

***“I never thought how I learn, just that I learn”* – An Evaluation of the Impact of Embedding Personal Development Planning (PDP) Processes and the Effect on Independent Learning.**

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Abstract

Adjusting to the more independent and less structured forms of learning characteristic of HE programmes is challenging for most students, but particularly for students with non-traditional academic qualifications and those returning to study after several years absence from formal education. The growing need to provide additional support to help students make this transition has coincided with a national requirement for higher education institutions to provide opportunities to engage in a structured and supported process of personal development planning (PDP) (QAA 2001). The PDP process of review, plan, action, review also underpins effective academic learning (Jackson 2004) and the approach adopted within the ‘case study’ School at the University of Salford was to link personal tutor support for first year students to an extended induction process which includes an introduction to the PDP process. For some students such support was linked to a credited academic skills module, for others such support was available through extra curricular voluntary meetings with personal or academic tutors. This paper will present and discuss the findings from an evaluation of these different approaches. Drawing upon qualitative data gained from focus groups with students and interviews with tutors, the usefulness of the support provided in helping students adjust to the demands of learning at university is discussed and advantages and disadvantages of such support being included within a credited module are explored. The paper concludes that personal tutor support, provided in a co-ordinated and structured way, as part of a credited academic learning skills module for first year students, is an effective model for helping students adjust to studying at university and in planting the seed for further engagement with a personal development process.

Introduction

The requirement to provide structured and supported opportunities for students in higher education to engage in a process of personal development planning has not been prescriptive and different approaches have developed (Fry et al 2002, cited in Clegg and Bradley 2006, Clegg 2004). There is now a need to establish research evidence of the impact of such provision on enhancing the student learning experience as well as institutional concerns with retention and employability (Ward, Jackson and Strivens 2005). At the University of Salford, implementation has been “partially devolved” with discretion on how to achieve desired outcomes being delegated to Schools (UoS 2003) resulting in a range of different approaches developing. In the ‘case study’ School, the original policy for PDP was for support to be provided by attendance at extra curricular meetings with a personal tutor in small tutee groups. Attendance at such meetings was encouraged but not compulsory and participation by students did not carry any credit towards programme award. At the same time there were growing concerns that Level 1 students increasingly needed greater input on developing core academic learning skills and building their confidence as independent learners in an HE setting. Three programme teams quickly moved to include credited PDP and academic learning skills modules at level 1, with one programme team including timetabled meetings with personal tutors within the module. It was anticipated that this approach, described by Earwaker in 1992 as a “curriculum model” of student support, would result in more effective and consistent provision for students, enabling them to become what Zimmerman (2000, cited in Jackson 2003, 2004) has described as confident “self regulatory” learners able to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring progress in achieving them.

Funding support was gained from the University’s Teaching and Learning Quality Improvement Scheme to undertake an evaluation of including support for PDP within a credited module. The aim was to establish if, compared to extra curricular approaches, this resulted in better engagement with the process by students and a greater willingness by personal tutors to take on this additional role.

Table 1.

<i>Table 1 : Comparison of PDP provision</i>		
Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
Not credited	Not credited	Credited
On an adhoc basis within lectures.	Small group tutee meetings with personal tutors – not formally timetabled	Small group tutee meetings with personal tutor timetabled into a ten credit semester 1 module.
PDP process not made explicit	PDP process explicit	PDP process explicit
Responsibility : by default the programme leader	Responsibility: personal tutor to agree date for meetings with tutees	Responsibility : module co-ordinator who planned dates for personal tutor meetings and provided prompts and guidance to personal tutors on topics to be covered
Implicit within curriculum	Additional to the credited curriculum	Included within credited curriculum
No awareness of PDP provision	Participation at students discretion	Participation part of module requirement
No specific PDP support resources provided	Resources to support students PDP provided	Resources to support PDP provided
No formal assessment	No formal assessment	Module assessment includes initial position statement and final reflective commentary.

The evaluation sought feedback on the experience of three different cohorts of students for whom arrangements for PDP support differed. Group A, a first year cohort in 2005/06, was in a different subject group to Groups B and C. Groups B and C were cohorts from the same subject group: Group B being a first year group in 2004/05 and Group C, a first year group in 2005/06. All three cohorts had been sponsored by their employers to attend on a day release basis over two years to gain a vocationally focused qualification. They were mature students aged between 21 and 50, many gaining entry through accreditation of prior learning (APEL). The majority had been out of formal education for several years and most had no previous experience of HE provision. Table 1 outlines how support and opportunities to plan for and reflect on progress were provided for each of the three cohorts.

Methodology

The research method chosen involved gathering and analysing student and tutor qualitative responses to questions to identify key themes and to establish differences between cohorts with regard to:

- their understanding of and confidence in learning at university
- their ability to articulate the range of skills needed to be successful
- their ability to identify and discuss when they had used these skills in the course of their study

- satisfaction with support provided

Literature on self regulatory and meta learning stresses the importance of effective learners being able to monitor their own approach to learning and being able to adjust their methods and strategies in order to improve learning (Norton et al 2004, Jackson 2003, Zimmerman 2000). Jackson (2003) suggested that a self regulatory capacity would be indicated by use of the following verbs: planning, organise, goal setting, self instruct, self monitor, self evaluate. The methodology made an assumption that indicators of this, for students in their first year of study would be the ability to identify the skills needed for successful study and learning and ability to discuss their approach to learning and use of these skills.

Exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion of support for PDP in a credited module were explored with the tutors interviewed. Focus groups were held with students from the respective cohorts. There were seven students from each of Cohorts A and B and eight students from Cohort C (22 students in total). Volunteers from each cohort were sought at the end of a teaching session. seven or eight students from groups of approximately twenty five were selected as a sample. The views recorded therefore are a limited snapshot and may not have fully represented the views of the whole cohort. The focus group question prompts were mainly open ended to enable students to develop their views. The students seemed more confident to participate in a group setting and the process enabled them to share and develop their responses. The focus group transcripts were analysed by comparing the number and types of comments made on key themes by the different cohorts. Although not statistically valid, the number of comments can be interpreted as an indication of strength of feeling on an issue.

In addition to the student focus groups, one - to - one semi structured interviews were conducted with 10 lecturers:

- the programme leader for Cohort A ;
- five tutors undertaking a personal tutor role as well as various teaching and programme management responsibilities with Cohorts B and C;
- four tutors from the same subject group as the programme leader for Cohort A, with two of these involved in delivering level 1 skills modules which included PDP input for fulltime students. These tutors were included to gain a wider range of views.

Not all tutors from each subject group agreed to be interviewed. It is possible that the views of non- participants would have differed from those who were willing to take part.

A qualitative methodology was adopted as the numbers of students and tutors involved were fairly small and a questionnaire survey would not yield statistically significant results. At this early stage in the students' university career it was not possible to gain valid statistical data to provide evidence of engagement with PDP or of students development as self regulatory learners. Instead insight into student and tutor perceptions of PDP, adjusting to learning at university and arrangements for provision was sought.

The author of this paper had a role within the School as PDP Co-ordinator, as module leader for the Personal and Professional Development module undertaken by Cohort C and as personal and academic tutor for some of Cohort B. This involvement had the advantage of providing better understanding of the nuances of provision but may also have influenced the willingness of students and tutors to be totally honest about their experiences. To ameliorate concerns about confidentiality, an independent facilitator with experience of qualitative research conducted the focus groups and the interviews and the taped content was independently transcribed.

Findings

The 'Findings' section is divided into two parts: the student perspective and the tutor perspective, with common themes and issues being pulled together in the final discussion and conclusion section.

The Student Perspective: Understandings of Learning at University

All three cohorts made similar comments on how 'learning at university' differed from their previous experiences. There was a recognition that "*it's a new level of learning*" and that it involved a greater need to self motivate, work independently and take responsibility for their own learning. All three cohorts commented that there was less guidance than in previous study experiences. When discussing support for completing assign-

ments the following comments were made : “you don’t get pushed to do them”; “there is a lot less information given... it’s more up to you to find it really”; “there is not a particular lot of guidance like you’re used to”.

Ability to identify and discuss use of skills for successful study.

<i>Table 2: Ability to identify and discuss use of skills for successful study</i>		
Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
Limited initial identification of skills needed. When prompted, following skills identified - written, oral, analytical, mathematical and computer skills and time management.	Majority mentioned range of skills including time management and organisational skills without prompting	Majority mentioned range of skills including time management and organisational skills without prompting.
Struggled to discuss how they had used these skills in the course of their studies	Able to engage in a discussion about how they had used these skills	Able to engage in a discussion about how they had used these skills
They felt that they had been able to make adjustments to how they approached their studies.	They felt that they had been able to make adjustments to how they approached their studies.	They felt that they had been able to make adjustments to how they approached their studies.

Table 2 compares the cohorts ability to identify and discuss use of study skills. Although with prompting all three were able to identify some of the skills needed for successful study, Cohort B and Cohort C were more able to engage in a discussion about how they had used these skills and there was usage of phrases which could be linked to a self review and self regulatory learning process including:

“scheduling work so that everything is not last minute”;

“I’ve picked up what works best for me”;

“you have to have the work structured and programmed in to finish it”.

All three cohorts responded to a question about methods used to learn about their subject with reference to practical study skill matters such as lectures, research, essay planning, discussion with fellow students and workplace colleagues rather than demonstrating awareness of meta cognitive processes such as learning from experience and reflection.

Availability, Source, Type and Usefulness of Support Received

Availability of Support

Table 3 outlines the responses from the three student cohorts to a question asking them what support they had received to help them adapt to studying at university. As can be seen Cohorts B and C which had PDP support provided through meetings with a personal tutor , and in Cohort C’s case a credited PDP/Academic Learning Skills module, had a much more positive response to the question.

	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
No. of students in focus group	7	7	8
	No. of comments	No. of comments	No. of comments
Felt supported	0	7	9
Didn't feel supported	15	1	0

The sources of support identified in the focus group comments were:

Sources of Support	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
	No. of comments	No. of comments	No. of comments
Personal tutor	0	1	8
PDP support material	0	1	0
Fellow students	3	1	2
Library staff	0	1	1
Lecturers/ programme leader	2	4	0
Employer	0	1	1

Cohorts B and C identified six different sources of support compared to the two sources identified by Cohort A (Table 4). The most frequently mentioned source of support for Cohort A was fellow students, for Cohort B it was lecturers. Whilst for Cohort C the personal tutor was seen as a main source of support .

The Role of a Personal Tutor

Table 5 outlines the response to the question 'What support have you received from your personal tutor?'. A significantly more positive response was made by the cohort which had timetabled meetings with a personal tutor as part of a credited module.

	Cohort B	Cohort C
	Voluntary meetings with personal tutor	Timetabled meeting with personal tutor as part of credited module
Positive comments	4	11
Negative comments	2	1

Cohort A were unable to directly answer this question as they did not have personal tutors. Five negative comments on the lack of such provision were made by this group. For cohorts B and C the few negative

comments referred to difficulty in contacting a tutor and some concern as to whether such support was necessary for day release students.

Types of Support Provided by Personal Tutors Identified by Students in Cohorts B and C

The main types of support provided were discussing feedback and confidence and morale building (Table 6).

<i>Table:6 Types of support provided by personal tutors</i>		
	Cohort B	Cohort C
Types of support received from PT	No. of comments made in focus group	No. of comments made in focus group
Discussing feedback	1	5
Confidence building/moral support		4
Planning and setting targets	1	
Guidance on sources of further information	1	
Discussing options		1
One to one review of progress	1	1
Dealing with personal issues		1
General support		1
Regular support		1

The benefits

- “it’s just moral support, there’s somebody there who you can talk to.”
- feedback and support in helping to identify how to improve their academic work
- help in re-evaluating and keeping pressures in perspective

“I found my personal confidence was low in the first semester, because we had so many assignments and they were bogging you down, and you felt like you weren’t doing them right, and you spent too long on them, and I felt that the personal tutor put the confidence back into you and helped you

- encouragement and confidence building

*“you just have a bit more confidence when you walk out of the room and he’s reassured you”
“the tutor encouraged and advised me when I was feeling like giving up”*

- opportunity to ask about aspects of study in small group setting not in large class
- guidance on how to develop academic skills such as report writing.
- help with goal setting and selecting options
“my last tutorial was great, because she sat down and went through all the options available”

Concerns Expressed by the Cohort: No clear arrangements for personal tutor support

Although Cohort A felt that the programme leader was supportive there was recognition that there were many pressures on his time and this meant that support was frequently sought from staff in the School office which was limited to practical administrative issues. The focus group transcript for this cohort was pepper potted with comments that indicated:-

- some uncertainty about what was required
“you are not given many guidelines on what you should be looking for, what you should be aiming at”
“haven’t really had any guidance on study skills”
- a need for confidence building
“I think you need more spoon feeding than just someone saying ‘right, there’s an assignment, go away and research’. Where do you start?”
- concern that there had been a lack of a clear focus for support and guidance
“we’ve just been left to our own devices”
“you’re just a number on the course really”

How Support from a Personal Tutor Could be Improved

Students in Cohort A thought a recognised point of contact with a regular meeting once per term would address their concerns about lack of guidance and support. *“There needs to be a focal point for support”*. Cohorts B and C, who both had access to a personal tutor, but with opportunities for structured contact being concentrated in the first semester of the first year, suggested that more regular meetings throughout the year to discuss assignment feedback would be beneficial. Unless meetings had a clear purpose, there was seen to be little point in attending. Some students felt that one to one meetings rather than group personal tutorial meetings provided a better and more confidential forum for discussing progress, particularly as they progressed through the programme, although there was recognition that pressure on academics time meant that this was not always possible.

The form and usage of the PDP resource materials used within the personal tutor meetings was also felt to need further consideration. A common theme was that such materials needed tailoring to meet the needs of different groups of students. As part time mature students already juggling work and domestic responsibilities, and mostly with access to PDP support processes in their workplace, there was a feeling amongst some that the detailed prompts to aid reflection on skills such as time management were a bit patronising. Another commented that following the structure of the PDP resource rigorously in personal tutorials hadn’t helped her to engage with the process. *“It just seemed like a process, to even talk to each other was to fill in a book”*. The same student felt that the process could be demotivating if there was too much concentration on their weaknesses rather than their strengths. All three cohorts commented that where support for reflecting on and planning for progress was optional they would not prioritise unless participation was a formal requirement of the programme.

The Tutor Perspective:

Impact of personal tutor and PDP support on students adjustment to studying at University

The tutors interviewed were asked to what extent students were able to reflect on and develop and implement strategies for improving their learning. Apart from one who felt unable to comment, the remainder felt that the students to varying degrees had developed this ability. However several commented that it was unclear whether there was any direct correlation with PDP processes in isolation.

“We are giving them the ammunition and tool box and they probably do have better skills ... but there is no clear evidence”

.One tutor felt it was something students developed instinctively as they progressed through the activities and assessments associated with the taught academic content. However, four of the five tutors involved with Cohort C felt that anecdotally the PDP support had helped students develop strategies for improving their learn-

ing. *“There were a couple of students who started off quite weak.....they did improve, and I think engaging in this process played a part”* . One tutor stated that they seemed to become more aware of things like organisation and time management. *“They can talk about how they work and what strategies they useand they seem to find that useful”*. Another commented, *“the people who came back to go over their marks and how they’ve done and what they’ve learned from the process, they’ve actually found that useful”*. One tutor felt strongly that helping students at level 1 to develop and implement strategies to improve their learning had fed through to helping students with project planning at dissertation stage *“because they’ve had to think about how well did I do something before”*.

One tutor involved with Cohort C as programme leader as well as undertaking a personal tutor role, felt that their ability to develop and implement strategies for improving their learning was better than previous cohorts because of increased confidence in being at university. *“I don’t think that level of uncertainty, despair almost, was present with this cohort as it was in previous years”*.

Tutor Views on the Role of the Personal Tutor

Tutors who had undertaken the role of personal tutor with Cohorts B and C were very positive about the benefits for students of having regular meetings with them in small tutee groups in semester one. The benefits were the same as those identified by students: regular contact; establishment of a stronger link with one member of academic staff ; confidence building ; *“a venue, an opportunity, to actually think through what it means to study”* and the opportunity to discuss concerns in a small group setting. One tutor summed the benefit up as *“I think the Personal and Professional Development module has done more than anything we’ve done in the past to reinforce the attitude that actually they can do this”* .

The benefits were not perceived to be just one way. The establishment of a stronger link with a small group of students at the start of their studies had enabled potential problems with academic study or adjustment to studying at university to be picked up early and additional support provided. Three tutors commented that the involvement as a personal tutor had provided them with a better insight into students experience and concerns. *“It has helped me to actually see them as individuals with particular needs, skills and qualities”*. This in turn had influenced their approaches to delivering module content. *“It helps me to understand where the students are coming from...which helps me then teach HNC too”*.

Taking on a proactive role as a personal and academic tutor has raised some practical issues for tutors. The additional workload within already time pressed schedules was mentioned by all tutors interviewed. *“Sometimes it seems like its another thing on top of everything else”* . Availability of rooms for tutorials when an academic’s office was not large enough and clashes with other teaching commitments created more administrative headaches.

Different views emerged during the course of the interviews about the role of an academic. Some tutors felt providing personal, professional and academic development support should be an integral part of an academic role. Others felt it was not something all *“academics per se are particularly skilled and versed in doing”*. A number implied that tutors who were more supportive of self awareness and independent learning type strategies were more likely to engage with the role, resulting in inconsistency of provision of such support for students. One tutor commented that there needs to be a *“better understanding for the tutors of the sort of uses to which it (support for PDP) could be put, the wider uses and real value of it”*.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the ‘Curriculum’ Model

Tutors involved with Cohorts B and C were unanimous in the view that the only way to secure student engagement with a PDP process and for provision to become established, was for it to be included within a credited module. The perception was that there was less student motivation when not linked to a credited module. *“It was difficult to get them to turn up for PDP tutorials because it wasn’t assessed”* . In contrast attendance at group tutee meetings by Cohort C in semester 1 was virtually 100% because *“they saw it as part of their study”* . *“The PDP support in the first year (referring to Cohort C) was structured around very specific issues, which was useful because it gave it a focus”* whilst still providing flexibility to discuss other issues which are of concern to students. *“When we didn’t have a focus (referring to Cohort B and also to Cohort C as they moved into the second year), then it was less well responded to”*.

All five tutors involved with Cohort C stressed the value of the co-ordination provided by the module leader as key to the success of embedding PDP within a credited module. *“It’s basically a well organised and timetabled group of support seminars built around the module”*. The co-ordinator *“instructed us as to what we might do to help the students...there is always a theme to it that worked well”*. There was also a perception by one tutor that there was

greater use of the PDP support materials by students when it was linked to assessment. *“There was clearly a greater tying in of that document, both as far as tutors and tutees were concerned”.*

Two tutors did raise a concern that this could result in PDP becoming seen as an achievement rather than a process by students, and to some extent tutors. The perception being of a tick box approach, where once the module is completed, students no longer wish to engage. This in practice has happened with many students in Cohort C with attendance at optional meetings with their personal tutor in subsequent semesters tailing off. The extent to which this was felt to be an issue varied between tutors. A number seeing it as important to make PDP processes explicit in all activities as part of an ongoing process, although not necessarily labeled as PDP. The other perspective was more instrumental taking the view that *“the value of it disappears fairly quickly after people have got what they feel they needed out of it”.*

Discussion and Conclusions: Support for the transition to learning at University

Students perceptions of the availability of support did not differ significantly between the extra curricula and the curriculum model of providing support. However the cohort who had not had personal tutor support or explicit structured support for engaging in a process of PDP felt very strongly that they had not been supported in adjusting to studying at University.

The students who had experienced a curriculum model of support through a credited PDP and academic learning skills module which included timetabled meetings with a personal tutor clearly identified such tutors as a main source of support compared to the other two cohorts. In the other cohorts students seemed more reliant on support from fellow students or from subject lecturers which would be more likely to vary in availability, consistency and quality. The support from personal tutors which was particularly valued was discussing feedback and confidence building. These findings were echoed by the comments from the tutors interviewed.

Benefits of a “curriculum” model

The evaluation suggests, that the more structured personal tutorials which formed part of the credited module, were successful as they had a clearer focus and students engaged with the requirement to attend to a significantly greater extent. Most tutors were in favour of support for PDP being included within a credited module although there was recognition that student interest and participation tailed off once the credited module was completed and that there is a risk of a “tick box” approach. However it was felt that all students should have equal access to structured support for the transition to studying at university. Practical concerns raised were the availability of academics time for such activity and finding suitable venues for holding small tutorial sessions. There was also a perception that not all academics automatically had the skills or inclination to support students in this way. This highlights a need for: greater training; promotion of the wider benefits of including such support within the curriculum; and recognition within reward and workload systems for academics proactive participation in this type of activity.

Engagement with a Process of Self Review and Development as ‘self regulated learners’

It is not possible from the research to establish a direct causal link between developing a self regulatory approach to learning and PDP support, although anecdotally the majority of the tutors interviewed felt that such support did contribute to this. All three cohorts of students felt that they had adjusted to meet the demands of learning at university and were able to identify changes they had made in how they approached their studies. However making the process of PDP explicit with structured support from a personal tutor does appear to have helped students to identify and discuss their use of academic learning skills and strategies. Students in Cohort C and to a similar extent Cohort B, seemed more confident about their ability to study successfully than students in Cohort A where there had not been any clear arrangements to provide students with an opportunity to review, discuss and plan for how they approached their studies. The ability to self verbalise the skills needed may be a first step towards becoming self aware and self regulatory learners (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Zimmerman and Schunk eds 2001)) and the evaluation indicates that providing time within the curriculum for Level 1 students to reflect on their academic learning skills and strategies, helps provide them with the language to be able to discuss their learning with tutors, providing a basis for further development of a self regulatory approach.

The evaluation has highlighted a need for greater realism about students readiness to engage in a reflective process on their approach to their learning and wider personal development. The following quotes from students in Cohort C provide an indication that some students were only just starting to think about what learning involves, *“I never thought about how I learn, just that I learn”.* Another commented that she had a debate over

a family barbecue. “*They think I’ve gone high faluting and I’ve got weird ideas now. They don’t believe me, they think you just learn*”.

The findings echo those of research by Clegg et al (2006) at Sheffield Hallam University who found that first year students were more concerned with practical study issues, with the ability to reflect on skills and approaches to learning beginning to emerge amongst third year students. Growing self awareness by students in Cohort C resulted in them highlighting that they needed more experience of learning than just one semester to be able to reflect on the process.

The evaluation also highlighted the need for student focused and flexible approaches to provision of PDP support. Students were unwilling to use resources that seemed inappropriate for their particular interests and concerns. Factors such as motivation for studying and time pressures can contribute to a fairly instrumental approach to their studies by students, resulting in an unwillingness to undertake activities which are not seen as essential to gaining the qualification. The evaluation indicated better engagement when support for PDP was included within a timetabled and credited module and linked to some assessment. Such activities do not necessarily need to be labelled as PDP.

The evaluation also suggests that supporting students in a process of PDP may also assist tutors to become more reflective practitioners. Some tutors commented that they too had benefited from meeting students in smaller tutee groups by gaining better insight into students concerns and approach to learning, which then impacted on their approach to teaching students at Level 1.

General Conclusions

This evaluation was undertaken with part time day release mature students. To fully establish to what extent support for PDP processes can help students become effective self regulatory learners and whether or not such support is best provided within a credited module, there is a need for further qualitative and quantitative research with more representative undergraduate cohorts. However, the findings from this small scale evaluation of an ongoing and developing approach to providing this support, within a credited PDP and Academic Learning Skills module incorporating timetabled meetings with a personal tutor, show strong benefits for students adjustment to and confidence in studying at university.

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