

# Embedding Personal Development Planning into the Social Sciences

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## Abstract

*This paper addresses a number of the theoretical and practical issues raised by using personal development planning (PDP) to enhance employability. It briefly discusses the background, rationale and evidence for PDP. It also considers the problems associated with policy implementation: the practicalities of embedding PDP in programmes of study, and the problems of curriculum fragmentation, student attitudes and integration with student services. This discussion is followed by the description and evaluation of an innovative 3<sup>rd</sup> year social science module designed to tackle these challenges. Finally, the authors provide some recommendations for the further development of PDP in higher education.*

**Key Words:** Personal Development Planning (PDP), employability, embedding, knowledge transfer.

## Background

Higher education has not escaped the 'discourse of learning as self development' (Doyle, undated) which has become a key element of public policy in recent years in the UK. Indeed Light and Cox (2001) discuss how academic knowledge has become supplanted by 'active forms of knowledge that can be employed to increase economic competitiveness and personal effectiveness ... increasingly displacing the passive knowledge of truth, contemplation and personal awareness' (p. 8). This discourse is accompanied by a stress on key and transferable skills, self-development and learning how to learn. Consequently, personal development has achieved a high profile in the higher education (HE) sector over the last few years. This article traces some of these developments and debates and their relationship to embedding learning for employability into non-vocational degree study. It shows how subject specific knowledge can be integrated with higher level cognitive skills, such as self reflection, within the context of learning for work. This is demonstrated through the inclusion of several short 'student vignettes' which describe how students both consolidate their learning by reflecting upon the uses of a social science education to the workplace and demonstrate understanding of the ways to make themselves employable.

The major policy thrust for Personal Development Planning in UK higher education dates back to the publication of the Dearing Report on Higher Education (National Committee of Enquiry, 1997) followed by the joint UUK-SCOP-QAA Progress File Policy statement published in May 2000 (QAA 2000). The Dearing Report saw Progress Files as a process by which students are able to 'monitor, build, and reflect upon their personal development'. The notion of Progress Files has been given added impetus by the Bologna Declaration, specifically the Tuning Project which is aimed at identifying commonalities for generic and subject-specific learning outcomes of higher education programmes across international boundaries.

Progress files were not envisaged by the joint UUK-SCOP-QAA Progress File Policy as merely records of learning and achievement, but as active documents which students engaged with throughout their programmes using personal development planning (PDP) processes. The Policy places an obligation on HEIs to provide students with opportunities for PDP at all stages of their programmes and therefore it can be argued that PDP is the most important aspect of the Progress File Policy (Cottrel 2003). In this sense, PDP has become something that must be implemented because of its mandatory nature

rather than emerging from grass roots development, tried and tested over time. As Holmes (2000) says of Key Skills in HE, 'It is now a commonplace notion' (p. 201).

However, Rob Ward (2001) points out that Personal Development Planning is not a new concept in higher education. Several institutions have PDP-type practices that predate Dearing and where policy has derived from practical experience. Thus, other terms have come to be used by academic staff to describe essentially PDP activities such as 'reviewing and recording learning and achievement, and action planning' (p. 2). Vocational courses, in particular, have drawn on these activities for many years and the notion of developing the reflective practitioner (Schon 1983) is firmly embedded in certain fields of professional training such as nursing, teaching and other human service professions. Nevertheless, the new policy requires institutions to extend these processes to all students by 2005-2006.

Personal Development Planning has only relatively recently been introduced into HE and FE although it has been a key part of educational policy development in the secondary education sector over the last two decades (Gough et al 2003). It can be seen as part of the 'dominance of economic and utilitarian agendas ...in education policy' (Doyle p.1), for example Records of Achievement, Key Skills, profiling, and foundation degrees. In relation to Higher Education, PDP is defined by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK as 'a process that is undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own educational, academic and career development' (QAA 2000).

However, Personal Development Planning has emerged from a particular vocational view of the role of higher education and of the individual and thus it sits awkwardly with many academic staff who have not conceived of the curriculum as being related, in any explicit way, with the 'development of the whole person' (Jackson 2002) or the career progression of their students. It draws into the curriculum a range of activities formerly considered the concern of individual students who may or may not choose to use university facilities such as a Careers Service. As Brennan writes (2003) of the work of Fenwick (2000), PDP could be seen as an example of the 'Surrender of the last private space of personal meaning to the public sphere of work place control' (p. 83). It is also linked clearly to the Key Skills arena as part of the notion of individuals taking responsibility for the management of their own learning. The Dearing report included 'learning how to learn' as a key skill for graduates because of the importance it placed 'on creating a learning society at a time when much specific knowledge will quickly become obsolete. Those leaving higher education will need to understand how to learn and how to manage their own learning, and recognise that the process continues throughout life' (para 9.18). As Doyle suggests in relation to learner managed learning, is it an example of a 'progressive discourse selectively and narrowly interpreted .....to veil managerial strategy' (p. 5).

On the other hand, Personal Development Planning could be perceived as part of an emancipatory pedagogy, espousing ideas of learner managed learning, experiential learning, learner autonomy and personal control over one's own education and development. Indeed, the drive to widening participation and social justice in universities may be stalled without greater attention to these capabilities. For example, the Council for Industry and Higher Education's report on *Graduate Opportunities, Social Class and Age* (Purcell & Hogarth 1999) indicates that those from lower socio-economic groups who obtain degrees are likely to get poorer quality jobs than graduates from affluent backgrounds. They conclude that HEIs could improve the employment potential of such students by clarifying what qualities they develop in students, building key skills into the curriculum, developing

guidance activities and helping students to articulate their academic, intellectual, social and employability skills, all possible components of PDP.

The literature supporting this policy development espouses the benefits of PDP as significant and various:

‘PDP is intended to support the development of self-managed learning for a complicated paradoxical world. It is also intended to foster intrinsic motivations to learning and develop and counterbalance the enormous extrinsic motivation of assessment. While not all students will be motivated in this way, it will help show students that self-motivation is valued in higher education’ (Jackson 2002: 2)

Indeed a review of the research on personal development planning for improving student learning (Gough et al. 2003), whilst recognising the lack of coherence and consistency in evaluation studies, does conclude that the ‘processes and actions that underlie PDP do have a positive impact on student attainment and approaches to learning’ (p. 6).

In addition, there is also evidence from a review of successful practice (HEFCE 2002) that curriculum-linked opportunities for student personal development contribute to dealing effectively with student diversity. This was supported by a survey by Yorke and Thomas (2003) of six English Universities that performed well in terms of widening participation and student retention. They concluded that one key area was the development of the curriculum to meet the needs of a more diverse student population including the integration of skills development and employment and careers education.

Whilst the literature raises questions about the motivation for Personal Development Planning in higher education, there is a range of strong reasons for ensuring that it becomes part of our practice including, as a minimum, the policy imperative driving the initiative. However, writing policy and creating a new reality are two different things, and policy implementation is particularly difficult in higher education, characterised as it is by devolved departments and autonomous individuals. Consequently, careful consideration needs to be given to the practical problems associated with providing PDP opportunities for students.

### **Practical problems**

A key practical problem of Personal Development Planning is which staff should take responsibility for supporting this aspect of the student experience. Jenkins (2000) identifies early problems in the implementation of personal profiling, particularly where it is integrated with a personal tutor system. It was an ‘aspiration... (they) could not deliver’ (p. 194) because staff were resistant to the employability focus, were concerned about assessing students’ wider achievements and were anxious about the implications for the overstretched personal tutor system. Undoubtedly, placing the emphasis for PDP on the personal tutor system makes it extremely difficult to manage as personal tutoring is not normally subject to the usual quality assurance mechanisms used in universities such as student feedback, moderation of assessed work and external examiners. It presents considerable opportunity for an inconsistent student experience.

Ward (2001) suggests that to secure staff ownership, it is helpful to develop policy from existing practice. His review of a range of case studies prepared for the Generic LTSN Centre indicates the

crucial need for PDP to become embedded in institutional policies and structures and not seen as bolt-on and peripheral. He talks about the 'psychological engagement' of staff and students with PDP. This

'emphasises the need for embedding within, and customisation to, the culture and demands of particular programmes and disciplines. While this can be reasonably identifiable in relation to the demands of awards subject to external professional recognition, or where 'reflective practice' is itself already a tradition, it is also important within broadly based non-vocational areas' (p. 4).

This recommendation to embed Personal Development Planning in programmes and disciplines creates an additional problem. The demand to 'embed' PDP is supported by the contents of the various Benchmarking statements for subject disciplines that identify 'transferable' skill outcomes for undergraduate study. Although the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England and Wales (FHEQ, QAA 2000) includes skills development at each level, it also creates tensions about the embedding of PDP practices, particularly skills' assessment, within contributory modules. For example at level 3, (honours level) awards should demonstrate high level academic skills and conceptual knowledge and tutors may feel it is difficult to combine with these reflexive accounts of personal development and assessment of employability skills. This is particularly likely to be the case on non-professional programmes. In addition, particularly at level 3, staff may resist the displacement of subject study in favour of PDP.

A second problem is the necessarily fragmented nature of modular programmes where each element of learning is usually separately and summatively assessed at the end of every module. This presents a challenge for Personal Development Planning which is, of essence, an holistic process not easily divided into modular chunks. Interestingly, the notion of 'capstone' modules has become increasingly popular in US higher education as a means of encouraging students to draw their learning together at the end of their programmes. As shown below, this was the approach taken in this study to embed PDP in the final year of an undergraduate degree.

A third problem is student attitudes. Students do not always see the benefits of forward planning (Cottrel 2003) and may avoid actively engaging in PDP activities where possible. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that staff frequently complain that students do not bother to attend personal tutorials. Furthermore, students may struggle to relate to the notion of 'skills' implicit in PDP. Lucas et al. (2004) discovered that students struggled to separate transferable skills from personal attributes, or qualities that emerged with age. They consider that the concept of skills has yet to be 'fulfilled' in the experience of students. The title of their article 'Who writes this stuff?' illustrates the gap between institutional descriptions of skills development and the tacit understanding of students. They recommend greater tutor and student reflection and dialogue on the subject in order that students can 'write this stuff' for themselves. They also stress the importance of relating skills specifically to the subject matter of students' courses which reinforces the notion, discussed above, of embedding practice.

A fourth challenge is to link embedded curricula with wider student services, particularly Careers advice. Historically, in UK HE, Careers advice has been offered to students as individuals with some classes available in related skills such as interview techniques and writing applications and curriculum vitae. Careers Advisers have been invited into the HE classroom as visiting speakers but rarely has their work been fully embedded in the HE curriculum.

It is these challenges which the module described in the main section of this paper has attempted to tackle. The remainder of the paper will describe the module, outline how Careers Advice was integrated with the teaching, evaluate progress to date and discuss the outcomes in the light of these introductory paragraphs.

## **The institution**

The programme is based in a College of HE located in the North of England with 7000 full-time equivalent students. The College offers courses in arts, humanities and social sciences and it is a major national and regional provider of both professional teacher education and non-medical health related education. The College's mission includes a strong regional focus and a concern to strengthen access, equality and opportunity. In this institution, Applied Social Science takes the form of an interdisciplinary degree drawing upon the main disciplines of sociology, social policy and psychology and the cognate disciplines of politics, cultural studies and gender studies which students apply in real world contexts.

## **The Module**

The motivation for the development of the module was threefold. Firstly, it was a response to a growing awareness of the need to embed Personal Development Planning within the undergraduate curriculum. Secondly, lecturers were aware that many of our students were expressing an interest in working in the 'people professions' following graduation without really knowing what options were open to them or how to access them. In the past we had tried to address employability and student progression in the curriculum by organising guest speakers from a range of professions. However, we didn't feel that this approach was either formal enough nor sufficiently tied into subject delivery. We were also aware that students on our programme only started to think about personal development, career planning and making job applications after their course had finished, in other words at a time when they were not able to take full advantage of College services and support systems that would aid this process. Finally, we wished to address the 'capstone' principle whereby students are encouraged to consolidate their subject learning at the end of their studies. Such an approach has the added advantage of addressing the issue of the fragmented nature of combined programmes that is always a key concern of modular delivery.

As a result, we created a personal development and career planning module to be delivered in year three of a combined studies (modular) programme. This module was designed to address some of the conceptual and practical issues raised by the PDP debate in particular the relationship between academic knowledge and practical intelligence. Practical intelligence is understood as the ability to move beyond analytical and creative intelligence (Yorke and Knight 2004b). It focuses on the practical aspects of learning, such as the acquisition of transferable skills and their application to employability.

Entitled *Investigating Professions in the Social Sciences*, the module is a 15 credit core component of an honours degree in the applied social sciences delivered in the Autumn semester on two of the three sites run by the college. It encourages students to focus on employability and the notion of building an 'exit strategy' from higher education through consideration of how to make themselves employable. This includes reflection on knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer to professional contexts. The module seeks to encourage students to develop a critical understanding of a chosen area of professional employment and also to demonstrate an ability to apply their knowledge of social science to future professional practice. The module aims not only to tackle the problem of where to locate PDP by

integrating careers development into the curriculum but also to address the thorny issue of skills assessment in contributory modules through embedding skills assessment with the application of understandings of the uses of social science.

### **Module Structure and delivery**

In the first instance students are required to identify a particular area of professional work that they may be interested in moving into upon graduation. Some students may already know which profession they are interested in, for example, social work. Others would like to work in a particular area, for example housing, work with looked after children or work with young offenders but often they do not know which professional fields cover these areas. The first task is to spend time researching a profession or field of interest. They are asked to consider some of the following questions as a guideline: what does the job entail, what qualifications are needed, what experiences or personal qualities are required, what is the career structure, are there related fields that I could move into in the future, what are the prospects for further study or training? Having researched an area of professional work students are then required to undertake a job search, find a post of interest to them, send for the application pack and make a 'mock' application. They are also required to produce an up to date professional CV using appropriate technologies. The CV, mock application and covering letter are assembled into a portfolio which constitutes one part of the assessment weighted at 20%

Concurrent with this, students make a short (10 minutes), non-assessed but compulsory, presentation to staff and peer group members. Based upon their investigations students are required to outline the main features of the profession they have researched. Students are encouraged to use appropriate technologies and support materials when making their presentations, for example Powerpoint, OHP transparencies, flip chart or handouts. The aim is to make the presentation as 'professional' as possible.

For the second part of the assessment students draw upon the knowledge of the social sciences to consider how social science informs and deepens a critical understanding of the area of work that they are interested in. Here, the guiding question that they are asked to address is 'of what use is social science to future employment?' They are required to consider the manifold ways the social sciences have been used and to demonstrate how social science ideas and methods influence thinking and shape practice. For example, a student interested in working with homeless persons might consider how the knowledge of sociology and/or psychology informs explanations of homelessness and shapes praxis. They might examine the political or social philosophies underpinning the professional practice of working with homeless persons. They may undertake a critical analysis of homelessness policy or investigate the effects of homelessness on identity formation and its consequences. For their second assignment students produce an essay that considers the 'uses' of social science in developing a critical understanding of their chosen area of work. Here, students either draw upon one discipline of the social sciences or they may take an interdisciplinary approach exploring their chosen field from more than one perspective. This assessment item carries an assessment weighting of 80%. Supervision of work is provided through individual tutorials arranged with the course tutor to discuss both the compilation of the portfolio and the development of the essay.

### **Integration of Careers Advice**

A further challenge for the PDP debate and the development of the module in particular is how to embed Student Services into the curriculum. The module is linked to wider student services through Careers advice and to an approach modelled upon the processes of Decision-Learning , Opportunity

Awareness, Transition and Self-awareness - DOTS (Law and McGowan, 1999, Law and Watts, 1977). Starting with self reflection, students are encouraged to raise their self-awareness through consideration of their abilities, skills values and interests. Opportunity Awareness would encourage them to search out occupational information, for example, does the work require strong interpersonal skills, will they have to consider out-of-hours working, is there a need to express themselves through the written word? Students then are encouraged to apply what they have learned about themselves to what they now know about opportunities and occupational requirements and so make more informed career decisions. Such planning and reflexive thought is essential in order to make the transition into a specified profession. The more logical order of progression is therefore SODT. However, it is recognised that students do not necessarily move through the stages in a logical order. The process may be aided by the addition of a work shadowing experience undertaken after the preliminary research has been carried out, or by seeking advisory interviews with persons in the chosen field of employment, again after the completion of preliminary investigations. Thus, students are progressing from informational learning to transformational learning. They are progressing from finding things out to working things out.

It should be noted here that it is not our aim simply to draw upon Careers service methods but to embed 'career tactics' (Hawkins 1999) within the module through the active involvement of Careers Service staff in the delivery of the programme. The module is based upon a student-centred, non-didactic learning model with staff inputs restricted to what is considered particularly appropriate. The module is organised over twelve teaching weeks with the college Careers service providing teaching inputs during four sessions. Currently these include; an introduction to researching careers and job markets, careers and psychometric testing, dealing with application forms and compiling CVs and interview techniques. These have practical relevance in introducing students to the basic principles of organising and preparing for employment. It also has intellectual relevance by encouraging student understandings of specific labour markets and the extent to which a proactive approach is essential to secure employment opportunities. The development of higher cognitive skills is required for students to think 'outside the box' and understand that simply reacting to job advertisements means that they will end up competing in often already saturated labour markets. Consequently more preparation for employment and creative methods are required. Careers advisors are also actively involved in assessing student portfolios.

Teaching staff inputs include a session using problem-based methods that requires students to work in groups on a scenario based upon a social issue. Students are required to draw upon the knowledge of the 3 main disciplines of the degree course (sociology, psychology, social policy) in order to analyse the 'problem' from a variety of perspectives. Their findings, shared with the whole class, form the basis of a class discussion. Located in the second half of the module, this session aims to support student preparation for the second assessment item by encouraging them to consolidate learning from their degree study so far. The aim is to enable students to practice evaluating the applications and 'uses' of social science in real world contexts. This is an established approach on the course and one that the students are already conversant with in other modules. The difference here is that they are reflecting upon their evaluations within the context of future employment. The remaining teaching weeks are devoted to self-directed learning with students working independently on their research and assessments. This is supported by staff that provide individual, timetabled tutorials. The demands on staff time of these tutorials, whilst not insignificant, are offset by the shared delivery of the module noted above.

## **Changes for the second iteration**

Following completion of the first year of the module, student feedback (see below) precipitated a staff discussion and evaluation focused on the value of assessing the short presentation. It was decided that the formative nature of the class presentation should be maintained and accompanied by a brief explanation to students of the differences between formative and summative assessment during the introduction to the module. The basic tenor of this was to encourage students to develop further their higher cognitive skills and intellectual maturity by reflecting upon the concept of 'value' and considering the extent to which not everything that they learn can be translated into a number on a mark sheet.

In a similar vein, critical student feedback from the first cohort also included the request to 'include more taught sessions' in response to the question 'What advice would you give on how the module could be run better next time?' Again, it was felt that such a request stemmed from either a lack of confidence or an unwillingness to engage with the independent learner approach that is central to the module delivery on the part of some students. This is something that can possibly be best tackled by further embedding graduate employability into the undergraduate curriculum at levels 1 and 2.

Following discussions with Careers Service staff it was decided to design an additional input that would give students practice in the close reading of job specifications and in completing job applications in line with 'essential' and 'desirable' requirements. This session places emphasis on language acquisition, encouraging students to take note of language use in job advertisements and specifications and to be aware of specific professional registers and the need to describe their skills and achievements in the way that employers recognise. Here, students are consolidating learning from earlier in their studies, in particular level 1 and 2 modules on communication and level 3 modules that include discourse theory and analysis.

As the module enters its third iteration in 2004/5 staff have focused, as a result of their evaluations of the module, upon the issues of assessment weighting and the development of a rigorous evaluation process.

As noted above, the configuration of the module's assessment pattern is 20% for the portfolio and 80% for the essay. This configuration reflects the established level 3 learning outcomes for the degree programme by placing the majority weighting upon the academic essay. This raises the issue of the extent to which academic knowledge is privileged over practical intelligence in the development of the module and draws us into debates on the valuing of assessment weightings in the wider context of employability evidence. As reflexive practitioners, it leads us to consider the possibility that we may be devaluing the skills acquisition component of the learning, teaching and assessment strategy in comparison with the acquisition of the knowledge base (Yorke & Knight 2004a) and is further discussed below.

## **Developing the Evaluation Process**

The further development of the current evaluation process is regarded as essential to both the future development of the course and the embedding of graduate employability in the social science undergraduate programme as a whole. This is work in progress and the aim of this section is to outline current practice and point the way to future developments. Evaluation of the course has focused thus



far on both the concrete and the less tangible outcomes of the student experience and has taken the following forms

- Student evaluation forms
- Student Vignettes

It should be noted here that to date our main approach to the evaluation process has been largely impressionistic. Student feedback is generated in the first instance through student evaluation forms. Overall the module was evaluated positively by the first cohort of students. A selection of responses to the question ‘The best things about the module have been?’ include:

‘Sometimes in seminars you think “ what has this got to do with real life?” but this module fetched ASS [Applied Social Science], life and proper jobs together’.

‘Thinking about life beyond my degree’.

‘Thinking about how theory and ideas impacts upon professional life/work’.

‘Don’t feel like you’re going out into “nothingness”, feel like there is somewhere to go’

In addition, verbal feedback from Careers Service staff reveals an upward trend among students who have taken the course seeking personal careers interviews early in their final year of study.

Less tangible outcomes have been traced through the more abstract currency of student’s psychological engagement with the benefits of Personal Development Planning for example, increased levels of confidence, self-awareness, wider understandings of labour markets and the need to ‘build’ a CV over time. These are articulated below through several short student vignettes. The interpretation of these demonstrates how such ‘value added’ elements of the course are instrumental in shaping students’ understandings of making themselves ‘employable’.

### **Student Vignettes**

*Sarah: Age 21 First cohort*

Sarah was clear from the outset about her intention to work with young people in the community. Her particular interest was in youth offending work and with her ambitions in mind she was ‘tailoring’ her degree studies to include appropriate modules. Interviews with careers staff encouraged her to think of her ambitions as long term plans rather than something that could be achieved immediately upon graduation. Consequently she undertook voluntary work in a local youth centre during her final year of study and investigated the work of an aspect of youth offending work for her essay. Sarah recognised the need to be proactive in her career development by building up her experience and CV. Upon graduation she successfully secured a position with a national children’s charity working first on a Summer Playscheme and then as a youth club leader.

*Jane: Age 49 First cohort*

Jane wanted to work in a school with young children but did not want to teach. Her interests were in the area of educational inequalities. Jane felt unsure about applying for what she regarded as jobs that were ‘too professional’ at ‘her age’. Through the module she was able to gain a wider understanding of

specific labour markets and consider jobs that supported the professions. For her portfolio she investigated the role of Teaching Assistant. For her essay she considered how knowledge of social science informed her understanding of social inequalities in the classroom and how such understanding might inform practice. Armed with a clearer picture of what was available to her in the education field and with increased levels of confidence from her investigations Jane decided to make an application to a course in teaching and learning support and train to become a teaching assistant herself. In order to satisfy the entry requirements of the course she undertook part-time work experience in a local primary school during her last year of study.

*Catherine: Age 21 Second cohort*

Catherine wants to pursue a career in either social work or probation work. Following completion of the module she applied for a place on the Home Office sponsored trainee probation officer scheme. This includes in-service training in probation studies and community justice. The selection process involved an application form that required students to explain and evidence their suitability for training under a range of headings such as: demonstrating understanding of diversity and difference, problem solving and inter-personal skill acquisition to name a few. Catherine was short listed for the first round of selection which consisted of a group work exercise and a short written exam. She was one of sixty applicants shortlisted from a field of approximately two hundred in the region. She failed to make it through to the second round and awaits feedback as we write. Understandably disappointed she was unsure if she wanted feedback but further discussion with course tutors enabled her to see the advantages of it and the ways in which she could effectively use it. Following this set back she sent in her CV to the local social services department and has also just applied for a job as a probation work assistant. She feels more aware of what is required in the job seeking process now and is less daunted by application forms and presentations.

*Linda Age 20 Second cohort*

Linda had always wanted to teach but had lacked the confidence to tackle a BA with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) course straight from school. She decided to apply for a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education course with a focus on early years teaching. Instead of making a 'mock' application for her portfolio she produced the real thing. She was successfully interviewed and offered a place subject to degree results. She will be the youngest student on the programme when it starts. She was particularly pleased by the fact that part of the selection process was an observed group discussion with the set task of discussing social inequalities in the classroom. Linda had chosen a similar topic for her essay. The fact that the module requires students to consolidate their learning by reflecting upon the uses of social science to the world of work meant that she was well prepared for task.

*Al Age 21 First cohort*

Like Linda, Al did not make a 'mock' application for his portfolio but concentrated on the real thing. He applied for an NHS graduate trainee management scheme. He was also selected for the first round of interviews from a large and competitive field. Like Catherine and the trainee probation worker scheme, he did not make it through to the second round. However, his feedback was positive, provided advice on how best to acquire relevant experience and offered encouragement to consider a reapplication at a later date.

These case studies show how students develop (or by the end of their studies are developing) an understanding of the need to be proactive in managing their own personal and career development. They also demonstrate the extent to which students learn the necessity to build an exit strategy in their final year of study and understand that they may need to continue to build their CV in the first years

following graduation in order to get the career they want. Such understandings become part of what Schirato and Yell (2000) following Bourdieu, term their 'metaliteracy' where literacy is an understanding of a situation from a particular perspective and metaliteracy as the ability to see a situation from different angles. Students must strive to understand employability from different perspectives. For example, whilst students may feel that it is sufficient to demonstrate subject knowledge in the form of a good degree classification, careers service staff may focus on developing self-awareness and an understanding of specific labour markets and employers may seek evidence of key transferable skills. Engagement with these different perspectives is vital in order to bring about practical effects.

The above vignettes offer several examples of students developing metaliteracy in relation to achieving graduate employment. For example, both Al and Catherine were motivated by the module to make job applications to graduate training schemes. Whilst unsuccessful in the later rounds of the recruitment process, the experience and feedback enabled them to recognise the employer's perspective in each organisation and tailor their future Personal Development Planning accordingly. Likewise, the module provided Sarah with a wider understanding of employer expectations and, therefore, the power to manage her work experience in a profitable way.

We are currently considering how to evaluate the module more effectively both in its concrete and less tangible aspects. This will inevitably involve moving away from the more impressionistic approach outlined above toward a process that involves combination of quantitative and qualitative data and quite possibly 'methodological triangulation' (Denzin 1989) which involves the use of multiple methods to study a single issue. As seen above, this process has already begun; further developments may include building case studies, possibly from students' own narratives, or developing a longitudinal study that tracks graduates over a period of time following graduation.

## **Discussion**

Current political regimes provide active encouragement for degrees that demonstrate relevance to the labour market whilst critics lament the devaluing of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Squaring this particular circle is a difficult task and some would say why try? Clearly our module does address current government concerns with key skills acquisition, graduate competency and vocationalism as important drivers. However, it aspires to go beyond these aims and the current employability agenda, important as that is. As we have shown, it aims to encourage students to draw upon the disciplines and knowledge of the social sciences to demonstrate how knowledge shapes understandings, informs personal philosophies and praxis and generates passions. It aims to bring together practical intelligence with higher cognitive skills, such as reflexivity, reasoning and creative thought and integrate these with knowledge acquisition within the context of a Personal Development Planning framework. We believe that developing such a synthesis serves to integrate technical skills with the development of understandings and ideas in relation to the uses of social science, the application of knowledge and the employability agenda. It also aims to go some way to resolving the tensions between knowledge that is regarded as merely a servant to labour market demands and economic growth, and the pursuit of knowledge for intellectual growth. Such synthesising encourages students to develop deep approaches to learning as they enter their final year of study by reflecting upon and demonstrating the usefulness of social science to both career planning and personal development. In this way, the approach does not involve displacing a subject module at level 3, but fosters discipline-based enquiry within an employment context.

In relation to the practical problems of implementing effective Personal Development Planning in HE, the module has undoubtedly had considerable success. Such an approach does not require the majority of academic staff to take responsibility for PDP, neither does it require those staff involved in the module to have specific skills in supporting PDP or giving Careers Advice. On the contrary, the full integration of the Careers Service in the delivery of the module has enabled such specialist elements to be delivered by the experts. Academic staff continue to focus on students' understanding of their subject and their ability to make links between the different component parts of their degree. In addition, PDP does not require additional funding as it is part of the normal curriculum although it may require some transfer of resources for teaching from academic departments to the Careers Service.

Secondly, the module has created a structure for Personal Development Planning which is likely to succeed as it is fully embedded in the students' programme. As a core module, students are unable to escape it. In addition, the nature of the module design offers the students a view of employability preparation which is fully linked to their subject studies. This has helped to tackle the issue of student attitudes as they do not perceive it as 'bolted-on' or marginal to their degree. Furthermore, the fact that students had to link their employment preparation to an analysis of the contribution of social science to a profession ensured that they were thinking and writing at honours level.

Finally, the module has provided a successful model for integrating Careers Advice into the curriculum in a way that makes effective and efficient use of the resources of the institution's Careers Service. Moreover, it works in a ways that brings all students in touch with that Service which is not the case when students have to initiate the contact themselves.

In terms of our learning from the experience and recommendations for further development, the evidence suggests that changes need to take place in the context of the wider degree programme, rather than significant alterations to the module itself. For example, earlier core modules in the degree could ensure that students engage in Personal Development Planning at levels one and two. This would enable them to make better informed choices about elective modules or obtaining additional work experience. This is a challenge for the programme.

In addition, the module is not sufficiently integrated with the programme's *Progress File* scheme and this is clearly a missed opportunity. In effect, the portfolio that the students produce as part of their mock job application compels them to create a personal record which could well serve as a final summary of their achievements, academically and personally. Our experience, elsewhere in the institution, in linking assessments of this nature to *Progress Files*, particularly on professional degrees, suggests that it would be a sensible way forward.

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