An integrated approach to supporting first-year students through Personal Development Planning and monitoring attendance

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Background

This project is being piloted during 2007-08 on the BA (Honours) Physical Education (BAPE) degree: a course that does not lead to qualified teacher status but from which a large number of students go on to teach in schools. The impetus for this initiative came from identification of three main concerns with existing practice:

• The Level leader had been part of the Leeds Met Progress Files group, a cross-Faculty working group set up to guide policy on Personal Development Planning (PDP), yet, despite some encouraging progress with the delivery of PDP, a significant minority of students was not fully engaging with this process until their final year of the BAPE course.

• The course team had already established a Cause for Concern (CFC) procedure which involved writing to students if their attendance or behaviour was not acceptable, but it was felt that some students were not receiving help quickly enough.

• It was proving difficult to attract the necessary staffing resources to deliver PDP support effectively, particularly since the role was seen as a 'service' activity rather than a 'teaching' one and hence was not acknowledged in the same way by managers.

An integrated Personal Development programme

The Level 1 Personal Tutor programme of pastoral and study skills had previously been delivered as an additional non-assessed programme alongside the existing eight Level 1 modules. This decision had been based on convincing evidence (Palmer, 2008) that Personal Development (PD) needed to be introduced as a lifelong process, not as an end in itself, and therefore was not compatible with a single summatively assessed module. However, as suggested above, there was less than optimum engagement from students and difficulties in attracting resources in terms of staffing, so it was decided to design a programme that would overcome these difficulties.

The resulting Level 1 Personal Development programme has been funded by creating a new module which runs for the entire first year, attracts 15 credits yet avoids becoming seen as a separate module. It has been integrated into the overall student experience by introducing the concept of PDP from day one of induction as well as guidance on the creation of a portfolio, which includes induction week activities. Staff were invited to express an interest in fulfilling a PDP role as part of a team including the Level 1 leader and course leader. Those who were selected already make a significant contribution to other Level 1 teaching on this course and could see the benefits to themselves in being able to get to know students from day one as well as being able to link learning on their modules with the PD module. During induction week, staff encouraged new students to identify and share their existing strengths and experience in order to develop a positive self-image. Previous experiences were valued as part of a discussion about intended career options and opportunities for independent learning, such as coaching awards, volunteering and employment, were identified.

A full programme of activities during induction week included small group sessions led by the personal tutors, whole cohort group sessions led by the Level leader and course leader, team-building activities on campus led by the Carnegie Great Outdoors team of specialist outdoor teachers and instructors, and sessions designed to help students become familiar with X-stream. Tutors and course administrative staff operated an 'open door' policy where students were free to drop in without an appointment to discuss any concerns. Following the induction week, the impetus of the PD process was maintained through compulsory weekly meetings with the personal tutor or Level leader and through a week-long residential programme in the Lake District. This residential programme of outdoor activities involves a variety of team-building activities with course staff as well as specialist outdoor activity staff from the Carnegie Great Outdoors team. Part of the assessment for one of the first-year modules takes place at the end of this week via group presentations.

Improved timing is a key driver in this pilot project. By the end of their third week on the course students have been assessed (by presentation on their outdoor residential experience) and received feedback on this presentation as well as having developed a strong course and group identity. Students and staff alike comment on how much more confident they feel and on the strong supportive networks they have already developed. The year-long PD programme is carefully scheduled to allow for the need for specific input to support work in other modules (including academic skills such as referencing and writing essays; careers skills such as awareness of graduate routes into teaching and other graduate careers; personal skills such as effective group working, action planning, meeting deadlines etc). Work is completed both during and after the weekly sessions and involves regular use of online resources on X-stream. These resources include self-tests and printable output which students must add to their portfolio (previously called a 'progress file').

The PD process itself is assessed both formatively and summatively. Towards the end of semester 1 students are required to attend a 15-minute individual interview with their personal tutor. They prepare for this interview with a list of possible questions covering the areas of personal, academic and career skills, as well as by making sure their portfolio is up to date. Staff encourage students to use evidence from the portfolio to support their answers. A proforma based on the interview schedule is completed by the student and tutor together, and returned to the students with accompanying formative feedback. This experience not only benefits the students but also yields valuable data for staff, providing an opportunity to identify common difficulties with any aspect of the first-year experience. Students' feedback led to the creation of additional revision sessions to support assessment in one particular module, and a session on writing essays was rescheduled to coincide with preparation for a written assessment.

At the end of semester 2 the summative assessment follows a similar format to the formative assessment but includes more detailed questions across each of the three aspects of PDP: personal, academic and career/professional skills. The list of questions is provided to students in advance as well as the assessment criteria and an updated contents list for the portfolio. Two members of staff interview each student (to allow for moderation), asking at least one question from each of the three sections and encouraging students to use their portfolios to provide practical examples, just as a potential employer is likely to do at interview – hence we claim that this represents 'authentic assessment' as well as 'assessment for learning'.

> 66 One of our first semester assessments was a group presentation. The dismay within the lecture theatre was audible when it was announced that we would be assessed in the same groups as on our residential at the beginning of term. Memories surfaced of ego conflicts, diva-like hissy fits and one group member "needing" to put away a few beers to steady his nerves prior to addressing a packed kitchen of coursemates during practice presentations. Fast-forward a few months, and the hissy-fitters had become serial non-attenders, most of us had permanent hangovers and we were all ratty from weeks of bad weather and dubious nutrition. Our group managed to concoct a Frankenstein-esque presentation of as many quotes as we could fit onto a PowerPoint background.
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> Wild rumours circulated in the days leading to the assessment. "The assessor insists we wear shirt and tie." "The assessor asks you about quotes that don't exist." "The assessor is a Cyclops." It transpired that the assessor was OK. Non-attender proved to be really insightful and clever, Nervous Public Speaker controlled his vocal quiver and as far as we know, we didn't fail. If there's one thing I've learnt from the experience, it's to have faith. 99
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Monitoring attendance and Cause for Concern

An existing system for identifying Cause for Concern (CFC) has been extended to include the PD process. This system is explained at the start of the year and then revisited at several points throughout the year. Registers are routinely completed and checked at each taught session. All staff, including administrative staff, are encouraged to indicate to the Level leader any students who are giving cause for concern either as a result of lack of attendance or, occasionally, inappropriate behaviour. Four weeks and eight weeks into each semester staff receive an email request to identify where there may be a CFC, allowing the Level leader to see the extent of any issues and take action. Letters with details of the module(s) affected are sent out to the students requiring them to contact the Level leader to arrange a meeting within a week. All students understand that copies of any CFC letter will be placed on their file and remain there unless evidence is produced of a satisfactory reason for the absence.

It is interesting to note that in almost all cases the students are contrite and suggest that this is what they needed to get back on track. On the rare occasion that a student does not reply to the letter we contact them by telephone and ask after their welfare, offering our support.

Conclusions

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2008) has described a number of different approaches to Personal Development Planning in UK higher education:

- support for the learner
- support for learning
- support for off-campus learning
- support for extra-curricular learning
- preparation for employment/professional practice.

The integrated approach described above should enable us to combine all of these, maintain a focus on students as individuals, and meet the national requirement for students to produce a portfolio or progress file. At a course level it provides the basis for action planning, including informing elective choices at Levels 2 and 3 and planning of work experience and final-year dissertations, as well as enabling students to be partners in their learning. The longer-term benefits should also allow our students to articulate clearly the value of their previous experiences and perform confidently in interviews. For staff there will be immediate and detailed evidence to include in an employment reference when requested.

Finally, as this paper goes to press it is interesting to note that, for the first time ever in the existence of the course, not one student has failed their first year.

References

Palmer, S. (2008) *Embedding PDP and Employability into Modular Degree Programmes*. Available at: **http://www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/ PDPEmpCaseStudies.pdf** [Accessed February 2008]

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