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Embedding personal development planning within a WebCT supported module—a collaborative venture

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Abstract

This paper describes the background to and development of a first year undergraduate law module which has been re-designed to enable the embedding of Personal Development Planning (PDP) within the curriculum, with particular emphasis on career management skills. The pedagogic rationale for the approach adopted is identified and it is then demonstrated how skills development, careers management and reflective learning have been embedded and delivered through a combination of classroom and online activities using WebCT. Finally, the paper presents a brief evaluation, based on student feedback at the end of the module.

Background

The institutional background consists of three main elements. Firstly, recent policy changes now require that Personal Development Planning (PDP) for first year undergraduates is assessed either as an independent module or by being embedded within the existing curriculum. Secondly, both institutional and departmental policies promote the use of WebCT for the delivery of all modules as part of a broader strategy to support more flexible, student-centred learning. Thirdly, the Careers Centre, in addressing the employability agenda saw this as an ideal opportunity to work in partnership with the law tutors.

The main impetus for the introduction of PDP into UK HEIs can be traced back to the 1997 Dearing Report on Higher Education, which proposed the introduction of Progress Files for the recording of student achievement as 'a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development' (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Subsequently, this was endorsed by the joint UUK-SCOP-QAA Progress File Policy statement of 2000, which required all UK HEIs to introduce 'opportunities' for PDP by 2005-06, as a 'structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal educational and career development' (QAA, 2000).

Rationale

In the context of a university that places widening access and employability at the core of its mission, this challenge is particularly important because both skills development and PDP opportunities have been identified as key factors in improving retention rates of 'non traditional' students (Warren, 2003). A HEFCE study of nine HEIs that had been successful in dealing with student diversity identified 'curriculum-linked opportunities for student personal development' as a key ingredient in that success (HEFCE, 2002). More recently, a survey of six UK universities performing above their benchmarks for widening participation, retention and completion, identified the 'integration of skills development, employment and careers education, and personal tutor systems' as areas of practice associated with such success (Yorke and Thomas, 2003). Both studies also identify the importance of a co-ordinated approach involving both academic and support staff.

However, other studies have identified challenges to the successful implementation of PDP. Probably the main challenge is that of overcoming the scepticism of both learners and academic staff, neither of whom may see the value of PDP (Cottrell, 2003). Studies have shown that students often fail to relate to institutional

descriptions of the relevant skills and do not always see the relevance of 'bolt on' skills modules divorced from the curriculum (Lucas, et al., 2004). The lack of enthusiasm of academic staff has been linked with inadequate resourcing of personal tutor systems (East, 2006) and the perception that the employability focus of PDP is not central to their role (Jenkins, 2000). Despite these difficulties, case studies within legal education identify strong approval of PDP from students (East, 2006; Prince, 2001), especially when embedded within the assessment structure (Humphreys, 2001).

One suggested solution to this is to embed PDP within the existing subject curriculum in a way which is both meaningful to learners and which supports and enhances the study of the subject matter (Ward, 2001). This demands the involvement of careers staff in PDP implementation, which may present further problems within a culture where collaboration between academic and support staff has been limited (Slight and Bloxham, 2006).

To summarise, the literature on PDP suggests that the processes of recording achievement and engaging in personal development planning can support the twin purposes of heightening learners' awareness of their skills development for career planning purposes and of developing a more reflective approach to their learning of the curriculum content. Against this, a number of potential difficulties have been identified—lack of understanding by learners and the scepticism of academic staff as to the purpose of PDP; inadequate resourcing of personal tutor systems; cultural opposition to, or at least unfamiliarity with, collaboration between academic and support staff.

Implementing changes

The Personal Tutoring (PT) system for a first year law degree was reorganised to involve only those tutors who taught on the Year 1 programme. PT meetings were timetabled to provide feedback and opportunities for reflection on assignments. The assessment structure was re-structured and now consists of a Reflective Practice Log (RPL), worth 40%; a Careers Management Portfolio (CMP) worth 30%; an Oral Presentation (OP) on a legal issue, worth 30%.

The RPL, introduced to encourage legal skills development and reflection on learning, consists of

- an online quiz designed to test students' library/research skills
- a court visit report, designed to enable students to reflect on the legal process and profession
- a research log, detailing the research and writing methodologies used for a formative essay
- a Year 1 performance reflection exercise.

The CMP, introduced to develop careers management awareness, consists of

- a PowerPoint presentation on the structure of the legal profession and the qualifications, skills and personal qualities required for work within it
- a reflective essay and an initial skills/careers development plan, based on a legal/personal skills audit
- a CV, designed to encourage early recording of, and reflection on, achievement.

In response to the drive to integrate career planning within the curriculum, Career Management Skills (CMS) have been developed within HEIs using different models. The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC, 1998), in summarising the conclusions of a series of DfEE projects on career management skills, identified three major strategies or models

- a Delivery through generic or customised programme modules
- b Integration within programmes, by linking the process of skills acquisition to existing course components
- c Delivery outside the curriculum, through technology or discrete activities.

In this context, an 'embedded' careers module is one where the content is tailored to the pedagogic profile of the subject, presenting challenges for careers staff who 'teach' such modules. In our own case, Careers Centre staff had experience of running programmes based on models A and C, neither of which had been particularly successful, and were keen to collaborate with academic staff in integrating an existing institutional Careers Management Online Certificate (CMOC) within the curriculum.

The Certificate structure is based on the four stage **DOTS** model - **D**ecision Learning; **O**pportunity Awareness; **T**ransition Learning; **S**elf Awareness (Law, 1996). The key aim of the Certificate is to understand and demonstrate practical application of CMS necessary for successful progression and development through and beyond university. The CMP is a result of close collaboration between the law tutors and the Careers Centre and demonstrates how CMS can be customised and embedded within the law curriculum. The basic structure of the institutional CMOG was maintained, with tasks specifically tailored to the legal profession, thus establishing a strong link between the curriculum and PDP.

Supporting WebCT infrastructure

It was decided to make full use of the WebCT platform to provide an online supporting infrastructure for delivery of the new programme. This decision clearly was not without inherent risks, as the case studies of the experience in law schools at the Universities of Glamorgan and Exeter have shown (East, 2006; Prince, 2001). However, those experiences need to be set against the evidence of positive student feedback on the use of ICT in the delivery of undergraduate law programmes at Coventry and Lancaster Universities (Davidson and Orsini-Jones, 2002; Bloxham and Armitage, 2003) and on postgraduate programmes at Glasgow Graduate School of Law (Maharg, 2001) and at Glasgow Caledonian University (McKellar and Barton, 1999).

Originally, WebCT acted primarily as a source of access to module learning resources. However, the tutors felt that this alone did not engage students sufficiently with the subject of law, nor did it allow for the reflection or appropriate skills development that was required for an effective PDP programme. The changes described above represent a more proactive approach to supporting skills development, reflective learning and personal development planning by provision of

- **learning and teaching resources**, including access to module documentation as well as discussion forums designed for interstudent and student-tutor communication to encourage collaborative learning and active student participation and involvement with the subject
- **online formative and summative assessment and feedback** which, through online quizzes and the WebCT Assignment Drop Box facility, enables personal tutors to assess coursework online, release marks and provide feedback electronically prior to PT meetings
- **an administrative structure for tracking student engagement, performance and progress**, consisting of the 'Track Students' tool, enabling tutors to monitor student usage and engagement with the WebCT pages; and the 'Manage Students' tool, allowing tutors to track performance
- **a mechanism for the creation of student records of achievement** is provided through the 'My Grades' facility and RPL4, which forms the basis for student Progress Files in Years 2 and 3, although the authors are currently exploring the possibility of using e-portfolios in future.

In collaboration with the Careers Centre and Learning Technology staff, online 'content pages' have been created for the CMP. The summative assessment exercises are, apart from an introductory lecture, delivered and undertaken entirely online and comprise of three sessions. Each online 'content page' includes the session aims and learning outcomes (Figure 1); the relevant resources, including additional links to various online legal careers sources and self-assessment skills audits, such as the Prospects and Windmills websites (Figure 2); the assessment instructions and criteria (Figure 3).

Figure 1 CMP Session 1-1

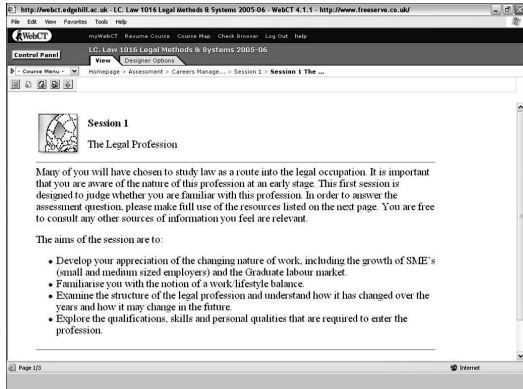


Figure 3 CMP Session 1-3

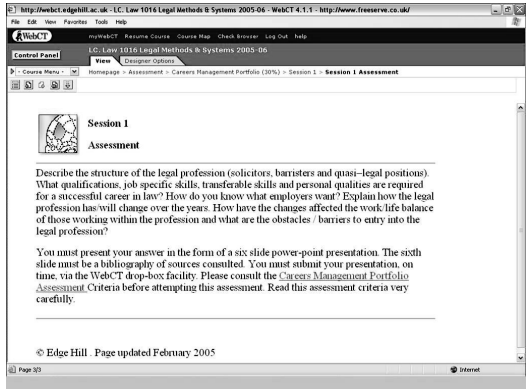
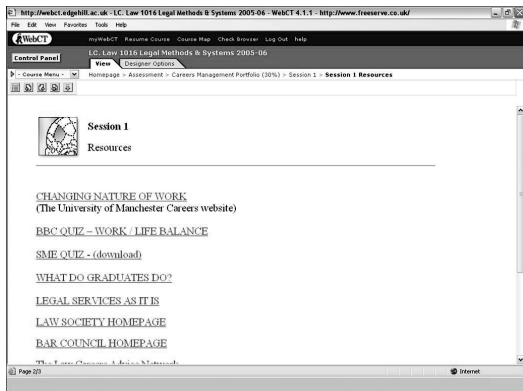


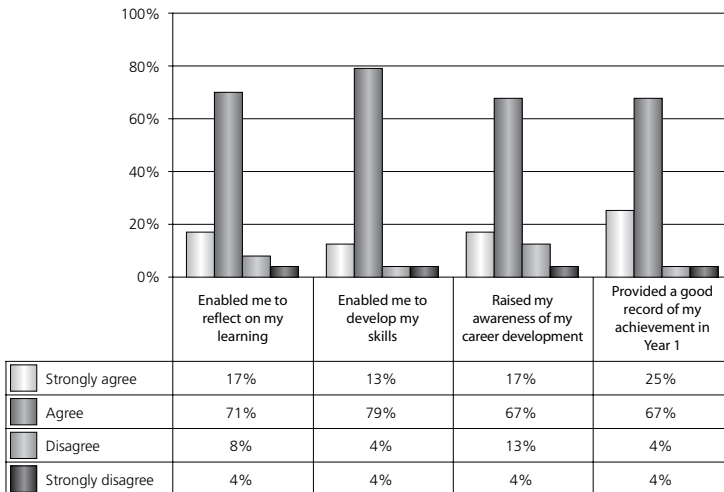
Figure 2 CMP Session 1-2



Evaluation

The main source of data was the evaluative quantitative and qualitative student feedback, gathered on completion of the module. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to their overall experience of the PDP programme. Questionnaires were completed by 24 of the 32 full-time students who were enrolled at the time—a response rate of 75%. The first question asked about satisfaction ratings for the overall programme. Responses were generally very positive, with most students 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that it had enabled them to reflect on their learning (88%), that it enabled them to develop their skills (92%), that it raised their awareness of career development issues (84%) and that it provided a good record of their achievement (92%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Evaluation of the Year 1 PDP Programme



The questions relating to careers awareness were designed to identify particular learning outcomes—subject knowledge, reflection on skills/careers, CV development—and relate them to the specific learning tasks that had been undertaken as part of CMP. Responses were very positive, with between 71-92% ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that the learning tasks had developed their subject knowledge (Figure 5) and enabled them to reflect on their skills’ needs and career options (Figure 6) as well as developing CV writing skills (Figure 7), although the latter was the least positively regarded. A number of students commented that a task considering a wider range of career options, beyond the legal profession, would have been more useful. This needs to be addressed, although uncoupling the subject knowledge, which would have to remain focussed on the legal profession, from the process of reflection on skills and career options will present difficulties.

Figure 5 Evaluation of CMP1 (Legal Profession PowerPoint)

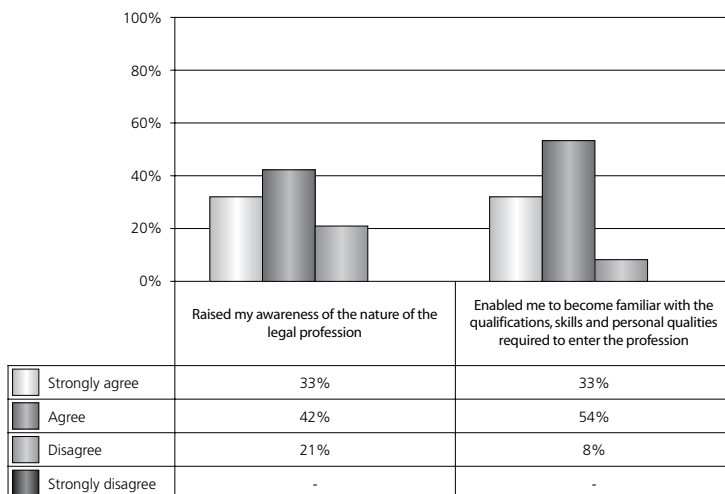


Figure 6 Evaluation of CMP2 (Skills Audit)

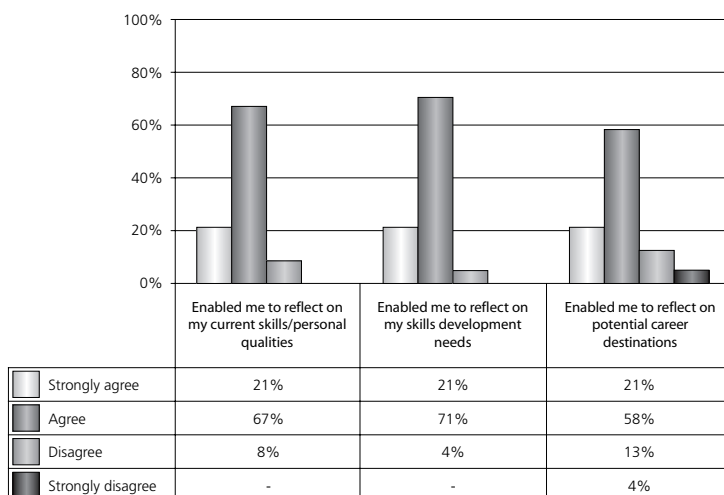
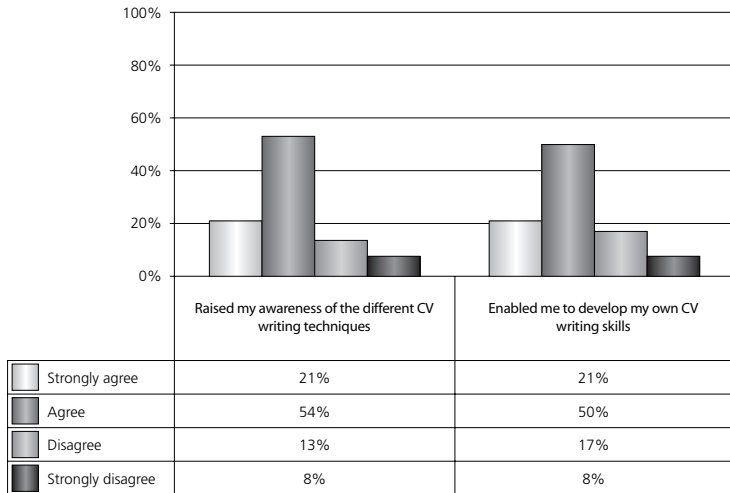


Figure 7 Evaluation of CMP3 (CV)



Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper outlines the development of an embedded PDP process within an undergraduate law module. The approach adopted for implementation has been located within the context of the research literature that identifies both the pedagogic rationale for PDP and how the use of ICT applications can support skills development and reflective learning. Finally, the paper has provided an evaluation, based on student feedback.

To summarise, the evaluation data suggests that although the new module appears to have been successful in achieving its objectives, attention needs to be addressed to further develop and improve the following aspects

- clarification of assessment criteria for reflective writing, for the benefit of the tutors
- additional support and guidance on reflective writing, for the benefit of the students
- consideration to extending elements of the CMP beyond the legal profession, to cater for students who do not intend to pursue legal careers.

Other issues may emerge in the future as the new module ‘beds in’ and as student numbers increase. Tutors are also considering the introduction of e-portfolios to further support and encourage student reflection and to promote an enhanced sense of ‘ownership’ of their progress files. On the positive side, the challenges of resourcing the PT system, online delivery of the programme, and academic-support staff collaboration, appear to have been successfully met. Indeed, the tutors are satisfied that the new module is effectively designed to achieve the intended educational objectives and will continue to critically reflect on the process with a view to introducing further changes as and when necessary.

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