

Personal Development Planning: A Tool for Reflective Learning

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The problem

All departments in higher education institutions must provide students with the opportunity to prepare personal development plans by 2005/06, but a survey by the author (funded by CIEHE) shows that only a minority of courses within the built environment offer this at present (Higgins, 2002). This is therefore an area ripe for sharing experience of current activity to help encourage wider participation and effective practice. This case study evaluates a pilot personal development planning system operated at Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot-Watt University, School of Planning and Housing, for all postgraduate planning students in 2001/02.

Context

The Learning and Teaching Support Network defines personal development planning (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' (Jackson, 2001, p.1).

The concept springs from the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) recommendation that institutions develop means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development. Since then, PDP activities have been spearheaded by the Centre for Recording Achievement and the Personal Development Planning in Higher Education Scotland Network. The bibliography at the end of this paper directs people to useful publications and websites for further information.

PDPs undertaken during initial professional education link well with trends within the built environment professions relating both to entry requirements and continuing professional development (CPD). Most of the built environment professions require something similar to a PDP covering the work experience requirement preceding full membership. In this regard, PDPs are excellent examples of relationships being forged between educational and professional requirements. Not only are students encouraged to start good habits of lifelong learning, they are given practical experience in reflecting, articulating and recording their achievements and plans.

Benefits of Personal Development Plans

Personal development planning brings potential benefits for students, academic staff and institutions, with student learning and development lying at its heart.

Benefits to students:

- a. Integrates personal and academic development, including work experience or other activities outside the curriculum, improving capacity to plan own learning
- b. Promotes reflective practice, effective monitoring and recording achievement
- c. Encourages learning from experience, including mistakes
- d. Promotes deeper learning by increasing awareness of what students are learning, how and to what level
- e. Requires explicit recognition of strengths and required improvements