

# Personal Development Planning for Students (PDP)

Marilyn Higgins, Heriot-Watt University  
Email: [m.g.higgins@sbe.hw.ac.uk](mailto:m.g.higgins@sbe.hw.ac.uk)

## The purpose of the guide

This Guide is intended to help staff in higher education reflect on their practice in relation to providing personal development planning opportunities for students.

It is appropriate for those staff near the beginning of the process as well as those who are reviewing their current provision.

### ● What is a personal development plan?

At its heart, a personal development plan (PDP) is a tool to help students reflect on their own learning and plan for their future development. Although these processes probably always formed some implicit part of higher education, what is new is that students must explicitly articulate aspects of their learning in a structured fashion, thus bringing into consciousness what was often left unspoken. PDP is defined by the QAA 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"*

The concept springs from the Dearing Review (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) recommendation that institutions develop means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development. A PDP, along with an official transcript, constitutes a student's progress file.

### ● National educational requirements

In 2000 the higher education sector agreed that by the academic year 2005/06, all courses in the UK should offer PDP to all students at all stages. This includes all undergraduates, postgraduates, distance learning students and research students/PhDs. There are no legal requirements to carry out PDP, but during institutional and subject reviews there are likely to be questions about PDPs and departments will need to demonstrate how they are carrying out this national requirement, commenting on its effectiveness. The implementation of PDP in built environment courses across the country has been patchy. Institutions differ in terms of how strongly PDP is being led from the centre and built environment departments vary in terms of the initiative shown by individual staff members. Although this is a national initiative, it is left to individual courses/schools or universities how and in what form PDP is implemented. As long as students are doing what is described in the above section, it is not even necessary to call the process 'personal development planning'. Some staff prefer 'professional development planning' or other phrases.

## ● Potential benefits for students and staff

### *Benefits to students:*

- Promotes deeper and more positive learning by increasing awareness of what students are learning, how, to what level, and what is required as a focus for the future
- Promotes reflective practice, effective monitoring and recording achievement, thus encouraging the habit of learning from experience and setting goals that are monitored
- Integrates academic development, any work experience and other activities outside the curriculum; this encourages students to see themselves as a whole person by explicitly making linkages between various parts of their lives that contribute to their learning, treating everyone as a unique individual
- Requires explicit recognition of strengths and required improvements, helping students reach their full potential and improving their study skills
- Provides a mechanism for monitoring career-related capabilities to prepare for seeking employment, building confidence
- Establishes lifelong learning habits, encompassing continuing professional development.

### *Benefits to staff and institutions:*

- Helps students be more independent and purposeful learners, promoting student understanding of learning outcomes, programme specifications and teaching and learning strategies
- Serves as a focus for personal tutoring and an individual student's progress
- Makes more effective use of off campus opportunities, including work placements or study abroad, encouraging students to integrate these with the curriculum
- Provides help in writing references
- Facilitates more effective monitoring of student progress for a course group as a whole, which is useful for curriculum development by pinpointing any gaps in knowledge and skills, while confirming that learning outcomes are being achieved in practice
- Results in more effective academic and non-academic support and guidance systems
- Enhances capacity to demonstrate quality of student support mechanisms during external and internal review

## ● Potential barriers

From a staff point of view, in a context of heavy workloads (including increasing research and quality assurance pressures), having yet another requirement has not been met with glee in all quarters. This in itself is likely to negatively affect students. Similarly, for students with academic and financial pressures, another time commitment is often seen as an added burden increasing stress levels. Emphasising the potential benefits of PDP and being clear about what is required is therefore crucial. PDP development needs to be supported by senior management and allocated sufficient resources, including staff training programmes. Because PDPs are new, there is a requirement for monitoring, research and dissemination in the future about the effectiveness of different models and processes to help staff think creatively about improvements and options.

## ● Relationship to professional requirements and employability

Built environment degrees, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are largely vocational and must meet the requirements of the various professional institutions as accrediting bodies (RTPI, RIBA, ARB, LI, RICS, CIOB, ICE, CIH). In terms of PDP, this is an advantage, because the various bodies prescribe learning outcomes and employability aims that can be useful in devising PDP systems. Over recent years, all the built environment professional institutions have initiated requirements for a structured system of recording knowledge and skills development integrated with work experience, supplementary to initial professional education, both at the point of obtaining full membership and also as part of continuing professional development (CPD). Although the requirements differ in detail, the rigour of required records has risen over the years. Candidates are encouraged to reflect in a structured way on their own personal development. In essence, most of the professions require something similar to a PDP covering the work experience requirement preceding full membership. Thus, 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. Knowing that PDPs will be required by professional institutions helps convince both staff and students of their value.

Many courses in the built environment sector include some element of work-based learning, such as sandwich years and work placements, 'live' projects, job shadowing, etc. In addition to these formal arrangements, many students organise work experience during their vacation periods. Despite this, too often there remains a gulf between the worlds of academia and practice and PDPs can be an excellent means of bridging this gap. PDPs are also well suited to integrating technical discipline-specific knowledge and skills with more generic and transferable ones. In practice, there is strong evidence that in the built environment sector professionals require both. The built environment sector includes many mature students, a number of whom are undertaking part-time courses while they are working. PDPs therefore can

help these students see the relationship between work and education in a way that places individual learning at its heart.

Given the vocational nature of most built environment degrees, PDPs can have very strong links to employability and career issues. As an articulation of knowledge and skills acquired, complete with examples, PDPs can be a very effective aid in writing job applications and attending interviews, building confidence. Some institutions have developed PDPs with the help of the careers advisory service, with employability aims in mind, either centrally or within individual departments. Another recent trend within the built environment professions, both in the public and private sectors, is the adoption of some form of staff appraisal related to human resource development and management. Appraisals are a form of PDP and typically include reflection about skills development and training requirements. It is useful to make these links explicit as another reason why PDPs can benefit students in the longer term.

● **Models for Delivery**

The current system allows people to choose the PDP model and implementation for individual courses. This is seen as a strength in the built environment sector, because PDP can take many different forms and academic staff can decide what is right for their own discipline, the course, location, and institutional context. Different examples and case studies are widely available on the websites listed at the end of this Guide.

**Programme level**

The table alongside sets out three models for how PDP can be implemented within an academic programme, with a brief summary of the pros and cons of each:

PDP model	Advantages	Potential disadvantages
Embed through the curriculum	Likely to promote deeper learning, better integration, wider perspectives; participation ensured if an integral part of courses; can link with existing reflective activities	More staff need to be involved and coordinated; danger of repetition
Personal tutor	On-going, personal relationship can deepen learning and build trust, adding an extra dimension to learning outside classroom setting	Many staff involved, with varying levels of training and commitment; implementation can be patchy
Free-standing module	Specific, deeper focus on PDP, ensuring participation; links can be made to career development, professional skills, employability by allocating specific space within the curriculum	Danger of PDP, professional skills and career development being seen as divorced from rest of the curriculum
Self-administered online activity	Flexible system provided by the university, school or course that allows students to proceed at their own pace; many allow manipulation of information	If left to students to do on their own, many will probably not carry out the recommended activities

A PDP system can combine the above models, which is likely to strengthen its impact.

*Detailed implementation level*

Whatever system is adopted, decisions will need to be made about the following issues:

ISSUE	OPTIONS
Key stages	PDP could form an explicit part of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● recruitment literature</li> <li>● programme and course guides</li> <li>● course induction</li> <li>● summary of skills development when students are applying for jobs upon graduation or work placement, linked to professional requirements</li> <li>● end-of-year reflection</li> </ul>
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wide range of formats possible, appealing to various learning styles</li> <li>● Student choice to be encouraged</li> <li>● Tailoring formats to learners is likely to promote participation</li> <li>● Formats of forms vary from prescriptive skills lists (sometimes with multiple choice answers demonstrating level of competence) to open-ended questions</li> <li>● Formats include personal SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), mind maps, pictorial/graphic representations, CVs, logbooks, sketchbooks, reflective exercises following projects/modules/assessments, portfolios</li> <li>● Can be used to develop creativity skills</li> </ul>
IT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Electronic versions can be most easily up-dated, either web-based or a computer file, but must be tailored appropriately to address issues of confidentiality and access</li> <li>● Various systems have been devised which can be manipulated to form a CV</li> <li>● The use of e-portfolios and web logs (blogs) can provide a flexible mechanism for students to record their achievements.</li> </ul>
Assessment / feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can be assessed or non-assessed</li> <li>● Assessment can include elements of self or peer assessment or be pass/fail</li> <li>● If assessed, explicit marking criteria need to be carefully set out</li> <li>● Feedback can deepen student learning, including self and peer assessment</li> </ul>
Work-based learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Most built environment courses incorporate some form of work-based learning, including sandwich or professional practice years, shorter placements, 'live' projects, job shadowing or mentoring</li> <li>● PDPs can be used as reflective tools to integrate academia and practice by focusing on the practical application of skills and knowledge learned at university, discussed by both work and academic supervisors, linked to any staff appraisal in the workplace</li> <li>● PDPs help integrate practice and education for part-time and Distance Learning students and mature students</li> </ul>
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The personal nature of PDPs can raise the sensitive issue of confidentiality which should be respected by staff and fellow students alike</li> <li>● Students to be informed about who has access to their PDP (see also IT)</li> </ul>

### ● Tailoring to specific needs

Since PDP is required for all courses at all levels, it will be necessary to carefully tailor processes and formats for a wide variety of circumstances.

**Distance learning:** PDP must be made available on all distance learning courses. Care should be taken in what is provided in terms of making the value of PDP clear to students, many of whom are likely to be in employment within the built environment sector. PDPs can be an essential bridge linking academia and practice.

**Research students:** Career paths and skills reflection, including research skills, are as important to research students as they are to those on taught courses. Supervisors should be well-placed to integrate PDP into regular one-on-one meetings and this is another useful way of recording progress and future plans in a supportive environment. Professional requirements may still be relevant to many of these students. The same principles described above will apply in terms of deciding what is right for research students in various disciplines; the only difference is that they will have fewer taught modules and will probably have to rely more on personal initiative. It is still important for Schools and Universities to work out how they wish to deliver PDP and involve supervisors. QAA codes of practice for research students explicitly mention PDPs, electronic logs, records of personal progress and reviews of development needs (see website [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice/section1/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice/section1/default.asp))  
See growing body of information at: [www.grad.ac.uk](http://www.grad.ac.uk))

**Architecture and Landscape Architecture:** The design subjects, which include a significant portion of studio-based learning, should seize opportunities for PDP which might take a wide variety of forms. The professional requirements after initial education are similar to the other built environment professions and therefore PDP is still as relevant in terms of career development. Schools have begun experimenting with alternative forms of PDP and it will be useful for these courses to share experience; two examples follow:

The University of Portsmouth, School of Architecture has adopted a model based upon a PDP log book tracking progress through the whole course, incorporating:

- key skills action plan during every stage
- design studio review feedback sheets inviting comments from both the tutor and student
- reflective comments on coursework components
- portfolio examination feedback sheets, including comments from tutor and student
- summary reflection and planned action for whole academic years

The School views the logbook as an extension of the studio tutor role, which is critical in architectural education. Students fill out appropriate sections of the logbook which are then discussed with tutors and woven into the assessment process at interim crits, reviews and portfolio examination. Links are made to professional body requirements and employability.

The University of Strathclyde, Department of Architecture has been piloting a PDP system embedded within the curriculum that develops students' creativity and reflectiveness and specifically avoids use of the phrase 'PDP'. The approach is based on the premise that self awareness, thinking skills and perpetual reflection are integral to architectural education. Elements of the approach include:

- a 'reflections' assignment at the end of a semester asking students to reflect on learning outcomes (both academic and personal) in an integrated fashion, including mind mapping, drawing and 'postcards from the edge'
- reflection built in to the culture of the design studio, personal diary/learning log/journal (confidential), portfolio
- small group reflective seminars following larger lectures
- key skills embedded in the curriculum
- personal tutor role taken on by year convenor or course director in later years, responsible for personal interview, overseeing key skills development in the curriculum, and reflective reviews
- record of personal achievement and CV

Further information can be found at:

<http://www.mis.strath.ac.uk/Secretariat/Publications/general/spdp/index.html>

## ● Summary of Good Practice Points

1. It is worth taking time and care to encourage both students and staff to see the value of personal development plans (PDPs). Links should be made to career and curricular development, professional requirements (both at the point of entry and CPD), personal tutoring systems and staff appraisals common in the world of work. It is essential to get both the process and the product right and seek continual improvement through feedback and monitoring.
2. PDP should be embedded in the curriculum and modules as much as possible, making it an integral part of the course.
3. PDP forms should be as short and simple as possible. There is no set prescription for the type of form and a strength of the system is that course leaders/tutors can tailor what they think is best for their students' purposes. Students need to be encouraged to see themselves as a whole person, integrating academic progress, any work experience and transferable skills learned in outside activities.
4. An exemplar form should be provided to help guide students, perhaps filled in by the tutor for him or herself.
5. Staff development events could help people learn from each other's experiences and answer questions. Careers advisers, employers, representatives of professional institutes and recent graduates can all help convince both staff and students of the value of PDP. Using 'champions' is a useful tactic and supportive senior management can make the whole process much easier. The real costs and responsibilities of setting up and maintaining a system need to be recognised in work programmes and budgets.
6. Computer-based systems are easiest to update, which is important given the aim for lifelong, continual learning and links to ongoing professional requirements.
7. Encouraging good habits in deep and honest reflection is a key aim. Departments and individual staff can provide the right culture for this.
8. Confidentiality needs to be respected and systems need to be worked out about who has access to a student's PDP within the University.

### ● Some examples of templates and questions to facilitate PDP

#### ■ Heriot-Watt School of the Built Environment:

[www.sbe.hw.ac.uk/studentinfo/PDPtemplate2.doc](http://www.sbe.hw.ac.uk/studentinfo/PDPtemplate2.doc) is an electronic template for built environment professions generically, both undergraduates and postgraduates, including open and closed questions.

#### ■ LUSID:

LUSID at Liverpool University: [www.lusid.liv.ac.uk](http://www.lusid.liv.ac.uk)

#### ■ PADSHE:

PADSHE at Nottingham University: [www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/padshe)

Both LUSID and PADSHE are university-wide programmes that have been operating for some years.

#### ■ RAPID:

A well-developed web-based PDP system: <http://rapid.lboro.ac.uk> for Architectural Technology, Building Engineering, Civil Engineering, Construction Management, Engineering Skills, Quantity/Building Surveying, Town Planning and Transportation Management. A number of built environment schools nationally have adopted this system.

## ● Further information

### CEBE:

[www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk/learning/pdp/index.php](http://www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk/learning/pdp/index.php)

A section of the CEBE website is dedicated to PDP, including case studies, related projects and discussion papers.

### Centre for Recording Achievement:

[www.recordingachievement.org](http://www.recordingachievement.org)

The Centre's website has up-to-date information about a range of aspects relating to PDP and case studies.

### The Higher Education Academy:

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

The Academy's website has a dedicated section for PDP with national requirements:

[www.heacademy.ac.uk/PDP.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/PDP.htm)

[www.heacademy.ac.uk/867.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/867.htm) links PDP to employability and [www.heacademy.ac.uk/963.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/963.htm) has Guides for Busy Academics on PDP generally and their relationship to Programme Specifications, employability, voluntary work and learning through reflection.

### Joint Information Systems Committee:

[www.jisc.ac.uk](http://www.jisc.ac.uk)

The JISC website includes information on PDP, data protection/confidentiality issues. A case study at Loughborough College is about disabilities and PDP, especially visual impairment:

[www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project\\_0103\\_loucoll](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=project_0103_loucoll)

### QAA:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles)

This sets out the rationale for PDP and provides guidelines for quality standards that will be sought during institutional review.

### Scottish PDP:

[www.eds.napier.ac.uk/PDP](http://www.eds.napier.ac.uk/PDP)

The website for PDP in Higher Education in Scotland.

### Warwick Blogs:

[blogs.warwick.ac.uk/](http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/)

Warwick University's implementation of Web Logs or blogs to record personal development.

### E-Portfolios:

[www.eportfolios.ac.uk/](http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/)

a flexible, on-line mechanism for recording achievement.

## The Author

This guide was prepared for CEBE by *Marilyn Higgins*, Senior Lecturer, School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. Marilyn is Director of the School's Postgraduate Urban Studies Programme and was a town planning practitioner for 18 years before going into academia. For several years, Marilyn has been experimenting with different processes and forms encouraging students to learn from personal development planning across built environment disciplines. She has also run CEBE and other departmental, university-wide and HEA workshops on the subject.

### Cardiff University

Bute Building, King Edward VII Avenue,  
Cardiff CF10 3NB  
Tel: 029 2087 4600 Fax: 029 2087 4601

Architecture, Landscape, Planning, Housing &  
Transport: Cardiff University

Web: [www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk)

### University of Salford

Maxwell Building, The Crescent  
Greater Manchester M7 1NU  
Tel: 0161 295 5944 Fax: 0161 295 5011

Construction, Surveying & Real Estate:  
University of Salford

Email: [cebe@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:cebe@heacademy.ac.uk)