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## **Integrating PDP (Personal Development Planning) and the e-portfolios in Accelerated Learning courses emphasising on employability.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a project taking place at the University of Plymouth, implementing a generic e-portfolio tool in a first year Ethics & Employability module for the new two year Bachelor courses – using accelerated learning approaches – in Computing. There is a considerable interest in Accelerated Learning courses in Higher Education and the institutions are called to make appropriate adjustments such as being responsive to employers and student needs. Mechanisms have been built into the degree structures in order to create a coherent curriculum that embeds employability and makes it possible for students to identify its different features within their learning experience. The project yields insights into how such technology might be more effectively integrated and deployed in supporting student learning and development in the future.

### **Introduction**

The introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) has become a major policy for UK Higher Education in response to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) recommendation in 1997 that all students should have either PDP modules or embedded PDP curriculum with subject based modules. This will enable students to make the outcomes of their learning more explicit and to demonstrate their achievements (NCIHE, 1997). Personal Development Planning has been described after extensive research 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” (QAA, 2001). The primary purpose of a PDP (Personal Development Plan) is to help students in higher education to learn and develop more effectively and to be able to:

- learn in a wider variety of ways and a wider range of contexts;
- recognise and be able to list evidence for their own learning and therefore the progress they are making;
- draw upon and use their expanded personal knowledge to achieve particular goals;
- review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning;
- recognise and define their training/learning needs.

This paper reports the findings from the work in progress project embedding a generic e-portfolio in a first year ethics/employability module for 2-year fast track Computing students at the University of Plymouth.

Accelerated Learning is the most advanced teaching and learning method in use today. It is a total system for speeding and enhancing both the design process and the learning process. At the University of Plymouth and more particularly at the School of Computing and Mathematics two year courses (fast track) using the accelerated learning techniques run for the first time. Fast track courses are the representation of the term accelerated learning. This type of learning is basically associated with programs designed to meet the needs of adult learners. Accelerated learning is used to identify an approach to learning that is multidimensional in nature and that places the learner at the centre of experience (Greenbaum, 1999; McKeon 1995; Meier 2000). Accelerated Learning is the result of Georgi Lozanov's work that developed the theory of suggestology (Bonanno 2000). Accelerated Learning has at its centre a philosophy of learning to demechanise the learning process and make it a whole person experience (Meier, 2000).

### **1. Context for the emergence of PDP in the UK for wider government policies concerned to promote employability.**

Personal Development Planning has its origins in a number of related policies. In 1997 the universities in UK, in Scotland, the QAA and Dearing, R. published a joint policy statement on personal development for students in Higher Education. In this report, Dearing (1997) notes that students and graduates can be seen as the higher education stakeholders, that affect its economy. In 2001 QAA said that learning is a lifetime activity. The purpose of higher education is to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest levels, to increase knowledge and understanding, to serve the needs of the economy and to shape a democratic and civilised society. There are also factors that make learning to be increasingly responsive to employment needs and should include the development of general skills that are widely valued in employment. Therefore, the demands for higher education are changing since the demands of employers are changing. Based upon the findings of Dearing (1997), the demands for the future higher education should be

- To develop a competitive environment.
- To adverse consequences of not responding to investment by competitors.
- To meet the economic benefits for individuals and society.
- Graduates in the workforce should refresh their learning.

Developing the above points, it is quite clear that higher education needs to produce employable graduates that are highly competitive and innovative. Throughout their studies at an institution they learn a variety of topics that will be needed when they will go and work in the real world. Hence, what we are looking at is to have students that are able to reflect on their experiences and gather evidence of their personal and professional skills development in order to improve in a number of areas. The development of students' self awareness is what made PDP modules to be introduced in higher education institutions.

PDP modules are a key contributor to student career development skills. PDP is defined by 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” with the objectives of improving the capacity of students to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning.

Nevertheless, students need to know that PDP has the above purposes and that it will help them with their future employability. Hence, a PDP module can include the following topics based on the suggestions by Higher Education Academy (2006)

- Partnership between academics and careers service people.
- Students to deliver presentations since they are highly needed and used in real workplaces.
- Report writing either as a group assignment or an individual one.

Students can produce reflective work either in the form of a portfolio or any other format that the tutor wishes to use, where the student will demonstrate his/her skills based on what was learnt during the course.

Edwards summarises the results of a major research project, sponsored by QAA, that shows how PDP and the associated student support can be implemented in higher education institutions so that it aids students in recruitment processes and later career management. He notes that most employers put strongest emphasis on the process of PDP rather than the documented processes. The mission is to produce autonomous learners that will be employable and able to position themselves in terms of global competitiveness in both UK and elsewhere. In order to succeed in that, government attempts to create education policies that will develop the human capital (Coffield, 2000) and enhance employability. Therefore, following up Dearing’s report, the development skills should become a central aim of higher education. The development of communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn at a higher level within all subjects, become essential (Cranmer, 2006).

## **2. Context for the emergence of Accelerated Learning in the UK for wider government policies concerned to promote employability.**

Fast Track is a programme developed and funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Fast Track seeks to identify, recruit, develop and retain talented individuals from within the teaching profession by offering an enriched professional development route to senior school leadership. One of the main thrusts of this modernising agenda is to realise the full potential of the education system by attracting and motivating students and staff with the use of incentives, professional development and general support.

The global context of education is changing (Carnoy, 2005). Globalisation is having an impact on Higher Education and as such universities have had to become responsive to international trends (Carnoy, 2005). International developments such as the Bologna declaration are taken into consideration. The character and composition of the students is also changing. Universities nowadays not only need to prepare graduates for the job market but also they need to provide service to mature and lifelong learners. Higher Education institutions are now required “to adapt objectives, content and presentation for this group of motivated learners who have decided to return to study usually to further their careers and to update their knowledge”

(Anderson & Askov 2001, p.155). In an environment of undergoing rapid transformation it is surprising that teaching methods have also been changing.

The Dearing report (1997) discussed the need for continuing professional development and many times in collaboration with employers. The 2003 white paper on Higher Education by DfES (2003) recognised the need for greater flexibility in teaching and learning in Higher Education to meet the needs of students from non traditional backgrounds and to attract people with different demands and commitments. This is when a proposal was outlined within that paper for accelerated Honours degree programmes-fast track two year. At the moment this proposal is now implemented by Higher Education institutions as part of an overall investigation into different models of flexible learning funded by HEFCE.

Motivation for this came from two interrelated factors, financial pressure on students and rising levels of student debt (McGraig, Bowen-Brown & Drew, 2007) but also the aim to increase participation towards 50% of those aged 18-30 (DfES, 2003). By following this approach accelerated programmes might provide a mean to provide more flexible opportunities at a lower cost to participants.

Although accelerated learning courses have a lot to offer, there are two major issues that have been raised. Degrees that form part of the national accreditation framework are defined in terms of the level of their learning outcomes (QAA, 2001) and the number of estimated learning hours to achieve them. Hence, for accelerated degrees to have an equivalent value, the academic learning hours have to be accommodated and there may be concerns about the feasibility of this. There may also be concerns about the practicalities of transferring to courses of more normal length. Also, as McGraig et al (2007) note, there may be issues in assuring quality for a programme that implies to achieve the same learning outcomes in a shorter time and this includes issues such as resourcing and student workload.

Another set of issues that McGraig et al (2007) have identified in their report relate to the Bologna process that aims to encourage compatibility across the 45 countries of Higher Education provision. Up until now in many European countries the undergraduate programs run for four years while the Bologna process anticipates three year programmes of study at the first cycle of a three part Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate qualification cycle. Accelerated programmes of study in an even shorter time span may raise concerns among European policy makers.

At this point it worth mentioning the Lisbon strategy which promotes lifelong learning and flexibility (McCaig et al, 2007). In 2007 DfES and HEFCE produces a joint report on fast track degrees (McGraig et al, 2007). The outcome of that report was that the UK government need to continue promoting the importance of learning outcomes within the Bologna process since we are living in an era of lifelong learning. This report also mentioned that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has also indicated that the fast track degrees have the potential to support the Bologna policy objectives and as such to support lifelong learning.

Apart from the governmental driven research on fast track courses and accelerated learning there is already evidence of high quality research on the benefits of this type of courses. Accelerated learning is not a totally new concept. Adult education is a fast growing enterprise and as Scott and Conrad (1992) found, adults appreciate the efficiency of accelerated learning formats. In other words students valued completing courses and attaining degrees in less time than usual.

Having discussed the above it needs to be mentioned that there are opposite views as well on fast track courses and accelerated learning. Many conventional academics

believe that accelerated programs stress convenience over substance and rigor (Wolfe 1998). They strongly believe that increased contact is needed so students have time for reflection and analysis. Another question raised is if the instructors can cover the appropriate amount of content in a shorter period of time.

Some critics think accelerated programs are too compressed in order to produce consistent educational value (Wlodkowski, 2003). In addition to that, learning is crammed and poorly developed. Another area that has substantial research is the quality of fast track courses. As Wlodkowski (2003) stresses, the issue of quality in education is a perplexing question rife with the conflicting values and standards.

### **3. The project**

This “work in progress” paper is based on the data resulting from 20 emails sent to the author of this paper who is also the tutor of PDP module. These emails were sent by the students between March 30<sup>th</sup> and May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. All of the informants were to provide in brief their experiences on using e-portfolios for the first time. Students commented on employability, depth of learning, student support and lifelong learning. These emails were saved and analysed using qualitative approaches to assist the study. Prior to the emails the informants were shown how to use e-portfolios using PebblePad and given examples and an assignment to complete by the end of Term 2. These e-portfolio examples were supplied by the author at the University of Plymouth. It is anticipated that a second stage of research will take place in due course using an online survey to try and attach some statistical significance to the findings. In September 2009 the e-portfolio approach will be available to 200 students and more concrete results are expected to be available by the end of the academic year 2009/2010.

Students were assigned an assignment that was asking them to reflect on their experiences during their first year of their studies. The content should focus on:

- computing professional and ethical concerns
- individual self-management (planning, organisational and reflective) skills
- focus on team working skills
- focus on employability skills

Students had several sessions with the author on ethical awareness and key skills and two events with employers (one with British Telecoms and one with 4 local employers). These gave them enough information to reflect and to complete the assignment. By using the e-portfolios, there was constant feedback on students’ assignments since they were uploading their documentation online. By using the e-portfolios creativity was also supported and encouraged and students were advised not to use existing templates.

This ongoing project raised a lot of fields of interest that will be further examined in the following year. At the moment we are trying to look at how e-portfolios are enabling students of accelerating learning courses to enhance their employability and why this is important.

### **4. Discussion**

Referring to Yorke’s (2005) extensive research, employability derives from complex learning. We should not assume that provision of experience is a sufficient condition

*SECTION B: applications, experiences, good practices, descriptions and outlines, educational activities, issues for dialog and discussion*



for enhanced employability. The same argument applies to the curriculum. Even when employability and professionalism are being included into the curriculum this is not enough to facilitate the professional development of the individuals. The students learn from their experiences formed by both work based experience and the employability integrated into the curriculum. While applying or getting a job students can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job. Employability is a characteristic of the individual. It is, after all, the individual whose suitability for the post is appraised (Yorke, 2005). Employability is a complex concept. A pedagogy for employability needs to take the inherent complexity of the construct into account. Students, therefore, will develop their employability in ways that reflect their particular circumstances and become capable (Stephenson, 1998). In reality, academic staff development emphasises the practice and perfection. Higher education is actually dealing with adults. Adult education was mainly based on a “front-end loading” model (Foley, 2000). In this approach professionals were taught the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they would need to practice. In 1980s a new model was introduced by Schon that focused on the way in which practitioners think and act in actual work situations (Foley, 2000). The practitioner-centred model puts the individuals and the complex contexts in which they work at the centre of analysis. This model assumes that “adult educators and other practitioners are active thinkers who are continually trying to make sense of their work” (Foley, 2000). This can be supported by Walker as well who claims that critical professionalism plays a key role for inquiry into practice. Adult learners do things and they think about them. When they do things they are engaged into practice and when they are thinking about their practice they re- reflecting and theorising. Reflection plays a key role in the professional development of an individual (Moon, 2005). Through reflection we can become aware of our implicit knowledge (Schon, 1983; Boud et al, 1985). We can then analyse these understandings and theories and modify and expand on them through reading, discussion and further reflection. In higher education there are two main paradigms being used, the interpretive and the critical. The interpretive paradigm sees knowledge as both subjective and socially constructed and individuals understand the world differently (Foley, 2000). In other words, they can be affected by culture and social structure and it more based on the individual. On the other hand side, the critical paradigm, places a much greater emphasis on the social context of knowledge and education and focuses on the relationship of knowledge, power and ideology (Foley, 2000).

As a result, for any type of paradigm that is taking place in a higher education institution, the attention should be drawn to enhance students’ employability and professionalism. If higher institutions can achieve that then we can have higher students’ motivation to enter higher education and improvisation of job prospects. Through the curriculum educators need to pursue understanding and knowledge, skills, efficacy beliefs and reflection (Watts, 2006). This leads us to the conclusion that career development learning is extremely important in higher education. It can persuade career management skills simultaneously with the use of knowledge as a tool by the students for self-understanding or as Watts remarks “as researchers of their own lives”.

## **5. Summary**

During the course of undertaking action towards e-portfolios a number of issues have already arisen but this gives us the opportunity to plan and design the modules in such a way to include online technologies. The implementation of e-PDP has resulted in a wide variety of approaches and tools in use in fast track courses, ranging from small scale in some modules to fully integrated and assessed approaches with all first year undergraduates.

E-portfolios should be viewed positively since they can provide benefits to staff as well as students, giving structure and direction elements. Especially in a fast track course where learning takes place in a faster pace e-portfolios can easily be linked to the learning objectives and outcomes of the programme. In conclusion, PDP and the application of e-portfolios enhance student's career development and they are more capable to identify explicitly the key skills they have and should further develop.

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