A Student- Centered Personalised Learning Space for Employability

Ruth Brooks and Alastair Mckinna, The Business School
r.brooks@hud.ac.uk and a.j.mckinna@hud.ac.uk

Abstract
In 2009 a pilot project was undertaken to develop and enhance Personal Development Planning (PDP) and employability skills amongst final year undergraduates on the BA Business Management degree. Developed in conjunction with students, the Careers and Employability service and the Academic Skills unit, a Personal Development and Employability Workbook was generated. Student learning from this tool was embedded, through the creation of an e-portfolio, in the campus-wide Blackboard VLE system.
Based on initial findings, the project team has researched a number of pedagogical issues to support student engagement with the process, developing a reflective practice model identifying key stages in the cycle. The model's aim is to encourage and challenge students to critically evaluate their personal skills and abilities, support their independent learning and academic progression on the course, as well as assisting with the first steps in their career

Keywords: employability; skills; e-portfolio; pdp; career planning

Introduction
Personal Development Planning (PDP) in Higher Education, first recommended by the Dearing Report (1997), continues to remain a developmental priority amongst undergraduate students. The Quality Assurance Agency (2009) updated guidelines, recognises the benefits for students, academic staff and institutions from a systematic and considered approach to PDP. Universities need to ensure at a course level, the currency of their PDP provision and its suitability to prepare undergraduates for academic achievement and future employment.
The subject benchmarks for general business and management (QAA 2007) identify ten essential skills, additionally commenting that as a practical subject, skill development should be related to employability. The CBI (2009) state graduate employability skills require improvement, with self management and business/ customer awareness currently being the weakest ones. However, many students continue to feel universities focus on knowledge rather than skills. Course teams therefore need to consider the integration of all these elements within a programme.

Background to the Learning Spaces Project
This paper discusses a pilot scheme, entitled Learning Spaces, undertaken during 2009/10 at the University of Huddersfield with final year Business Management students, to enhance awareness of graduate employability skills through the use of PDP. Prior to commencing the research, the literature on PDP and employability was reviewed, with the work of Cottrell (2003), Ward and Watts (2009) and Knight and Yorke (2004) being particularly relevant for informing the early stages of the project. As the project progressed the literature was broadened, particularly regarding the use of e-portfolios in relation to PDP and is discussed later in the paper.
Within the university, a wide range of support mechanisms are available to students, including professional guidance from the careers service and subject specific academic skills support from units within the individual schools. In addition, pastoral and academic support is provided by the teaching team. The Learning Spaces project has taken the approach of combining these different aspects of cross university support into the final year PDP programme rather than each service working independently of each other. Quniton and Smallbone (2008) advocate internal staff champions for successful implementation of

programmes and the promotion of a PDP culture. To achieve cohesion and promote the use of PDP amongst students, the final year tutor coordinated the different aspects of the programme.

The overarching aim of the Learning Spaces project was to improve employability skills amongst undergraduate students through a range of learning materials and an e-portfolio framework. To achieve this aim the following objectives were established:

- A review of final year PDP practice across internal and external programmes.
- An integrated PDP resource to use with students to include personal analysis, careers analysis, psychometric/ aptitude testing, job application and interview techniques, guest speakers from employers and past graduates and progress files.
- An initial qualitative evaluation of participation rates and effectiveness.
- Quantitative assessment via degree classification and destinations statistics.

The review of PDP, both internally and externally, identified a diverse range of practices depending upon the requirements of the academic discipline, staff commitment and resources within a department. Models varied from a minimalist tick box approach to complex, detailed systems where PDP was fully integrated into the curriculum and mapped. The review informed the Learning Spaces project by taking elements of best practice from different programmes, to develop the most appropriate model for Business Management.

Project Outcomes

The next stage was the development of an integrated PDP resource, to help students perform to the best of their ability in their final year and prepare for an increasingly competitive job market. Tobin (2010) found graduates were teaching themselves additional skills to become more employable and gain a competitive advantage; emphasising the need to be aware of all skills and abilities, not just those learnt within the university environment. Tomlinson (2008) reinforced the point that students need to add value through employability skills rather than solely relying on academic qualifications. A key factor behind the development of the Learning Spaces project was for students to recognise the full range of their skills and abilities not solely those acquired on their academic programme, particularly relevant to the increasing numbers of students taking a placement year.

The QAA (2009:5) define 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 has the potential to enhance the student experience and maximise personal achievement within the boundaries of an individual's ability. Using the above definition to underpin the project, a Personal Development and Employability Workbook was written, providing a framework for the process. Containing seven sections, the workbook allows students to progress through a range of exercises and reflective thought processes for their early career management. An action based approach was adopted as recommended by Revans (1993), as learning cannot take place without activity. The workbook used colour, images, diagrams and space to facilitate ease of use and appeal to students as a worthwhile activity to complete, rather than being seen as a complex and difficult task and therefore disregarded. Croot and Gedye (2006) believe that paper based PDP's are advantageous, providing a tangible set of materials that can easily be annotated. It was felt that the workbook, through physical representation, highlighted to students the importance of PDP and employability where purely electronic formats could potentially be easily overlooked.

Students will only participate in processes perceived to provide a valued return on their investment (QAA 2008). Encouraging students to engage with the workbook and e-portfolio focused on the potential achievements that could be gained both in terms of degree

classification and graduate employment. JISC, in its role of promoting the innovative use of technology in education and research, has supported a number of projects and believes that to have a significant impact learners need to understand the role of PDP and e-portfolios in relation to their studies, a factor emphasised at the launch of the process.

The material in the workbook incorporated three strands: academic development; personal development and career development, all of which contribute towards graduate employment. Gibbs' (1988) six stage Reflective Learning Cycle formed the design basis of the workbook, with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle additionally being drawn upon to model the PDP process. Reflection still poses challenges in its teaching from both a student and staff perspective; experience from the project identified that reflection is best taught through a combination of examples and staff engagement.

The concept of enhancing employability amongst students is reinforced by Hillage and Pollard's (1998) findings that the benefits of PDP are assets in knowledge, skills and attributes which need to be effectively deployed and presented to potential employers. PDP has assumed greater significance in recent years as job markets have become increasingly competitive. Undergraduates frequently lack experience of promoting their attributes within job applications, interviews and selection processes; therefore guidance was provided through an interactive careers Blackboard site as well as being available through traditional face to face guidance. The careers Blackboard site was integrated at various intervals in the workbook providing embedded materials and activities that are on-demand and self-paced.

The role of technology in PDP

Good practice recommends the use of both paper based and electronic evidence within a portfolio (Strivens 2007). The next stage was the design of an e-portfolio for students to store personal documents and resources. The paper-based resources allowed activity and experiential learning, complementing an e-portfolio's concept of portable, lifelong learning. A number of packages such as Pebblepad and Mahara were considered, but as the Blackboard VLE is already used extensively within the university and students are familiar with the system, the e-portfolio was integrated into a dedicated Blackboard site using a combination of HTML, Microsoft Office and hyperlinks. The hope is that by combining a workbook and VLE, it will improve a learner's capacity to analyse their personal goals and values to build upon their strengths and skills. During the pilot a relatively simple Blackboard site was constructed, allowing students to upload documents into a number of pre-named folders that they felt were relevant to their personal development. The activities behind these documents were based in the workbook. The folders included: my reflections, CV, my achievements, my core competencies and my work experience, bringing together the range of attributes for successful personal development.

It is important to balance the use of technology with the fundamental elements of PDP, so that the challenges of using the technology do not over ride the importance of self development. An advantage of an e-portfolio is portability; the entire portfolio can be downloaded from Blackboard upon completion of studies for future use and ongoing Continuous Professional Development. Overfield et al (2009) found students preferred to use a combination of paper based and electronic materials rather than solely relying on one method; the Learning Spaces project by providing a workbook and e-portfolio achieved these two elements of recommended practice.

The integral use of a paper based workbook and an e-portfolio raises issues regarding pedagogy, challenging traditional approaches. Providing on-line resources can lead to increasing learner autonomy but can deny students personal contact with tutors and peers, to support the learning process. Pedagogical issues are to be further explored in the next academic year, to ensure the most appropriate model for delivery is in place.

Other aspects of the integrated PDP resource included bespoke psychometric testing for management students, support workshops to advise and guide on the PDP process, careers talks and the promotion of fairs and graduate employment opportunities. The academic skills tutors and librarians ran sessions highlighting study skills appropriate for final year students, helping them to work at a high level of independent study required in the latter stages of a

degree. As a consequence of the in-class sessions, academic skills tutors reported an increased use of their services by academically able students, who were pushing themselves towards the upper grade boundaries after realising study skills could support them as well as weaker students experiencing difficulties. Finally, within the programme it had been hoped to hold guest lectures by employers and past graduates but this had not been achieved during the year. Plans to overcome the difficulty of coordinating the lectures involve the use of online interviews and multi-media presentations. A flip camera will be used for technologically simple, short clips of people's personal experience of employment.

Student Experiences
The third and fourth objectives were designed to evaluate the integrated PDP resource, ensuring it met student needs. The qualitative evaluation was achieved through a student focus group, where overall feedback on the resource was positive. Students had liked the style and content of the workbook, though acknowledged that at busy times in a final year priority was given to academic study. From the focus group, it was realised that students engaged with PDP and employability in their own personal time frame. Some students were keen to secure early graduate employment, therefore engaging in PDP at the start of the academic year, where as others preferred to concentrate on their studies and search for employment upon completion of the degree. This highlighted the need for flexible and portable resources that could be used at a later date, while simultaneously providing appropriately timed sessions for those following a more traditional time scale of graduate recruitment.

An unexpected outcome of the focus group was the number of students not searching for graduate employment upon completion of the degree. Approximately 15% of students were planning to take a gap year or study at masters level, before applying for the 2011/2 graduate intake. This again demonstrates the need for long term reflective and personal development skills for use in an individual time frame.

The final outcome of the focus group was that despite being extensively used in academic literature and official publications, students do not always clearly understand the term 'employability'. The university careers service previously used the term employability in their title but have recently been renamed Career Planning, simplifying the title and encapsulating the main focus of their provision. Based on this feedback, the current title of the paper based Personal Development and Employability Workbook has been reconsidered and will be referred to as Personal Development and Career Planning.

The quantitative evaluation will be completed in October 2010 with the leaver destinations survey. Initial indications from results identify that 65% of those who engaged with the process did achieve higher classifications, with the remaining participants achieving a 2:2. Students amongst the group who received thirds or had resits showed no evidence of using the Learning Spaces materials. The project team recognise that the achievements are not wholly attributable to PDP, but feel it demonstrates that students who utilise the different support mechanisms available are engaged with their studies and personal achievement, being prepared to put in additional time and effort to gain high grades and graduate employment. Approximately a third of students engaged with the project working independently on the materials; a third engaged but required tutor support and a third did not effectively utilise the programme. An aim for the next academic year is to increase participation rates through earlier introduction and an increased number of in class PDP activities.

PDP for Self Employment
There is a limited literature of PDP for self employment though the principles of self reflection and analysis can be equally applied to graduate enterprise as employment. Universities principally engage students in enterprise activity either through the curriculum or start up

units such as the Business Mine at the University of Huddersfield. Projects, such as the one run at the University of Worcester by Bowen-Jones and Bill (2009), have successfully embedded enterprise and pdp into the curriculum but initiatives such as this are few in number and still in their infancy.

As the Higher Education community is required to provide employment opportunities in the widest sense, there is a growing demand for graduate enterprise. Activities in the Learning Spaces project could be used for enterprise as well as employment, a feature which will be considered for the next academic year. Processes such as a personal SWOT analysis, a personal timeline or a Johari window allow self reflection and analysis that could lead to a conclusion of self employment being the most suitable pathway. Enterprise is also encouraged in the curriculum with a core module on Small Business Enterprise and Planning as well as further options in the final year.

Future Developments
Having completed the pilot year and achieved the key objective of developing a viable integrated learning resource, the project team have identified a number of new features to be introduced for the next academic year.   Firstly, Web 2.0 technologies will be used to enhance the e-portfolio, improving functionality for the students. A social bookmarking tool, del.icious, will be incorporated into the site, allowing storage of favourite website URL's and links, facilitating fast and easy navigation between resources. The concept of a SkillCloud, available within del.icious, where tagging and bookmarking images are used to help student's visualise all the information in an e-portfolio, is currently being investigated for possible integration into the system.

Secondly, a range of multi-media materials will be embedded as a balance to the text based material. Podcasts, screencasts and videos will be used to deliver the PDP materials and provide comments on learning and employment experiences from past students. Local employers will also be approached to provide short commentaries on their perspective of graduate recruitment. By providing a range of materials and formats, it should address individual learning styles, so that each student can engage with aspects of the PDP process.

The Learning Spaces project has been developed and delivered by a small team of people committed to the process, a factor believed to be essential for success (Quinton and Smallbone 2008). The team secured internal funding for the project and due to the success of the pilot, ongoing resources are being supported by the department in terms of staffing, materials and planned future developments. PDP requires adequate resourcing if it is to be undertaken effectively (Brennan and Shah 2003) and the ongoing support is welcomed by the project team. For Learning Spaces to continue being successful, it is essential that the process and supporting materials meet the needs of students; therefore it will be a dynamic and constantly evolving programme.

As a small team of staff have delivered the PDP, it is hoped to widen the teaching team slightly to deliver to an additional group of students. A series of two hour workshops covering topics such as CV writing, applications, interview techniques and how to maximise the benefits of work experience are being written, to allow other staff to be involved in the process. The workshop sessions will provide presentations, student handouts and tutor notes to ensure consistency of delivery, incorporate features of good practice and support tutor commitment.

Academic reflections based on Learning Spaces are that for PDP to be successful students have to be personally motivated to engage with the process; a conclusion also drawn by Kneale (2007). The process has to be explicit, relevant and develop students progressively to maintain ongoing interest in PDP. Strong links to employability are essential, as first stage career planning is a key driver for student engagement. PDP also needs to be integrated

within the learning and assessment process (Adenekan 2010), rather than being an extra activity.

The Learning Spaces project has been a first step in developing a robust and viable integrated PDP resource. The concept of PDP in higher education is well established. Course teams however, must review their provision on a regular basis to ensure it meets the current needs of students and makes effective use of continually developing technology without losing the key focus of personal development for academic success and graduate employment.

References

Adenekan, S. (2010) *Why Personal Development Planning (PDP) Matters.* [online] available at:
http://www.jobs.ac.uk/career-tools-and-advice/careers-advice/1367/why-personal-development-planning-pdp-matters/ [Accessed 20 June 2010]

Bowen-Jones, W. And Bill, K. (2009) *Enhancing Enterprise, Entrepreneurship and Employability through PDP* Higher Education Academy: York [online] available at:
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/case_studies/bowen_jones_bill.pdf [Accessed 21 July 2010]

Brennan, J. and Shah, T. (2003) *Report on the implementation of Progress Files.* Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, Milton Keynes [online] available at: http://oro.open.ac.uk/324/1/ProgressFiles.pdf [Accessed 22 June2010]

Confederation of British Industry (2009) *What business wants from higher education* [online] available at:
http://highereducation:cbi.org.uk/uploader/1_CBI_HE_taskforce%20reort_What_business_wants_from_higher_education.pdf [Accessed 5 June 2010]

Cottrell. S. (2003) *Skills for Success.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Croot, D. and Gedye, S. (2006) 'Getting the most out of Progress Files and personal development planning.' *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* Vol.30, No. 1, pp173-179

Dearing, R. (Chair) (1997) *Higher Education in the learning society: Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.* London: HMSO

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods.*

Further Education Unit, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford.

Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: Developing a framework for policy*

analysis. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) Research report. No

RR85. London: DfEE

JISC (no date) [online] available at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/ [Accessed 22 June2010]

Kneale, P. (2007)' Personal Development Planning (PDP) really happens at work.'

Planet, 18, pp33-35 [online] available at:

http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p18/pk.pdf [Accessed 22 June2010]

Knight, P. & Yorke, M. (2004) *Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Prentice Hall: New Jersey

Overfield, J, Ainley, C, and Cullen,R (2009) Development of e-portfolio for Reflective Learning. *In:* Science Learning and Teaching Conference 3rd June 16-17, 2009, Herriot-Watt University, Edinburgh [online] available at: http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/ftp/events/sltc09/papers/p13overfield.pdf [Accessed 12 June 2010]

Quality Assurance Agency (2009) *Personal Development Planning: Guidance for Institutional Policy and Practice in Higher Education.* QAA: Gloucester.

Quality Assurance Agency (2007) *Subject Benchmark Statements: General Business and Management.* 165 02/07, QAA: Gloucester.

Quinton, S. and Smallbone, T. (2008) 'PDP implementation at English universities: What are the issues?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp99-111

Revans, R.W. (1993) 'Action Learning: Its Terms and Character.' *Management Decision,* Vol. 2. Iss. 1, pp39-50

Strivens, J. (2007) *A Survey of e-pdp and e-portfolio practice in Higher Education.* Higher Education Academy: York [online] available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/personal_develop ment_plan/survey_of_epdp_and_eportfolio_practice_in_uk_higher_education.pdf [Accessed 5 June 2010]

Tobin, L. (2010) 'Students looking to extra-curricular activities to give them employability.' *The Guardian* April 20 [online] available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/apr/20/student-employability-extra-curricular-skills [Accessed 20 June 2010]

Tomlinson, M. (2008) 'The degree is not enough: students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability.' *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* Vol.29, No.1, pp49-61.

Ward, R. and Watts, A.G. (2009) *Personal Development Planning and Employability in* Personal Development Planning and Employability revised edition The Higher Education Academy: York [online] available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/employability/PDP_ and_employability_Jan_2009.pdf [Accessed 10th June 2010]