Personal Development Planning: Case Study (Art and Design)

David Allen, School of Art & Design, The Nottingham Trent University

The Keynote Project and Student Personal Development Planning (PDP)

The Keynote Project, which was carried out between May 2000 and August 2002, was funded by the HEFCE Fund for the Development of Teaching & Learning (FDTL) Phase 3 following a successful bid by a consortium led by the Nottingham Trent School of Art & Design in partnership with The London Institute and The University of Leeds. The aim of the project was to embed and disseminate good practice in key skill development as a way of enhancing graduate employability and developing the skills of lifelong learning. The project, which focused specifically on the subjects of textiles, fashion and printing, developed a mechanism (a Student Guide to PDP), which enables students to consider their strengths and weaknesses, develop a greater awareness of their use of transferable skills and to consider the skills employers wish to see in graduates.

The impetus for this was The Dearing Report (1997), which recommended that institutions of higher education should develop a Student Progress File, consisting of a transcript of results covering the time the student was studying at an institution, and a means of PDP, enabling the student to monitor, build and reflect on their personal development. QAA guidelines indicated that PDP should be operational across the whole HE system and for all HE awards by the year 2005/06.

The guide, which can be accessed online (www.keynote-project.co.uk) or as a CD ROM, is interactive, the students being guided through a series of exercises to assist them to develop their skills and articulate their learning. Easy to use, downloadable editable Word documents are provided to enable students to build up a portfolio. It encourages reflective practice enabling the identification of where attention is required in skill development. It develops in students the ethos of learning beyond their degree, and addresses the requirement of graduates to problem solve with the integrated application of the key skills of communication, IT, numeracy, learning to learn and working with others.

Although the Keynote Project was based in certain subjects, its outputs are essentially generic and have strong cross-disciplinary application. The PDP guide can be used by any student and information is provided to enable it to be customized by individual institutions for their own use.

Piloting the Keynote PDP guide

In order to evaluate the PDP guide it was piloted extensively at the three project partners and at a number of other collaborating institutions. The guide, in CD ROM format, was given out to over 400 individuals, mainly students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in different disciplines, and at different levels, but also to staff members in order to get as wide an indication as possible of what users felt about the guide, and to elicit suggestions for amendments etc.. Students were briefed and supported by tutors within their own institutions, and gave preliminary feedback before using the guide, and summative feedback after using it. They were asked to feed back their thoughts on such features as previous experience of this type of activity, content, relevance, appearance and user-friendliness of the guide, need for tutorial guidance etc.. At The Nottingham Trent University the guide was piloted in a number of different programmes across the School of Art & Design.
Feedback from the pilots
In terms of preliminary feedback, of the students who responded, almost half had heard of the concept of PDP and three quarters had previously worked on a Record of Achievement, almost half the latter feeling that the guide would be of value to them as such a record. Most staff who responded were aware of PDP.
The main concern of both students and staff was in respect of the time it would take to engage with the material of the guide, but this is inevitable if it is to have value. It is not necessary to spend a lot of time on the guide at any one time – it is better to have a repeated involvement over a period of time. Although half of the students thought that they would need little or no support in the process of PDP, it was overwhelmingly felt that support would be best provided by their tutors.
The student summative feedback given after using the guide was predominantly positive, many students providing constructive criticism in the areas referred to in the previous paragraph in order to enable improvements to be made, and many of these were acted upon. In respect of ease of use, feedback has resulted in the guide being improved with regards to accessibility for students with disabilities and the site is now Bobby AAA rated for disability access. Some students felt the guide might be better used nearer the end of a course of study when they were thinking about getting a job. The CV section was considered to be useful – again this relates to helping secure employment or a work placement. The link to increasing graduate employability was seen by users to be a very positive aspect of the guide. The most useful aspects cited were the recording of achievement and goal setting. Overall most students thought that PDP was very important or quite important and a majority found the Keynote guide very useful or quite useful.
In line with student feedback staff saw recording of achievement as the most useful aspect and did not think any sections were unnecessary. The major difference between staff and student feedback was that although most students said that they would continue to use the guide only half the staff who fed back said they would recommend that their students should continue. Despite this three quarters of staff thought that PDP was very important and most felt that the Keynote guide was useful or very useful.

Customization of the Keynote PDP guide
The guide is essentially generic, enabling it to be used across all subject disciplines, but it was recognized to be important that individual institutions could modify certain aspects of the guide to suit their own use, e.g. adding material specific to their own subject or institution. To facilitate this the PDP guide contains a section on customization, providing all the necessary details to enable this to be carried out by any particular institution.

Implementation of PDP
The recommendation in the Dearing Report was for a means of PDP to be provided for students as part of the Student Progress File, but the actual implementation has been left to the discretion of individual institutions. This raises a number of questions, for example, should PDP be optional or compulsory, should it be handled as a ‘stand alone’ activity or embedded into existing studies, how much tutor support should be provided, should PDP be formally assessed etc.. The Keynote Project PDP pilots did not address this issue as it was outside their remit, but it is important that institutions address the implementation methodology to enable PDP to be as effective as possible. In the School of Art & Design at The Nottingham Trent University extended pilots are being undertaken to ensure that the Keynote guide to
PDP fits the requirements of all the students of the School and that it is implemented in the most effective and efficient way to enable students to gain the greatest possible value from it.