculum. It does not feed directly into the normal teaching of staff or the learning of students.

The reactive nature of the counselling session was mirrored in the documentation with which academic counsellors logged the sessions in the department of Law and Public Administration. This was an A4 sheet with a number of boxes in which staff recorded the interview with a student. Normally, in real counselling environments, what documentation there is tends to be either primarily administrative in nature, or for the use of the practitioner in reflective notes. However, the academic counselling documentation logged student problems, identified and agreed via staff-student contact. The next year, a new counsellor was appointed, and a new log began. But with each passing year, the opportunity was lost to build up a portrait of the student from year to year, not merely for staff, but primarily for the student. Such a portrait could have been an important ‘process’ document which charted progress in interpersonal contexts such as group-work and the like. Normally this is difficult to assess across years, particularly because modular systems can render it difficult to track the assessment of interpersonal activities across the curriculum.

Kept systematically, the content of the log described above was composed of private notes for the counsellor. It was not descriptive of, or intended to describe, students’ understanding of skills and knowledge acquisition, and their understanding of details that may cast light upon why they felt or did things. Above all, it was a list of problems, defalcations, failures; and as such, could be described as a pessimistic document. This arose from the reactive and trouble-shooting nature of the academic counselling in which staff and students played out their roles.

But it also, and inevitably, arises from an epistemological view of what constitutes educational knowledge, events and interactions. For the most part in higher education, these take place in what one might regard as formal educational settings — seminar rooms, lecture theatres, libraries or laboratories — and not in one-to-one counselling sessions. Formal educational settings inevitably constrain the nature of the learning undertaken by students because they appropriate it to physical spaces within the university, and to specific forms of interaction between students and students, and students and staff. Such constraints are always present within any learning environment, and their effects have long been recognised by educationalists, such as Dearden (1976), p12, and Carr & Kemmis (1986), pp112-13. However many of the recent innovations in teaching, learning and assessment have had the effect of introducing new forms of learning — groupwork, collaborative learning, learning contracts, online learning, for example — that redefine types of interactions and events used in learning.

Personal development planning is one such form of learning. It is a form at least part of whose roots can be traced to the literature of student-staff interaction. As a recent study shows, students tend to see lecturers as potential sources of help, not only with academic problems, but for help with personal problems (Grayson, Clarke & Miller, 1998). This creates expectations which, if not met, tend to reduce the quality of the learning environment. As Grayson et al put it, “[w]e would speculate that there will be an increasing mismatch between what students expect and want (in terms of support from tutors) and what tutors are in practice able to offer’.

A third of the students were still unclear about the purpose of the Plan, so clearly this needed to be clarified. The point about registration is more problematic. As administrative procedures then stood in Caledonian, it would have been very difficult to have transferred Registration information to the Plan, even for such a small group of students. However it is not impossible to mark up electronic text on a form (whether typed or scanned) and to transfer it electronically from one form to another, and such a procedure would certainly help students to draft their Plan. For a good example of how this might be planned within a web environment, see http://www.scit.wlv.ac.uk/university/roa/roa.html

This Plan, developed at the University of Wolverhampton, is generic, and does not seem to be linked to specific programmes of study or disciplines; but gives a sense of the type of interactivity which is possible online.
Description of the Action Plan

The Action Plan is a modest example of an instrument that was designed to:

- Enable students to integrate social, personal and academic domains
- Chart the development and integration of skills across modules
- Facilitate the adoption of a new role for staff in advice situations.

These three together may appear ambitious and far-reaching aims for such a relatively simple idea, and document, but it was an underlying principle of the document that none of these three can be achieved to any great extent without taking into account the other two. The key characteristics underlying the aims were those of interaction and integration, both of these arising from a study of the educational literature in the field of student development instruments. In the next section I shall describe the educational background to this, and the models upon which the Action Plan was based.

Function and Use

The document is thirteen pages long at present, and consists for the most part in sections that the student fills out before meeting with the counsellor. Some of the sections are filled out during the counselling session, while others are filled later.

**Part A** consists of an analysis of acquired abilities, skills and achievements, as defined by a statement of:

- academic achievements
- work experience
- interests
- personal qualities
- health

**Part B** is given over to an analysis of educational and career aims, as defined by statement of:

- occupational goals
- personal transferable skills
- how the university could help attain/improve the above two statements

**Part C** consists of an analysis of personal targets and means of achieving them by:

- brainstorm (individual)
- priority list (with counsellor)
- updates throughout the year

In contrast to previous counselling documentation which lay in staff filing cabinets, students exercised their right to the information in the Plan by having physical possession of it, if they wished. They gave it into staff safe-keeping only if they want to, and if staff wanted to copy it, they require student permission, though staff would make their own notes too. In this way I hoped to signal to students that this was not just an administrative document, but a valuable and above all a personal document.

Students were asked to update the information as and when it changed. The information they logged in the Plan was then fed into a number of modules at key points in the curriculum. Reference was made to it in a level one Legal Skills module, in the writing skills unit, which was developed in a level two module. Further on in the curriculum, in a third level module called Clinical Legal Skills, it was planned that students would have used the information in their Plans to construct CVs directed at areas of employment they had outlined in their Plans, and covering letters which identified the key elements in their personal and employment experience which were relevant to the simulated job application. To an extent this already happened as an activity in the Legal Writing Skills unit, where it is used as an example of the importance of transforming writer-centred ideas and feelings into reader-based prose which deals with audience expectations and needs. The Action Plan, though, would have allowed students the space to think about how the academic curriculum, together with their employment record and their social life, was interacting to create their future. In the process, students’ potential for marketing their skills and knowledge would have been enhanced.

In one sense the Plan helped students considerably to write reader-centred CVs. In such documents, activities tend to be snapshots, lacking in context and experiential resonance. Since the Plan is cumulative over the period of undergraduate study, the inclusion of its historical dimension was designed to add depth to the activity of producing the CV. Moreover, the Action Plan is one method of presenting a portrait of students across the curriculum. Most modules the students took were one semester in length, and in the thick of assessments and assignments, students could find it difficult to give serious thought to progress in personal skills and personal goals except as a marginalised activity, in between more foregrounded activities in the curriculum such as module assessments.

Beyond self-marketing, though, I found that the Plan functioned as a script for the interview with students in which I could explore the issues that arose. Discourse theory teaches us how people shift in their narratives from episodes or isolated events to the perception of these events as instances of a general pattern, to script formulations, consisting of what that pattern might be composed (Schank, R.e & Abelson, R.,1977, and Nelson, K.,1986). Script details are created within repeated and situated accounts of experience. In the Plan, these were first narrativised then reformulated in interviews. Such dialogic reformulations serve two useful purposes. First they strengthen the trust and integrity between staff and students. Second, they signal the importance of the interpersonal context of learning to students, and the links between academic and personal skills, between social and intellectual learning.
Resource Implications

The key resource implications are as follows:

For Staff:
Curriculum development
The Action Plan was designed to work within a context in which it would be embedded within a coherent skills-based structure in the curriculum. This is crucial to its success. However there are resource implications in the amount of time needed to map out the implementation of the Plan within the curriculum, and to persuade colleagues of its usefulness. On its own, the Plan is barely worth the effort of implementation: its success is crucially dependent on its integration in the curriculum.

Staff time and development opportunities
The use of the Plan with students requires staff to read the Plan in advance of their interviews with students, and to spend more time discussing it with students than they might otherwise do. This also raises the question of training. While use of the Plan does not amount to a counselling event, it does require staff to be aware of best practice in discussing the interface of personal and academic with students.

For Students:
Time to complete the Plan
As will be evident below, students did feel that completing the Plan was time-consuming.

Purpose of Plan
Students need to be clear about the purpose of the Plan and the way in which it will be used in the curriculum. This needs to be clarified for them in course documentation, and emphasised by staff in specific modules.

Student Feedback
The Action Plan was piloted with one group of first year students (12 in number), and qualitative feedback was obtained from them, and their answers coded using a coding frame. Students used it throughout one year, and the Plan was used in level one and two Legal Skills classes.

Students were asked first of all what they did not like about the Plan. Their responses were as follows:

• Quite a lot to fill in (5)
• Gave all this information before when I registered (4)
• Not sure why I need to give all this information (4).

Students were then asked to comment on what they liked about the Plan:

• Helped me to talk about what I wanted to do [later in life] (7)
• Made me realise how I wasn’t prepared for university and how I could be more prepared (5)
• Helped me review previous employment (3)

I was surprised that few students thought the Plan helped them to review previous employment, particularly as this formed quite an important part of many of the discussions. It may be that for students, much part-time and holiday employment is short-term, and does not deserve much analysis in their eyes. Just over half the students, however did feel that the Plan helped to clarify future plans, and to think about the gaps between university and school or further education and personal life.

Next, they were asked to comment on how the Plan had helped them to reflect on their university experience to date:

• Helped me to talk to [my counsellor] about my experience of school and university (7)
• Helped me assess strengths and weaknesses in my studying (3)
• Don’t see the relevance of it (2)

Here again, the Plan had had a significant effect. Students felt that the Plan had facilitated the discussion about academic context, while a few commented on the helpfulness of the skills-based elements of the discussion. In the context of a report on client interviewing skills in the level two legal skills module, one mature student commented on the Plan as follows:

“I didn’t realise it at the time when I was filling out the form but it [ie the Plan] does help you think about your career and what you want to do. I found the interviewing [unit in the module] let me know what it was like for lawyers and I liked it. When I looked back at the Action Plan I found that’s what I wanted to do and what I thought I was good at.”
Conclusion and Future Developments

This feedback comes from a very small sample, and clearly more research requires to be carried out. Even from this small sample, however, we can say that the Plan was a qualified success, and that there are some interim conclusions that can be drawn about future use of the Plan:

- for students, the Plan is an unusual approach to skills-based learning, and therefore requires careful introduction so that they can appreciate its long-term advantages over the short-term effort of completing it
- it would be helpful if there were some form of administrative integration between centralised registration records and the Plan
- the Plan can be useful in departmental interpersonal initiatives
- most students saw it as a way of understanding and communicating their past.
- The Plan may require redrafting to help them see it more clearly as a tool to plan their future.
- Staff development would have been essential if the Plan were to become more than a pilot project. Staff self-image, for example, plays a role in the construction of the counselling role. Inevitably, staff bring unconscious attitudes and values to the counselling session, all of which affect the quality of the academic counsellor’s presence and, for students, the quality of the outcomes from the counselling interview. It would also be fair to say that not all staff may be easy with the concept of the counsellor, although everyone accepts that a caring role is essential (Brayne, 1998). If personal development planning is to succeed at a personal level among staff, therefore, there will be a need for staff development planning.

References

Brayne, H. (1998) Counselling skills for the lawyer: can the lawyer learn anything from counsellors?, The Law Teacher, 32, 2, 137-155


This is a version of a paper given at a COSHEP seminar on Personal Development Planning in Higher Education (Scotland) in November 1997 at University of Aberaty, Dundee, while the author was a member of staff in the Department of Law and Public Administration, Glasgow Caledonian University.
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING WITH SUPPORT NETWORK TEAM VOLUNTEERS

Colin Mason, Sally Collier & Catriona Baxter
University of St Andrews

Summary

The University of St Andrews has a strong system of student welfare support. Part of the Welfare set up is a volunteer force of about 25 students that form the SupNet (support Network) team. These students are supported in keeping a Personal Development Profile (PDP) issued as they commence training for work in the post. Students and staff involved in the SupNet team are committed to the formative process as well as the recording activity. Students principally use the opportunities afforded by the SupNet work for self-development. Neither the process nor the record are assessed formally as part of any academic programme. Staff view the process as an integral part of ongoing monitoring of the training of students in their SupNet role and use the record, with permission, in providing personal references for future employers.

Dr Colin Mason is Head of Staff Development at the University of St Andrews. He has long been committed to enhancing student skills in the area of personal and professional development planning and is reknown for helping individuals and groups develop and use such tools as concept mapping.

Sally Collier, supported by Catriona Baxter, is Student Adviser within the Welfare team of Student Support Services at St Andrews, encouraging and supporting students to participate in the SupNet initiative.

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