

PDP DNA Project Report

June 2012

1. Project overview and rationale

The overarching aim is to embed PDP in the DNA of the University and the student body. This project has 3 goals which act as sequential steps:

1. To create a definition and shared understanding of PDP (Personal Development Planning) that is situated in the Essex context, appealing to students and which grows out of the long term values of the institution.
2. To use this understanding of PDP to identify existing PDP related activities and to alert students to them through the creation of a concept map and student guide.
3. To generate innovative ideas for enhancing (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the engagement of first year students in PDP and employability that flow out of the shared understanding of PDP.

Essex emphasises that University is an 'experience of living as well as learning'. The community of scholars (students and staff) is seen as crucible for identity formation. Accordingly, participation in volunteering is high: over 700 students formally volunteer with the SU each year and over 4000 are involved in sports, clubs and societies. Our corporate Vision 2009-13 emphasises taking learning out of the lecture room and into the local and global community. Our KPIs include specific targets for placements and the launch of an employability award in 2011-12, which aims for 400 participants by 2013-14.

This environment is highly conducive to PDP yet at the same time awareness and understanding of PDP is low. We will address this through the following steps:-

First, by engaging staff and students in conversations, the project will create an understanding of PDP congruent with the culture of the institution and which can be widely owned across the university. These conversations will include the identification of examples of good practice and professionally led focus groups. Our approach draws on Schön's (1987) work on situated definitions of employability and PDP, Sizser's work (1997) on the educational impact of institutionally shared principles and values and Midgley's observations on the power of ideas and metaphors (1989). We anticipate that this will emphasise the core values of experiential learning, diversity and responsibility for taking learning out of the lecture room and into the wider community.

Second, this shared understanding will bring conceptual clarity and enable joined up working. It will assist students and staff in making links between the diverse range of activities that contribute to PDP within and outwith the curriculum and in signposting developmental opportunities. Concretely this will result in a concept map (Novack, 1998) a guide (printed or web-based) to PDP activities.

Thirdly, working with the SU we will scope out pilot projects that will engage first year students in PDP and employability. These schemes will aim to catalyze student interest in personal development whether through curriculum or co-curricular activities (including volunteering). These projects will draw on narrative approaches and will encourage students to reflect on their HE journey in the context of possible future selves (Stevenson & Clegg, 2010). Students will engage with the question: what sort of person do I want to become through the living and learning that I choose to get involved with at Essex?

These interventions will promote experience as a key motor of identity formation (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) and career maturity (Savickas). They will support: the SU volunteering team (the V-Team); a University wide expansion of work placements; Essex's distinctive in-house placement programme – *frontrunners*; and the launch of our new extra-curricular Essex Employability Award. Through increasing participation in volunteering, work experience and other forms of experience, these projects will enhance the personal learning of students and their academic learning (Harvey and Little). By sparking students' interest earlier in their degree, we will lay the foundations for enhanced career development and PDP throughout the rest of their time in HE.

2. Project outline

The PDP DNA project aims to embed PDP in the DNA of the University of Essex and the student body. This project has 3 steps:

- To create a definition and shared understanding of PDP (Personal Development Planning) that is situated in the Essex context, appealing to students and which grows out of the long term values of the institution.
- To use this understanding of PDP to identify existing PDP related activities and to alert students to them through the creation of a concept map and student guide.
- To generate innovative ideas for enhancing (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the engagement of first year students in PDP and employability that flow out of the shared understanding of PDP.

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Throughout we will seek ways of talking about PDP that resonate with students and that align with the cultural values of the institution. The project outcomes will include:

1. A worked example of a situated definition of PDP and the methodology we used to create this;
2. A PDP concept map and student guide
3. A number of scoped out interventions designed to boost engagement in PDP and employability among first year students

3. Summary of outcomes

3.1 Working towards a methodology for arriving at a situated formulation of PDP

A situated formulation is a definition of PDP that 'fits' into a particular cultural setting. In the case of this project this entail finding ways of expressing PDP that worked for the University of Essex.

To achieve this we:

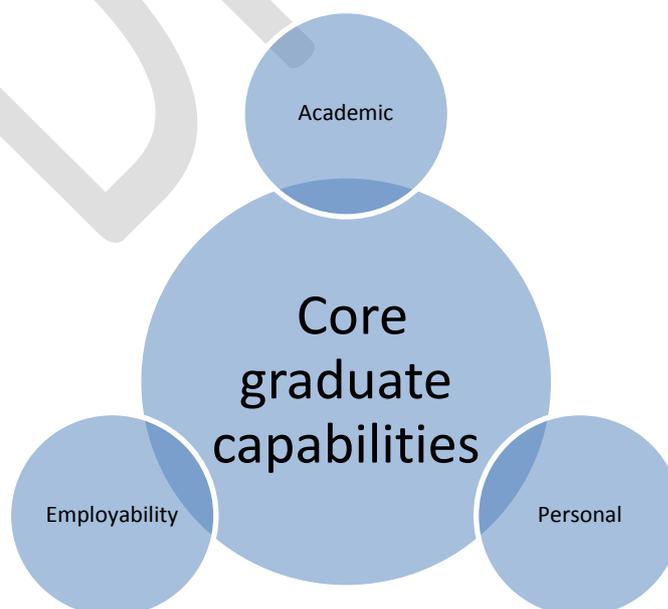
- a. Formed a project group that included key stakeholders from within the University including: academics, SU, Student Support; Employability & Careers Centre, Communications & External Relations (CER).

- b. Used this group to create semi-structured scripts for interviews and focus groups to explore key aspects of PDP. By using a broadly based group we ensured that we would be able to focus in on aspects of PDP that were likely to be congruent with the culture and ethos of Essex.
- c. Ran 10 focus groups to capture a range of distinct 'voices' with: senior staff, sceptical academics, home and international students, support staff, prospective HE students in 6th Form. Each focus group had distinct a separate make up.
- d. Synthesised focus group findings to identify a range of recurrent terms which were favoured across most / all groups.
- e. Grouped these terms conceptually (see below).
- f. Drawing creatively upon the findings, added a small number of additional terms which were suggested by the research results.
- g. Launched an online staff survey (see attached PDF) to see which of the popular terms for PDP were most popular.

3.2 A PDP concept map and student guide

The focus group results indicated that while the principles of PDP are readily grasped and generally appreciated, the presentation of PDP is often a barrier to engagement. Typically participants commented on the word 'plan' and negative connotations associated with planning. For some respondents a plan implied something fixed and restrictive. For others planning suggested onerous effort. On the other hand there was more receptivity to the notion of personal development, growth and transformation resulting from the HE experience, and the acknowledgement that this growth could be enhanced by intentional action and reflection.

From the focus groups we identified a range of terms, phrases and concepts (listed below) that are meaningful for staff and students, and have grouped these into four dimensions of personal development with HE.



Dimension	Terms and phrases
Core graduate capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future- focused • Life goal-setting • Evolve and growing / transformative experiences • Making maps • Broadening horizons • Trying / experiencing new things • Becoming confident • Having control / autonomy • Seeking a better life and future • Bettering yourself as a person • Exploration / self discovery
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming more responsible and independent • Personal development
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming critical and reflective • Creating connections • Becoming critical citizens
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for future success • Exploring Career paths

We have not produced a student guide. However, it is possible that this might be produced after the end of the formal phase of the project in the form of an interactive time line.

3.3 Interventions designed to boost engagement in PDP and employability among first year students

The project group was able to use the momentum of the project and the positive internal PR to enter into a dialogue with the Freshers' Planning Group. The FPG had identified a need for departmentally developmental activities to be included in timetabled Freshers' events.

The Group developed a proposal for a session and had reached agreement with History and Psychology to pilot this session in October 2012 (see Appendix 1).

The Group will meet once more and plans to investigate the feasibility of creating an interactive time line tool designed to help student visualise the passing of time while at University.

Dave Stanbury
June 2012.

Appendix 1: Switching students on to employability from day One

Session summary

The over-arching aim of the session is to switch students onto employability right at the start of their degree so that they can make the most of their Essex Experience. While employability will be the main focus broader issues affecting student satisfaction and success will be addressed. Students will set personal developmental goals and consider in depth what it means to be a *higher* education student at Essex.

The session will use interactive learning methods (card sorts, flip charts, discussion) to promote engagement. Many of these will be bespoke activities designed by LDev and the E&CC specially for the occasion. Most of the time students will work in groups. The session will be fast paced and action packed consisting of a number of short focused group activities with plenary feedback. Punchy videos clips of current students, and brief presentations by final year students will be used to create a rich learning environment and role models that students can identify with. The session will run over three hours. This will include a 20 minute break with refreshments.

The content will be research informed, academically interesting but practically focused. Activities will create opportunities for students to discuss issues that directly affect them and to identify concrete things they can do to overcome challenges and make progress with their career and personal development.

Benefits to participants include:

1. Forging relationships with peers in their department (positive impact on international integration and student retention)
2. Knowing where to go for help and support around the University
3. Raised awareness of opportunities for developing employability skills through volunteering and work experience
4. Conceptual framework for developing employability
5. Knowing when to take key actions during their degree (through understanding the Essex Employability Time-line)
6. Promotion of the Essex Employability Award
7. Knowing about the Essex CV
8. Increased ownership of employability (more positive and proactive approach)
9. Receiving a hard copy guide to key employability resources and recommended actions to take away

Benefits to department include:

1. Enhances Freshers' offer
2. Well developed session delivered for them
3. Structured space to promote departmental employability opportunities
4. Engages students in PDP and employability from the outset – sets tone and raises expectations
5. Gives clear message that the department values employability
6. Creates peer effect that promotes employability among student body
7. Prepares the foundation for later curricular or co-curricular employability interventions (eg work experience)

8. Concrete way of helping students which can be used to help market the department to prospective students
9. Can feature in the departments KIS contextual statement on Course Finder
10. Improved interactions between students and better retention.

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