

PDP: From introduction to the present

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Personal Development Planning (PDP) was first conceived by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, published as the 1997 Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997). Initially envisaged as a two-part means for recording student achievement, the proposed Progress File emerged as part of a national strategy for equipping the UK as a learning society over the following decades. In the 11 years since the report was published, PDP has evolved within a dominant context of employability and skills development, from a planning and recording tool aimed at linking formal and informal learning to one geared towards the needs of the UK as part of the global economy. This literature review will trace its origins in the Dearing Report through to the present day, following the course of PDP's own development, as well as the gaps that remain in research, policy and practice.

The implementation and implications of PDP

Looking back from the perspective of 2008, the Dearing Report reads as a resounding acclamation for the benefits and potential of education generally and higher education in particular. Based on a 20 year vision for the advent of a new learning society, the Report called for improved investment 'in education to develop our greatest resource, our people' (NCIHE 1997 para. 1.2), recognising that worldwide economic success and the cultural richness of 'life-enhancing' education are inextricably linked (NCIHE 1997 para. 1.1). This education is offered to everyone at all levels of achievement, both for the tools required for competing in and managing a working life increasingly in flux, but also for personal fulfilment away from the workplace (NCIHE 1997 para. 1.12, 1.13). Framed in terms of the individual, education becomes more than the sum of cognitive or subject-dependent knowledge, and instead also encompasses the four 'key skills' of communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn (NCIHE 1997 para. 9.17), and thus doing more to link academic study to success and progression in the workplace (NCIHE 1997 para. 3.53, 8.16).

It was anticipated this would be achieved in part with the introduction of a dual-function Progress File, designed to strengthen the links through informal and formal learning by highlighting the value of what is done as well as what is known (NCIHE 1997 para. 9.47). A transcript would provide an institutional record of achievement, showing the final award, the modules studied with individual marks, and a record and results of any other assessed activity carried out (NCIHE 1997 para. 9.49). This was to be complemented by a means for demonstrating progress and achievement in the four key skills, in addition to other learning and development in the workplace or informally elsewhere. Key to this was the related components of reflecting upon and building development (NCIHE 1997 para. 9.50, 9.48), so that the student becomes engaged in a lifelong habit of learning and reflection.

The QAA formalised these ideas in the term 'Personal Development Planning' in their guidelines for the implementation of the Progress File, underscoring the developmental aspects of the policy as being the prime motivator for its introduction, with a rise in academic standards subsequently following (QAA 2001 para. 8, 9). The guidelines made it clear that every person studying towards an award in an HE institution should have access to PDP (and its corollary, the transcript), and that this access should be in place by the academic year 2005-06 (QAA 2001 para. 38, 41), although individual institutions would be free to develop their own practice within the principal framework of the QAA document (QAA 2001 para. 40). QAA also warned that PDP would need to become a mainstream academic activity, fully supported and valued by students, staff and employers, if its full potential were to be realised (QAA 2001 para 47).

Reviewing practice

Two years later, the EPPI review (Gough et al 2003) was the first systematic attempt to map and synthesise all the available data and research that had been carried out to date on personal development planning and other related processes. It reiterated the promise of PDP in boosting employability through the promotion and development of transferable, key skills, and, it was proposed, might also empower individuals by enhancing self-esteem, self-awareness and life planning (Gough et al 2003: 13). However, while it is apparent that PDP does

have a positive impact on student learning, it has not proved so easy to determine whether the same can be said for personal characteristics such as identity development (Gough et al 2003: 65). By 2003, research into PDP and its associated processes had mainly been restricted to particular features such as the use of learning logs and journals, reflection, self-assessment and self-regulation, leaving aspects like action planning, portfolios, self-awareness and self-motivation relatively under-researched. Moreover, much of the empirical work carried out had concentrated mainly on directed approaches to PDP, rather than self-directed, and the review concluded that knowledge building needed to become a research priority (Gough et al 2003: 65-66).

Later the same year, a report conducted by the CHERI group (Brennan and Shah 2003) suggested that the difficulty of research lay in the lack of consensus over what PDP entailed, and the range of interpretations that could be applied to the phrase. With two years remaining before the QAA's deadline, Brennan and Shah found that fewer than half of all higher education institutions had established a formal policy on PDP, and only half expected all their students to undertake PDP practices by 2005 (Brennan and Shah 2003: 7). At this stage of PDP's existence, concerns about its implementation were, according to the CHERI report, mainly focussed on such issues as whether it should be compulsory, how or if it should be assessed, whether it was primarily for employability purposes or had a wider academic objective, the nature of the informal learning that might be included, and how (and how far) it could be supported within the institution, including tutor commitment and subject-specific modifications (Brennan and Shah 2003: 7-8). Despite these reservations, the overall picture given by the report was generally positive, with the acknowledgment that PDP could be a force for innovation and change in higher education, depending on the means of its presentation, and that PDP had to date been introduced because it had been perceived as adding value to the student experience. Under these conditions, the main barriers to its successful integration into a degree programme lay with adequate resourcing borne out of its unquestionable benefit (Brennan and Shah 2003: 8).

PDP as product and process

These debates signify the starting point in the dichotomy of research into PDP, between product and process, and the dichotomy is itself realised in the two parts initially proposed for the Progress File: the physical record of achievement, and the accompanying cycle of reflection and planning. It is clear that, through 2003 into 2004, material issues around the 'performance' of PDP continued to be the dominant theme of research (Grant et al 2003; Jackson et al 2004: 2), leaving the decisions about the conceptual content to individual institutions on an ad hoc basis (Jackson et al 2004: 3). While Jackson and co-workers see benefit in this situation through the engagement of more individuals in developmental processes 'than if standard procedures or processes were imposed', thus providing evidence of the impact of PDP and self-knowledge of its workings through its implementation, it is undeniable that this method of policy making relies on evidence gathering after the introduction of the policy in order to prove it is worthwhile, rather introducing it onto a firm ontological, evidence base (*op. cit.*).

This uncertainty as to the untested uses and benefits of PDP activities is echoed in a cautious paper (Hays 2004) that dismisses learning portfolios as tedious documentation more suitable for programme evaluation than individual assessment (p. 302). The concession that, through the opportunity to reflect, such activities might benefit students is grudgingly made, but overall the tone is one of resentment and concern, echoed in many institutions, that this policy had been imposed from above without a clear understanding of 'what we are measuring and how we should measure it' (p.803).

A more detailed and scathing critique by Sue Clegg (2004) emphasises the 'chaotic concept' of the whole Progress Files initiative (Clegg 2004: 290) that destabilises attempts to research the efficacy of PDP, given that 'the deceptively simple question, do 'they' work, is unlikely to be amenable to sensible analysis because we don't know what the 'they' are (Clegg 2004: 291). For the same reason, she also doubts the usefulness of 2003's systematic review (Gough et al 2003), since the evidence it contains is presented as a solution to a pre-defined problem and post-hoc research is now being used to justify policy decisions (Clegg 2004: 291-292). Clegg herself states that she has no wish to argue for the

rejection of reflective practice or PDP generally (p. 293). However, this paper does uncover and explicate a major problem with the introduction and implementation of PDP, the repercussions of which are still being dealt with four years later: 'starting with the obvious, concrete phenomenon prevents the reconstitution of the object of enquiry in a way that allows for an understanding of the phenomenon itself' (Marx 1973, cited in Clegg 2004: 291).

The problem stems from the definition and therefore the purpose of PDP as supplied originally by the QAA (QAA 2001). The multiplicity of meanings and functions of PDP propagated at various points throughout the early literature include, but are by no means limited to: improving students' understanding of how they are learning; enabling students to reflect critically; helping students become independent learners; encouraging students to build on their academic work, extracurricular activities and career opportunities; and students' general employability (Clegg 2004: 289). Although this can be argued to provide a holistic view of learning, the result is a variety of distinct practices and interpretations (Clegg and Bradley 2006a: 59). In addition, these user guides published by the Generic Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN; the forerunner of the Higher Education Academy) make it clear that the employability agenda was always in the background, even from the time of the people-centric Dearing report (NCIHE 1997).

Focussing on the individual

However, Clegg also identifies a more insidious shift at the heart of the introduction of Progress Files, PDP and their related processes. By forcing previously tacit practices to be made explicit (and in some cases, subject to assessment and accreditation), the context surrounding those practices is also changed. For example, the labelling of an activity as being a contributor to PDP 'subtly changes its location from being an integral part of learning within the context of specific disciplinary ways of knowing, to one in which meta-discourses of learning-to-learn or employability apply' (Clegg 2004: 290). Moreover, the varied and almost confusing array of meanings of PDP all centre around attributes of the individual and cannot therefore be easily institutionalised or made equally

approachable to those with 'differential access to social and cultural capital' (Clegg 2004: 289).

The movement towards a focus on the 'subjectivities of learners' (*op. cit.*), mediated through reflection, is a subject to which Clegg returns in 2006 (discussed in further detail below). Nevertheless, she warns here that the failure of practitioners or students to engage in what may be a flawed and even unhelpful activity might be 'interpreted as a personal failure to engage, rather than a prompt to rethink what might be wrong with our conceptualisations of practice' (Clegg 2004: 293-294). Bush and Bissell (2008) agree that 'the ability to think reflectively is not inherent' (p. 108). Again, the concentration on the self is part of the transferral of responsibility for career and well-being from the state to the individual. While this is not necessarily wrong, the concomitant pedagogical shift from 'the presentation of disciplinary culture to an interest in the self-generational capacities of students' (Barnett 2003: 148) is placing an unprecedented level of official, State-directed interest on the individual.

As if to illustrate this viewpoint, the results and summary of a QAA-sponsored research project were released the following year (Edwards 2005). Begun in 2000, the aim was to explore the problem, 'In what ways can personal development planning be implemented in HEIs to be of maximum benefit in recruitment processes and later career management?' The employers interviewed for the study reported that it was the process of PDP that they considered to be its most important element; that reflection and an improved ability to articulate experiences and competencies as part of a continuous process 'added value' to student applications. Although the second half of the Progress File, the portfolio, was generally felt to be valuable, employers were reluctant to encourage the presentation of large amounts of documentation, and it is likely that the standard application form will retain precedence for some time to come (Edwards 2005: 3).

Similar to the problematic exposition highlighted by Clegg (2004) above, the study articulates a series of competencies which the employers included in the project say they want and which every graduate should strive to prove, such as organisation and planning, ability to innovate, flexibility, motivation and

communication (Edwards 2005: 5-6). As a result, Edwards urges that PDP should be geared towards helping students identify the competencies they have, how they have obtained them, evidence for them, their impact, their application, and how they might be enhanced (Edwards 2005: 6); a hard task for anyone faced with a list of such vague aptitudes. To reiterate Clegg's (2004) concern, making these previously embedded skills more overt removes them from their context of learning and changes the focus of the degree to employability. While students should rightly be encouraged to develop the capabilities required for employment, there is perhaps a danger that the benefits and pleasures of learning for the sake of learning are being lost. The focus has become that of acquisition, rather than development.

The study closes by acknowledging that a level of coercion may be necessary for students to undertake PDP, but that they 'must be made to realise' how vital it will be to their later 'career management' (Edwards 2005: 8). HEIs are called to impress upon their students that PDP is a 'survival skill' for their future, through its role in keeping 'in touch with changes in working lives' with the aim of 'staying ahead of them and developing future plans' (Edwards 2005: 9). The thrust of PDP thus far, in light of the motivations behind the policy drive, can simply be summed up in the words Bill Clinton used during his successful campaign in 1992: "It's the economy, stupid!"

PDP within an employability framework

Certainly the State's attempts to introduce systemic change in higher education through the introduction of PDP can be unarguably be seen as an economically motivated intervention. The language of the Burgess report (Universities UK 2004) subtly reconfigures PDP, reducing learning to 'achievement', specifically that which can be measured, reported and conveyed to 'different audiences with different needs and interests' (pp. 15, 22). The Scoping group chaired by Robert Burgess considered that the Progress File, with the 'significant added value' of PDP (p. 22), might prove to be a useful alternative (or starting point for an alternative) to the current degree classification system, in helping express in greater detail the differences between individual students' achievements and additionally work towards a more unified European structure (pp.17-18). The

report does acknowledge, in a familiar refrain, the 'paucity' of research into the impact of PDP, and calls for this to be remedied, although the 'encouragement and support' suggested lack the exactitude needed for action (p. 22).

Nevertheless, the Higher Education Academy did not include PDP (or Progress Files generally) in their first round of literature reviews, preferring that 'the development of more evidence- and research-informed approaches to the improvement of teaching and student learning experiences in higher education' should be confined to 'the issues, concepts and evidence associated with the topics they address rather than specific questions of practice or policy' (The Higher Education Academy 2006: 2-3). This surprising avoidance of the subject, in the year of its implementation, seems to be a valuable opportunity lost.

Regardless of the lack of research into this wide-reaching policy initiative, the literature indicates that the marriage between PDP and employability has in many cases been successful; although this approach is not without its own problems. Careers education can be a convenient vehicle for PDP, particularly if it is an accredited and assessed part of the curriculum (Stapleford et al 2005: 3), and this has been demonstrated at Sheffield Hallam University (Holden et al 2005), Leeds Metropolitan University (Dean and Stapleford 2005), Anglia Polytechnic University (now Anglia Ruskin University) (Betts and Calabro 2005) and the University of Luton (Atlay 2005a). Slight and Bloxham (2005) go further, seeing a tension in the relationship between careers advice and PDP, recognising that PDP's vocational slant into higher education carries with it activities that would previously have been the province of individual students; such as seeking careers advice, resulting in the 'surrender of the last private space of personal meaning to the public sphere of work place control' (Brennan 2003: 83 cited in Slight and Bloxham 2005: 2). Nevertheless, they do grant that PDP may yet prove to be an 'emancipatory pedagogy', focussed on learner autonomy and experience (Slight and Bloxham 2005: 2). As such, their final year module at St Martin's College, Lancaster, looks beyond employability to the higher cognitive skills of reflexivity and reasoning, synthesising these under the PDP umbrella (p.12). This position is firmly supported by Wailey (2005) at the London College of Communications, and Davis and Mannion (2005) at Glasgow Caledonian University, where the integration of PDP into the academic curriculum is paramount, both for staff

acceptance and to provide it with a context and a history. This position is firmly supported by Clegg and Bradley (2006a: 61) who make the important point that 'disciplinary loyalties run deep and are entrenched in tradition', and that allowing for the context of the discipline within a 'particular institutional environment', this might be the most effective way of lodging PDP firmly into academic practice.

Even so, despite the conviction of a 2005 working paper produced by the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) that the 'policy and conceptual frameworks for PDP, as currently conceived, are broadly 'fit for purpose'' (Ward et al 2005: 1), the student experience seems less certain in its consistency and rather more chaotic in its goals. While PDP (and Progress Files) must develop the student's employability, it must also represent achievement; while providing a vehicle for demonstrating disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge (Jackson and Ward 2004: 427), it should also prompt planning and reflection (Croot and Gedye 2006: 175), as well as encouraging creativity by aiding, amongst other things, individuality, objectivity and self-reflection (Jackson 2006). Again, the holistic strengths of PDP are pitted against the confusing reality in the field, and it is clear that a compromise will need to be reached if practitioners throughout higher education will ever manage to share a common conception of the process.

Promoting engagement

Since the ratification of PDP by the QAA in 2001, an unprecedented array of resources has been channelled towards its introduction, operation and flourishing future. However, despite the efforts of government, employers and HE funding bodies and agencies, PDP in 2005 was still considered to be a peripheral, resisted activity, and it may be that this is so as a direct result of these efforts, rather than in spite of them. Any top-down policy initiative must engage with and win over the sceptical lower levels in order for it to succeed, and it is likely that the (ever-changing) vocabulary of PDP has acted as a barrier to this. The sway of an absent theoretical base besides should not be underestimated (Lucas et al 2004: 56). The practical difficulties of PDP's introduction have also taken their toll, leading to questions and confusion over which staff should have responsibility for its delivery and structure, as well as how that delivery is to be achieved as part of a modular curriculum (Slight and Bloxham 2005: 4-5).

Yet even where these issues have been addressed (for example by introducing a compulsory core careers module, as seen above), often effort and resources can be enthusiastically deployed to no avail, as students do not see the benefits of planning, actively avoid taking part in PDP (Slight and Bloxham 2005: 4), and fail to recognise or credit PDP (or even their degree) with skills development (Lucas et al 2004). In a crucial study of student perceptions of skills, Lucas and colleagues found that 'students experience skill development as a tacit process...so tacit that students don't perceive it as a process' (2004: 66). Although lecturers may categorise and describe various skills neatly and rationally, this is not always passed on to the students, who interpret skills descriptors in a much more 'hazy' fashion. Students' perceptions of their skills development is likely to depend quite highly on each individual's understanding of the nature of the skill in question and their previous experience in life (2004: 62). In this particular study, many students considered that skill acquisition was a part of personality; that there was no skill to be developed, rather that 'it's something you either do or you don't' (*op. cit.*). Moreover, this view was not restricted to any one specific skill, but crossed a range without a discernable pattern (2004: 63). In a similar way, some students reported that certain skills were picked up unconsciously as part of a maturing process, although being at university was deemed to be a useful facilitator of this process (*op. cit.*). It seems that there is lacking a common understanding between lecturers and students (and more than likely also policy makers) about the nature of skills and identification of the same, and until this discordance is resolved, PDP is in danger of failing to reach its own potential.

Early research questions

Thus far, the concerns expressed here have been echoed throughout the pages of the PDP-UK Newsletter, published by the CRA for those professionals joined in the PDP Network established by the CRA in conjunction with the Higher Education Academy. Produced six times a year and circulated online to members of the network, the earliest issues exhibit an ongoing effort to define PDP (as part of the broader Progress File), make it tangible through discussions on implementation and varying potential models, and in doing so reassure practitioners about what it is they are expected to do; and to a lesser extent, why. There is a hint that these

higher level, large scale questions are beginning very slowly to break down at this early stage, creating space during 2005 for enquiry into matters surrounding the application and content of PDP; for example, should it be assessed (Atlay 2005b)? And what should one be aware of with regards to student data protection (Home 2005)? Encouragingly, into 2006 – at the close of the first academic year with a requirement for PDP provision – the first research into practice emerges, looking at student attitudes (Peters 2006), the role of storytelling (Tomkins 2006), student intentions (Micklewright 2006), developing learner biographies (Buckley 2006), student self-efficacy (Wilson-Medhurst 2006) and the effect of PDP and portfolios on the quality of student learning (Clark 2006). Nevertheless, with these exceptions, the focus for the CRA remains heavily on case studies and descriptions of practice.

Elsewhere, more fundamental questions are asked about the imposition of reflection and PDP as a new pedagogical ideology, questioning its value and purpose, and providing a voice for the frustration of teaching staff (Clegg and Bradley 2006b). As with PDP, reflection in education is not new (Clegg and Bradley 2006a: 59), but is part of a broader approach to individualism in society. But in the same way that Clegg (2004: 290) warned above with reference to PDP, the change of context for reflection to that of policy discourse alters its meaning and the responses of students and staff to it (Clegg and Bradley 2006b: 469). Regardless of the benefits of their outcome, nationally applied initiatives cannot be considered neutral, since they must necessarily depend upon compliance and notions of quality for their successful implementation (Clegg and Bradley 2006b: 470). Ultimately, this is the situation in which PDP and its associated practice, reflection, find themselves. The central role of reflection in the PDP process has the admittedly ironic potential to create a formidable barrier to student progression, since it is not easy and even where learning and reflection had taken place, students may remain unable – or unwilling – to articulate it adequately (Clegg and Bradley 2006b: 477). It may be that the language involved in reflection is a contributor to that barrier, but in one study (Bush and Bissell 2008) most students reported finding it unhelpful and not enjoyable. However, as the authors note (Bush and Bissell 2008: 108-109), it is not necessary for a process to be

enjoyable for it to be of value (but neither do positive feelings indicate that learning has occurred).

The matter of assessment has not been directly dealt with until now. Regardless of how it is structured or whether it is designed to be formative or summative, assessment cannot help but change the meaning of the activity in question, as it changes its context; by being asked or compelled to share reflection automatically shifts the balance of the relationship between tutor and student, assessor and assessed, and reduce its value to both (Clegg and Bradley 2006b: 478, 483). The challenge now facing reflection as policy is that it draws back from pernicious ideology (Barnett 2003) and allows room for effective research into counter positions and alternative practices.

Broadening the reach of PDP

The status of PDP as a pedagogical ideology has only increased, however. An increasing focus on the delivery of PDP through online media has led to its conflation with electronic portfolios, the two considered to be performing the same task (Strivens 2007). Indeed, portfolios have been introduced in a number of institutions as a means of serving PDP to students, and of the 66 HEIs who responded to the survey, around half were using an electronic portfolio primarily to support and implement PDP (Strivens 2007: 15). The concept of the Progress File has always involved a transcript and PDP as two distinct components, but in the advent of the electronic portfolio they seem to have merged in their role and function. This relationship is so established that the CRA have now (as of February 2008) changed the name of their PDP publication to 'PDP and e-Portfolio UK Newsletter'.

By adding this final layer of complexity, the difficulties and wrangling over the large scale, far-reaching reservations bordering implementation and content come to a head in resolution. It is as though an unannounced and unacknowledged consensus has been reached as to the variation and institutional independence of the form, manner and context of PDP. By coming to terms with these areas of hesitation, the smaller scale questions are finally able to emerge. This view is borne out by the changing emphases of both the literature

and other institutional pursuits. The student experience, particularly with regards to the first year in higher education, is the first such lower level point of interest to arise, as the need to 'provide a learning situation in which individual students' needs are catered for rather than seeing students as part of a potentially problematic mass' is seen here as a condition which PDP is trying directly to address (CRA 2007: 2). The role of PDP in providing a site for 'reflective engagement with the personal and social activity of being a student' could prove to be valuable during this 'crucial transitional period' (Miller 2007: 4). Miller also notes (*op. cit.*) that where there is a wealth of research on the first year experience, and at least some on PDP, there is very little to be found looking specifically at PDP in the first year, and this is a gap in the research literature that ought to be filled for the crucial reason she gives above.

Other evolving themes of interest include PDP provision expressly for learners in employment (Scott and Clark 2007), the application of new Web 2.0 technologies (such as social networking sites) in support of PDP (Cotterill et al 2007) and the best way to give feedback to scaffold PDP processes and reflective learning (Denton et al 2008). The importance of social integration for student engagement is also underlined, again with regards to the first year in higher education, since students 'experience a real emotional journey which they describe as affecting every aspect of their being' (Beard et al 2007: 248). Although this latter study was conducted independently of PDP, many aspects it uncovered, such as the opportunity for students to consider their feelings, the relationship between the personal, the academic and the social, and the differing discourses of being a student, are all characteristics which PDP is 'seeking to endorse' (Beard et al 2007: 249). This becomes more pertinent with the growing drive towards widening participation, welcoming people into university who may have been out of the education system for years. Driven by the employability agenda, higher education is more open now than ever before to mature students, disabled students (Jacklin et al 2007) and people from all ethnic backgrounds (Allan and Clarke 2007: 64). In this new learning environment, subject knowledge must share space with generic study skills and metacognitive skills, based on the core assumption that 'an ability to take responsibility for directing and improving one's own learning...is a requisite for success in HE, and, by implication, for future

employment' (*op. cit.*). Complications arise with women returners to education, since it is known that women and older people in general are less likely to adopt a technology if it seems difficult to use, even if it will be of benefit (Herman and Kirkup 2008: 74). Once more, this is precisely the challenge that PDP was envisaged as aiding, and Herman and Kirkup's evaluative research demonstrated that the use of portfolios and PDP, particularly in a group situation, can be highly successful and help make higher education into the transformative experience it should be (Herman and Kirkup 2008: 75).

Moving into the future

It appears that research into PDP is moving now into discrete areas and that evaluation of the concept as a whole will be derived from these more specialised studies. The first year experience, on its own and in relation to widening participation, is likely to be the primary focus over the next couple of years, so inextricably is it linked to the employability agenda and thus with institutional goals (see for example Andrews et al 2006, and Yorke and Longden 2007). Contrary to the early encounters with PDP though, there is now opportunity for individual researchers to join in a single research network, allowing better flow of information and findings, and helping to create a more unified insight into PDP. The national action research network for research and evaluating PDP (NARN-PDP) affords a forum for PDP practitioners to come together from a number of higher education institutions, in order to build knowledge and generate the scholarly research that PDP needs and deserves (Peters and Burkinshaw 2008).

This is a timely and vital intervention, and it must be hoped that more work will follow. Unfortunately, the recent announcement (Mitchell 2008) of a new Advisory group to review and revise the guidelines of the PDP segment of Progress Files looks set to introduce further potential for confusion and mixed messages. It may be that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) proposed by the Burgess group (Universities UK 2004) unifies the scattered and individualised approaches to PDP and the transcript, but judging by the experiences of the original implementation of PDP, it is not likely to be a straightforward process, running the risk of opening up the higher level issues (for example staff and student engagement, mode of implementation, content and context, and so on)

that have only just been resolved. Further issues are thrown up with the publication of the Leitch report into skills (Leitch 2006), which concentrates on the development of 'world class skills', particularly those linked to an occupation or activity and which can be measured by academic qualifications (Leitch 2006: 6). While the commitment to adult learning and employer-driven training is certainly welcomed (Thomson 2006), the student as an individual is entirely absent from the report, and thus PDP is too. That such a major Government report on learning and education should omit PDP is confusing, at best.

PDP that is instigated as part of an overall learning strategy, promoting engagement, maintaining student interest and with a clear, meaningful purpose, has the potential for transforming students' experience of higher education (Buckley 2007). The history of PDP has been a troubled one, and its future will not necessarily be smoother, but PDP in some form is now an established part of higher education and will be for a number of years to come. It is in the interests of staff and students that it is embraced, but with the firm backing of research evidence and evaluation, in order that it becomes the best possible practice for the best possible experience.

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