Employability Skills and Personal Development Planning.

Research Findings & Issues Arising

Personal Development Planning [PDP] and Employability Skills are closely linked: both are widely regarded as initiatives which require careful introduction into the curriculum, and PDP can be seen to be central to students’ awareness, planning and demonstration of Employability. In addition, both PDP and Employability Skills delivery need to achieve a high level of engagement with learners in order to be effective.

We can see that the implementation of the Employability Skills and PDP agenda places a focus on curriculum issues as a whole and provides a valuable opportunity to consider teaching and learning strategy within a developmental context.

It is also evident that there are issues of ownership and expertise in relation to these areas:

I’m a careers tutor, as well as a subject lecturer and Employability related work seems to land on my desk along with Personal Development Planning…[Lecturer]

I can't pretend to be an expert in employability issues…[Lecturer]

A central point of support can therefore be invaluable for planning and implementation:

Support for the PDP is good – if we need extra help or a workshop, they [PDP development team] are always happy to come and do it…help is always forthcoming…[Careers Tutor]

From our research findings, we have identified a number of issues relating to the identification and evidencing of Employability Skills which have implications for PDP

Issue 1:

It is widely reported that many students experience difficulty in identifying and articulating their own Employability.

Graduates don’t have fewer skills, but they do have problems recognising and articulating them... [Graduate Recruiter]

It appears that students can quite easily miss the fact that they have developed and applied employability skills through the curriculum, and through their own work experience. There is sense of frustration from graduate recruiters that potential applicants are rejected through a lack of ability to present effectively the skills which they may well possess.

Our initial screening interviews for applicants take place over the ‘phone, so it’s absolutely essential that graduates can put their skills over effectively. I can see from their applications that they have got, for example, work experience in a bank, and I try to lead them to talk about the skills they gained from that, but they don’t seem to recognise the value of them. We could be rejecting really good people because they can’t recognise their own skills or the relevance of their experience… [Graduate Recruiter]

Issue 2

Students do not plan their development of Employability Skills early enough in their course:
University offers an unparalleled opportunity for students to develop Employability Skills which will provide a foundation for their future career success and satisfaction; however, a significant number of students report that their realisation of this fact arrives too late:

*I’m applying for graduate trainee schemes now, and I realise that I’m competing with students who have done work placements and voluntary work, been the president of this and that student society and SU officials, and I’ve done nothing…*[3rd year Student]

**Issue 3**

It can be a challenge to engage some students in the PDP process in relation to developing Employability, and to see its purpose and relevance:

*Some students have objected strenuously to ongoing self reflection. They were put off at school and feel they have been answering the same questions for a decade. They feel that they have been lab rats for these new initiatives…* [Lecturer]

**Strategies for Success**

PDP is widely seen as an effective tool for delivering the Employability skills agenda:

*PDP has been very good for helping us get the students to think about employability skills…* [Lecturer]

It is important, however, that PDP’s academic purpose is not seen as secondary to its role in developing Employability. First year students in particular may be more likely to be engaged initially in relation to the development of their study skills, which are of key importance at the point of transition from Secondary to Higher study. They can then, as self-reflective learners, apply their skills in the wider context of Employability. Students generally see the relevance of study skills, and are eager to develop them:

*I did a preparatory skills course with the Open University which I think was really useful. There wasn’t one at the university that I could do- I would have found it very hard without it…*[Postgraduate Student]

The identification and evidencing of Key Skills is a well recognised and standard practice in PDP; these commonly take the form of checklist proforma despite the fact that this device is regarded as an anathema to many practitioners. In order to engage students and allow them to see the relevance of self reflection in their careers, it can be useful to present skills assessment tools within a business or industrial context. For example, in the resources section below there are examples of learning materials and strategies which employ real company case examples of documents used by organisations such as Woolworths and Somerfield.

*Some students are past the point where they can be motivated about PDP and Employability unless they can think of a new way of delivering it…*[Lecturer]

Similarly, job application forms can be adapted and used as a mechanism for students to identify and evidence their skills in a format which holds some resonance for them.

Students can be encouraged to reflect on the skills which they have developed and applied through part-time or temporary work which, as we have seen, they do not always recognise. In the resources section below, there are examples of a skills analysis activity carried out on sample jobs typically undertaken by students, but not generally valued by them.

It is essential for students to engage with the PDP and the Employability agenda early in their course and see it as a continuous and integral part of their studies:
We are piloting PDP in the first year and employability skills are one of the skills that we are trying to make students more aware of. Our Postgraduates are about to do it as well. In my opinion, it’s one of the more valuable aspects of PDP...[Lecturer]

PDP can also be used to provide a structure for the personal tutorial system which some students feel is ill-defined:

I see my personal tutor, and he says, “How are you?” and I say, “Fine” and that’s pretty much it, really...[1st year Student]

Students’ obvious desire to establish a constructive dialogue with their personal tutor, combined with an understandable wish to create a favourable impression, can be used as powerful motivator for engagement with PDP and Employability:

We see our personal tutees every week for the first 6 weeks, and we have things that they talk about and PDP is central to that, we encourage them to fill in the forms, really look at how they want to improve their skills. [Lecturer]

This consistent reinforcement of the importance and relevance of PDP can be a major factor in its successful implementation:

PDP can be good, but only if you fill in the forms properly before your tutorial. I have found that I get more out of it if I actually think about it rather than just filling in the forms ten minutes before I see the tutor...[3rd year Student]

PDP is actually quite good. It does make you realise that you have got some skills and lets you see the ones that you need to improve...[2nd year Student]