The Higher Education Academy

Personal Development Planning

for International Postgraduate Students (PIPS):

Perspectives from Taught Masters Students

Dr Kate Baker

Contents

Acknowledgements

Summary

1. This report investigates international taught postgraduate perspectives of personal development planning (PDP), and is part of the first of four phases of a cross-institutional project, commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN). This project seeks to:

- design and develop a generic bank of innovative personal development planning (PDP) resources
- pilot PDP materials and activities with taught postgraduates in a representative sample of institutional types
- evaluate, review and disseminate the developed generic PDP resource bank.

2. The main objectives of this part of the project are to investigate students':

- prior experience of PDP
- interest and demand for a tailored PDP resource
- perceived benefits for PDP.

3. Forty-one semi-structured interviews from a representative sample of Scottish institutions were conducted and analysed.

4. Very few of the students interviewed had experience or knowledge of PDP, the majority seemed to have a strong employability focus, and some had limited English skills.

5. All international students perceived PDP to be useful, either in getting added value from their programmes, or in developing on a personal level.

6. Among the most important perceived benefits were transferable skills and employability in a competitive job market, self awareness, increased support from staff and encouragement to maintain lifelong learning.

7. There were a small number of perceived drawbacks: most students interviewed were mature and some had secure employment, and these felt they had less need for PDP.

8. Where students had already been exposed to PDP on their taught postgraduate programme, there had been mostly positive experiences, particularly in personal awareness and development, skills development, and increased knowledge of UK job opportunities.

9. Students expressed a preference for PDP to be integrated in the programme, with one-to-one support from their programme tutor, and/or small group work. They felt that the PDP process should be introduced at the time of induction, and delivery should be at the beginning or middle, rather than at the end, of the taught programme.

10. Among the list of topics that students suggest should feature within the PDP process were:

- development of transferable skills and self-awareness, progress review, and action planning
- opportunities for sharing experiences with tutors and their peers
- information about UK culture and universities, which can be linked to orientation and induction
- careers guidance relevant to seeking work in the UK and abroad, work experience or internship opportunities and guidance on business practice from professionals
- activities to promote integration with students from other countries

11. This research highlights the widely differing backgrounds of international taught postgraduates and that the PDP needs of this growing cohort are different to undergraduates. Developing a flexible bank of PDP resources tailored for taught postgraduates will address the student need and demand for PDP identified in this research and will also help students adjust to their new academic context.

1   Introduction

1.1   Growth in the UK taught postgraduate sector

Nearly 20% of all students in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the UK are taught postgraduate students, numbers having increased by 77% over the ten years to 2008 (Universities UK, 2009). Taught postgraduates account for more than 75% of all postgraduate students, and these numbers alone suggest that they should be considered as a distinct group from other types of student (Universities UK, 2009). Throughout this report, international students are defined in a broad sense, as students from outside the UK, and include both the conventionally defined international students, and those from the European Union. This is because non-UK students face similar cultural challenges upon arrival. Of the taught Masters cohort in the UK, 50% are students from outside the UK, and these non-UK students are much more likely to be studying full-time than part-time (Higher Education Policy Institute and The British Library, 2010).

Other key stakeholders interested in taught postgraduate provision are employers, who are increasingly demanding graduates who possess a strong set of transferable skills beyond technical subject knowledge (Prospects website). Employers often emphasise that the process of Personal Development Planning (PDP) completed by undergraduates is crucial for lifelong learning and enables graduates to make the widest contribution to organisations (Maxwell et al., 2009). The same also holds true for taught postgraduates in post-graduation employment.

For this study, PDP is defined as:

> *"a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process, open to all learners, in all HE provision settings, and at all levels"* (QAA, 2009a).

In order to begin to address the emerging issues arising from this complex situation, Personal Development Planning for International Postgraduate Students (PIPS), a cross-institutional project, was commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN), to develop, pilot and evaluate innovative PDP resources specifically designed for international taught postgraduate students. SHEEN is a joint initiative of the Higher Education Academy, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland. SHEEN supports institutions in implementing, monitoring and evaluating their employability strategies, by providing a forum for Scottish University institutional employability champions.

1.2   Trends in Scottish institutions

Universities across the Scottish sector have, in line with the wider UK picture, experienced a significant increase in the number of international students registering on Masters programmes in recent years. The Scottish Higher Education experience is also increasingly marketed to international students as a firm foundation for a successful career. In 2008-2009, 36% of all postgraduate students in Scottish institutions were non-UK domicile (Higher Education Statistics Agency website).

Data collected by the Careers Service at the University of Aberdeen (2009)[1], from seven Scottish Higher Education Institutions, reveal that the top five countries from which taught postgraduate students are recruited are as follows:

1. India
2. China (People's Republic)
3. Nigeria
4. USA
5. Pakistan

---

[1] Scoping Survey conducted by the University of Aberdeen's Careers Service (July 2009).

International students also represent an increasingly important source of income for universities. To maintain this, universities have a responsibility to fulfil the high expectations of students. PDP integrated into the curriculum and made relevant for international students can help to ensure that their expectations of a firm foundation for a successful career are met.

The implication within *'Personal development planning: guidelines for institutional policy and practice'* (QAA, 2009a) is that all learners in HE should have PDP provision. However, despite considerable activity in PDP development at undergraduate level, there has been little investigation into whether a need exists for different, perhaps tailored, PDP materials for international taught postgraduate students. The increased activity at undergraduate level has driven a rise in PDP networks, which have discussed the need for innovation in the development of tailored PDP resources for this student cohort. The recently produced *'Toolkit for enhancing personal development planning strategy, policy and practice in higher education institutions'* (QAA, 2009b), demonstrates the commitment from the Scottish sector to PDP but also provides preliminary evidence that taught postgraduate students, of whom a substantial portion are international, have different needs, and that more detailed research is required in this area.

A number of 'special' factors which make taught postgraduate students different to undergraduates and research postgraduates were identified in the aforementioned Toolkit (QAA, 2009b). These are summarised as follows:

- taught postgraduates are usually studying for a shorter length of time
- the taught postgraduate curriculum is likely to be highly varied and cover many advanced academic areas
- students frequently have a wide variety of backgrounds, and range from international students, who may arrive with little or no prior experience of PDP (in addition to cultural differences which might cause the process of personal reflection to be challenging) to UK students, who may have had prior experience within their undergraduate programme
- certain subjects may have a highly vocational content, and students may be required to complete PDP within their future professional careers, increasing students' willingness to engage with PDP.

In this context therefore, to "shoehorn" the taught postgraduates within the undergraduate PDP setup, without some tailoring of resources, seems an inappropriate approach (QAA, 2009b).

1.3 Addressing the needs of international Masters students: the PIPS project

The PIPS project will be conducted in four phases, the first of which comprises two elements. A survey was conducted to investigate:

I. international taught postgraduate student perceptions of PDP
II. academic staff interest and demand for a tailored PDP resource for taught postgraduate students.

The further phases are to:

Phase 2. design and develop a generic bank of innovative PDP resources

Phase 3. pilot PDP materials and activities with taught postgraduates in a representative sample of institutional types

Phase 4. evaluate, review and disseminate the developed generic PDP resource bank.

This report focuses on students' PDP perceptions, and involves a thematic analysis of forty-one thirty-minute interviews to investigate international students' views.

The main objectives of this study are to investigate students':

- prior experience of PDP
- interest and demand for a tailored PDP resource
- perceived outcomes for PDP

A further outcome is to obtain students' viewpoints which can be used to support and validate forthcoming resources.

To gain an understanding of perceptions of staff about taught postgraduate PDP, a corresponding second report focussing on the perceptions of staff accompanies this publication.

2 Methodology

2.1 Background and methodological approach

2.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

Forty-one students attending taught Masters programmes at five Scottish Universities of varying ages (ancient, pre-1992, post-1992) were interviewed following a semi-structured protocol. Taught postgraduate programmes in this study are typically one year in duration. The proportions of students grouped by institution type are shown in Figure 1. The interviewees were international taught postgraduate students studying a range of different disciplines (23) such as Fine Art, MBA, Environmental Science and Computing, and the breakdown by discipline area is shown in Figure 2. The participating students by continent is shown in Figure 3, with the specific countries of origin of the students are shown in Table 1. The questions for the survey were designed by two independent educational researchers and are attached in Appendix 1.
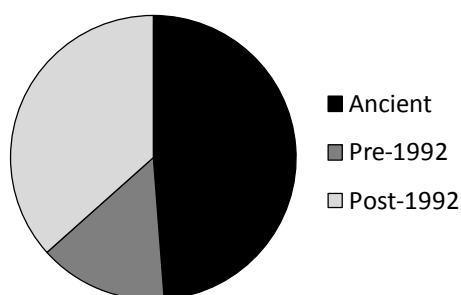
Figure 1. Proportion of participating students by university type: ancient, pre-1992 and post-1992.
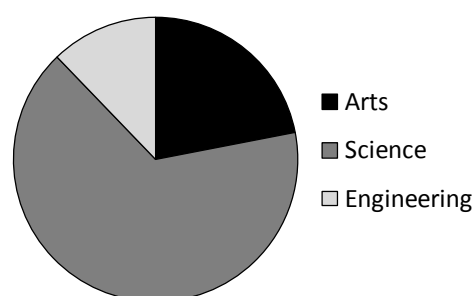
Figure 2. Proportion of participating students by discipline: arts, science and engineering.
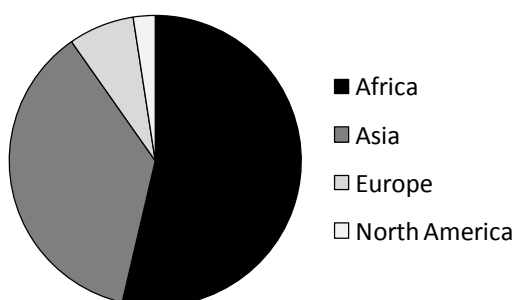
Figure 3. Proportion of participating students by continent of domicile: Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.

Table 1. Countries of domicile of participating students.

Country of domicile	Number of participants
Botswana	1
Bulgaria	1
China	3
Germany	1
Ghana	1
Greece	1
Hong Kong	1
India	5
Korea	1
Libya	1
Malawi	1
Nepal	3
Nigeria	17
Pakistan	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Sri Lanka	1
USA	1

The interviews aimed to determine students':

- prior experience of PDP, including evidence of any prior reflection or planning regarding the decision to undertake a specific programme
- interest and demand for a tailored PDP resource, including any participation through the current Masters programmes
- perceived outcomes for PDP, including any suggestions and ideas for implementation, and potential issues
- viewpoints which can be used to support and validate forthcoming resources.

For the purpose of this study, international students are defined as those having non-UK domiciles. The study has included 3 students from EU countries, as many of the same issues will be faced by all non-UK students.

The interviews were designed to last around 20-30 minutes. Interviews were carried out in Summer 2009, when the students were around half to three-quarters of the way through their study programme. A copy of the invitation is included in Appendix 2. The two interviewers were independent educational researchers and were not members of the institutions at which they interviewed. They have not been involved in the subsequent analysis and presentation of the findings.

2.1.2 Selection process

International taught postgraduate students from a variety of Masters programmes from across the institutions were invited to participate in the interviews by open invitation, usually comprising a general advertisement from the Programme Coordinator. The interviewees comprised 22 males and 19 females.

2.1.3 Ethics protocol

Students agreeing to attend the interviews were sent a document outlining the nature of the PIPS project and the ethics protocol associated with the interview. The project is covered by the Universities UK with the British Educational Research Association's *'Guidelines for ethical approval of cross-institutional projects (related to learning and teaching) based in Scottish Higher Education Institutions'* (2009). Copies of the consent form and ethics information sheet are included in Appendices 3 and 4 respectively.

In line with educational good practice, all data obtained as part of the research project have been anonymised. At all stages, good practice in data handling, storage and processing in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998) have been adhered to.

2.1.4 Data analysis

The primary areas covered in the questionnaires were:

- previous experience of planning for personal future
- skills learning i.e. skills learnt or developed during the programme
- planning for future work or further studies
- personal goals
- PDP.

3   Project findings

This section provides an overview of taught international postgraduate students' viewpoints on PDP at a point around half to three quarters of the way through their programmes.

3.1   Why students choose to study in Scotland

Students' decisions to come to Scotland to study are influenced by a number of factors. The primary reasons cited for their decisions were:

- reputation of the UK and the institution
- the influence of family, recommendations from friends and alumni
- improving employability and job prospects
- programme content
- fulfilling the criteria of the scholarship provider
- entry requirements
- value for money (cost of living)
- sentimental reasons (such as "*I really love Scotland*").

Other commonly mentioned reasons for choosing Scotland which also featured include:

- improving English skills
- the Scottish institution was only place which did a particular programme.
- the Scottish institution was the first one to reply.

Scotland was also cited as a friendlier version of England (by which most students appeared to mean London). One student said that *"Scotland is one of the best places to study"*.

The majority of the students surveyed have been in employment prior to arrival in the UK, so they no longer had links with anyone in the University of their first degree whom they could ask for help in decision making and career planning. Most of this advice about further study came from the students' families, friends, or students who had already been studying in the UK, and additionally from University websites and league tables.

3.1.1   UK versus Scotland

On the whole, the students interviewed seemed unable to articulate why they specifically chose to study in Scotland over anywhere else within the United Kingdom. It was surprising that there was little mention of the distinctive Scottish culture, although one student did mention that they wanted to see kilts, and another said that they loved Scotland. But aside from these limited cases, reading between the lines, the implication is that in several cases there isn't always a specific desire to come to Scotland; it is more important that the degree is from the UK rather than specifically from Scotland.

For any international student, to come to the UK to study is a great commitment and upheaval. Several students had resigned from their jobs, and they had left their families and friends back home, because they felt that they had hit a "glass ceiling" in their employment. One student summed this up by saying:

> *"…it's a large sacrifice to come here, but it's worth it".*

They perceived that the only way they could progress at work was to seek further qualifications, and that those from the UK provided greater opportunities to enhance their employability, both at home and abroad.

Another student had a slightly different viewpoint and their reasons for coming to do the programme was that they felt they had reached the point in their career where they were sufficiently mature and had enough work experience to gain the full benefit from the programme.

3.2 Student prior experience of PDP or Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

None of the students surveyed had prior experience of PDP at undergraduate level. However, almost all of the students interviewed had worked before they arrived in the UK and a few of these had been involved in activities which included aspects of PDP such as reflection, monitoring progress and goal setting. These include appraisals, continuing professional development (CPD) or professional development planning in the workplace, or participating in various training programmes.

There seemed to be a lack of understanding or clarification of the differences between PDP and CPD. One student commented that they did some PDP at work, but the process was more of a performance review for the company, less about the student's development:

> "They were more concerned with how to develop in the line they wanted to develop, maybe not really the line I wanted to go along… They emphasise more about what you had done in the company… They centre on the targets more."

One student was very engaged in PDP and websites such as Prospects[2] at the careers service, and was very keen to emphasise the benefits they had obtained from participation, although when probed, it transpired that knowledge about PDP originated from being employed in a careers service at a different institution.

Another student commented:

> "It [PDP] was brilliant. I loved it… I remember doing [the] Myers Briggs indicator – that was really really good. It just helped me to figure out my weaknesses in a way and be able to get round them or to work harder on the things that I knew I was weak on."

Just one student had 'a flexible plan', a written record where:

> "everything is planned, I know what I am going to do ten years down the line".

This was cited as being particularly useful as:

> "I have a tendency to leave things half done...You know, writing things down makes it more concrete. When you see it, it becomes more real, in your head it's more of an idea, it's a thought, you would forget it... Sometimes you just want to block things out. If you don't want to do something you can just procrastinate, so I feel, you know, writing it down keeps it on track."

---

[2] www.prospects.ac.uk

3.3 Skills and attributes from the taught postgraduate experience

3.3.1.1 What have students learnt from their Masters programme?

In order to determine whether students had acquired skills that they would consider useful to their future employment, a number of questions were asked regarding skills development, both in relation to the taught programme and any extra-curricular activities.

In addition to gaining technical, research and subject-specific skills from the programme of study, students were also able to identify some personal and transferable skills which they had gained. Skills most frequently identified, by almost all students, as having been developed were:

- communication (verbal and written)
- teamwork
- time management
- organisation
- planning.

Other skills mentioned by a minority of students include:

- different approaches to thinking
- confidence
- listening
- learning to admit they are wrong
- letting others have their say
- putting across their own point of view
- presentation skills
- IT skills
- greater independence
- developing social skills
- adaptability
- budgeting.

It is interesting to observe that the distinction by students between skills and attributes is rather confused in some cases (e.g. confidence is an attribute rather than a skill).

Prospects.ac.uk (the UK's official graduate careers website) has identified 10 major transferable skills which employers would like to see in recruits. These are:

- communication
- teamwork
- leadership
- initiative
- problem solving
- flexibility/adaptability
- self-awareness
- commitment/motivation
- interpersonal skills
- numeracy.

It is interesting to compare the above list with the skills identified by the students, and note that only four of the specific skills were common, these being communication, teamwork, adaptability and interpersonal skills. It should also be noted that some intensive prompting was required before the students could articulate the less obvious skills i.e. those aside from communication and team working. This all suggests that in many cases, students have not thought formally about the skills they possess.

The students learned skills from the taught programme and from interaction with their peers outside the classroom, not just those from different cultural backgrounds but also those of different ages. One student commented:

> *"In my class I'm the youngest and I have the least amount of experience - everybody else is in their 40s and their 50s and they are directors of companies, directors of boards, they've managed huge country-wide operations, so my learning is not only from the lecturer but also from them as well. I don't think I would have ever learnt that if I'd gone elsewhere."*

Interestingly, there was only one Scottish student in the aforementioned class, the remainder being international students.

3.3.2 What have students learnt from being in Scotland?

The international students in Scotland learned that different cultures have a different approach to working and the learning system is different from the *modus operandi* in their home country. They also widened their horizons by mixing with people from other cultural and religious backgrounds.

Comments from students reflected their working practices at home. For example, a student from Asia commented:

> *"In the Middle East if you work late, or if you do overtime, it's a good thing, it means you are hard working. But …[in the UK], working late… meant that you are not productive."*

The same student went on to say:

> *"also in the work environment and academically, you call your professor by their first name, but in [home country], that is not acceptable,…it is unthinkable."*

Other students reiterated this and appreciated the openness and availability of their lecturer in the UK, commenting that they cannot talk informally to their lecturer back home.

Two students felt that being in Scotland had enabled them to learn to do things in a different, and in their opinion, a better way. One student went on to comment that they realised that society operated in a more ethical way in Scotland:

> *"when they [Scots] want to do things they do it in the right way".*

Another student was able to distinguish differences in teaching styles:

> *"by our style of learning back in [home country], it's kind of a mass delivery system where the lecturer just pours it out to you and you just try to grasp as much as you can".*

One student highlighted that back home:

> *"you don't really spend much time expressing what you're thinking,… whilst here [Scotland] you describe the process…you need to be able to write and convey what you know to others either in written or spoken language".*

One student commented that in Scotland:

> *"if you don't say what you want, nobody knows what you want",*

highlighting the need for potentially reticent students to speak up.

Another commented that learning and research approaches differ in some aspects:

> *"If you're international, you haven't been underneath this [British] system, you have no clue where anything is, you don't know…your resources that are out there...and if you're not…a person that's gonna step out there and say OK where is this?...you're kinda like left in the back."*

So it would be helpful if there was:

"an extra person to encourage people to ask or figure things out and know what's going on."

The student went on to describe how they would prefer not to have to ask questions all of the time, and that international students needed to be told which resources are available and how to find them.

Some students had to adapt to different social values, for example a student said that their home country was a male-dominated society, so they had to modify their behaviour accordingly since coming to Scotland.

A major benefit highlighted by one interviewee was the increased proficiency in spoken English. Many were forced to speak English every day because there were no others from their home country on their programme. Those who speak English are likely to receive better pay in their country.

Students appreciated the diversity of nationalities on their programmes and could recognise the value of this diversity, saying that they enjoyed working in groups because it encouraged mixing of different cultures.

However, this cultural mix did not apply to all programmes. In some there was a preponderance of one or a few nationalities only, and in these cases, students expressed disappointment at the lack of cultural diversity. The quotation below from an African student refers to a programme on which there were many African students, and only a small minority were home students or students of other nationalities.

"That is just one thing I wish that was different…I wish that there was a little more diversity."

3.4 Identifying student interest: demand for PDP

3.4.1 Students' awareness of PDP

In the majority of cases, there had been little forethought on the part of the students regarding the next step after they have obtained their taught postgraduate qualification. When asked what they will be doing next year, many students replied that they were unsure, and said that they hoped to get a job. Some students had been sent to the UK sponsored by their company or government, and have jobs, either on the same or a higher level, to return to. This type of student appeared to be those who had carried out the least planning about their longer term future, possibly because they did not see the need to think about it at that moment.

Similarly, when asked to identify transferable skills learnt from their programmes, some students required considerable prompting to understand what was meant, by this implying they had not spent time thinking explicitly about their skill set.

One student said they had only heard about PDP through a staff-student liaison committee, and was there told that PDP was only for undergraduate students and did not apply to postgraduates.

Several students expressed surprise when PDP was described to them in the interview. All these points demonstrate a lack of student awareness of the PDP process, highlighting the current lack of or low level of explicit PDP provision within Scottish Universities.

However, some students were already practising reflection and independent learning (external to the curriculum) to some degree. One student worked out their strengths and weaknesses and went to the library to read about how to improve their weaknesses. Whilst this is perhaps not the easiest way to learn, it is a proactive solution to the lack of formal provision and strongly suggests that demand for a PDP provision is present. This activity showed great initiative on the student's part, but it was pointed out by the student that not all students will do this.

Along similar lines, another student thought that their university was helping to identify strengths and weaknesses, but then did not follow it up with how to improve. The student had read as much as they could at the library to improve weak areas, but noted that other students did not bother to do this.

3.4.2 Challenges specific to the international student

Many international students face different and supplementary challenges to those faced by home students. These broadly include cultural differences, especially in terms of language and university protocols, and external pressures.

3.4.2.1 Language and communication problems

Whilst some international students have excellent English language skills, for others it can take time to become proficient with day-to-day usage. So, for some, limited English language skills can become a barrier to understanding, at least at the start of the degree. Additionally, even if the student is completely fluent, the UK system will probably be different to the system from which they have come, and will require some adaptation on their part. Confidence is required to enable international students to have the courage and persistence to repeatedly ask for clarification when they are unsure, or for help when it is needed. Hence it could be very easy for them to miss information or fall behind.

In addition to being unfamiliar with UK procedures, participating students highlighted that writing could be difficult for international students:

> "…especially for those of us that come from developing countries, writing is one of our major problems. We don't know how to write."

The fact that most taught postgraduate programmes occur usually over only one year means that the work is very intensive. All the students interviewed were studying full time, although it must be remembered that some programmes also have the option of being followed on a part-time basis. When a student embarks on a taught postgraduate programme, they will need to adapt quickly to the amount and type of work they will be required to do, whether they are prepared and settled to do so or not.

> **Recommendation**: A major challenge that faces many international students is English language skills. It is fundamental for the success of this project to develop PDP resources using "plain English" to cater for the wide variations in students' English language proficiency encountered in the survey interviews.

3.4.2.2 Pressures and demands on international students

There are added pressures on international taught postgraduates to perform well, as many students stated that to study here, they had been sponsored by their company or country, funded by their parents, or are self-funded. In addition, some students are also working part-time to provide the funds for living costs and fees. All of these factors lead to students working hard and feeling high expectations to do well, the focus being to obtain the highest marks possible. This could lead to an emphasis on the examined part of the programme, and other activities which are seen as not directly related to their programme could be viewed as a much lower priority, but there was recognition that this was perhaps not the best attitude to have as it can cause a skills gap:

> *"…I noticed that a number of people in my class all they talk of is exams and exams, am I going to pass this course, how am I going to do well in the course…they think that passing the exams, making a distinction is the ultimate for them. That's not it…because those same people with very good degrees come to work in my company, you know… they had excellent degrees, but they didn't have people skills, …they couldn't really work very well, they couldn't get things done. I think they should be made to know that it's not only basically academic skills or passing exams… they just read towards that to pass the exams and do the coursework…and that's it…"*

Another student reiterated that the emphasis of their programme was about exams:

> *"That [skills] is one area I would like them to add value. They should make us aware of these skills... And basically your thoughts are towards passing exams rather than gaining experience and skills and knowledge. So you can see somebody who has done very well academically but cannot fit into industry. They haven't got the skills."*

One student develops this, saying that international students had made sacrifices to get here and that means they must make the most of their experience:

> *"…once we are here, we have spent the money, and spend the time and all the hardship, we must maximise our benefit, so everything that is coming towards us…we should go for it when an opportunity comes to us from any place."*

In support of this view, several interviewees said they had paid a considerable amount for their education, so needed to feel they were getting value for money.

Students need not see PDP as an extra burden in addition to their studies, as there are several examples where PDP is seamlessly and successfully built into the programme, whereby it is a culture and way of working, rather than a supplementary piece of work.

> **Recommendation**: With the many demands facing international students, it is important that sufficient emphasis is placed upon providing added value to students from their university experience, and it is recommended that PDP is included within the programmes so that it is not seen as an extra burden and therefore of reduced value.

3.4.3 The role of careers services

It was apparent from the comments that many international students misunderstood the nature and scope of UK careers services. One common misunderstanding was the expectation that employment could be arranged on their behalf. This finding mirrors the results of the International Student Barometer[3], and whilst many careers services have a Statement of Service, perhaps students are unaware of this. Other students perceived that the careers service was only available to review *curricula vitae* and application forms.

The careers service was frequently mentioned as being a place that the students either had visited or knew they could go to if required. One student spoke about the careers service helping them identify their skills:

> *"Most people don't realise [the skills they have]…can apply to any job. If someone would be available to help them to identify those things… that would go a long way… You just don't think that these things apply."*

Other students were also appreciative of the careers services, and commented that the careers service was a useful resource if only students would use it:

> *"they should encourage more people, especially the international community, to really make use of the [careers] service… most people [international students] hardly patronised these services."*

Another student found that it was helpful to undertake research about UK industries, to search for a job and to do a practice interview on a course organised by the careers service, so that they felt more prepared and knew what to expect in the future.

An issue highlighted was the perception of degree level-specific knowledge within the careers service. One student said that the careers service had an advisor who met the students, although the student felt that it would be difficult for a single careers advisor who dealt with both under- and postgraduate students to give tailored information to both parties. This further highlights the misconceptions held by students, and shows the demand for careers services to continue to provide relevant support and information for the students.

It is clear from students' comments that careers services are able to provide a key role in PDP provision and in fact some students mentioned bolt-on PDP courses having been run by their careers service, which they found to be beneficial.

> **Recommendation**: The careers services within HEIs have a vital role in meeting the demands of students, not only for careers-related and employability advice but also in the implementation of PDP. Careers services can provide academic staff with support and guidance on PDP, but will require further resources and support to achieve this. This should be enabled through sharing of tailored PDP resources, to optimise co-ordination of effort within and between careers service staff. Proper induction packages which clarify the nature of the role of the careers services to the students would be helpful, to avoid careers services being undervalued, dismissed, and underused by students who could benefit from them.

---

[3] The International Student Barometer is an online survey which takes place twice a year, in Summer and Autumn, with the aim of finding out about the experiences and opinions of International Students.

3.5 Perceived benefits of PDP

3.5.1 General PDP benefits

All students agreed that PDP would be very useful in showing students how to achieve their aims, both personally and academically.

"It [PDP] helps me to see…the distinct steps I need to take [to reach the goal]."

Some added that they needed guidance to get an overall view of possibilities and someone to put it all into perspective.

One student particularly appreciated the value of PDP:

"Personal development is as important as the [degree] certificate itself".

Another student supported this view:

"sometimes if you have ideas, it's nothing, it's just ideas, you have to make it happen. I just don't know which way to go … that's why I'd like to maybe just to try them out and… see what that takes."

In answer to the question: how useful do you think PDP is at Masters' level for international students, one student replied:

"I think it is very useful because most of the times when a student comes in… for most students… they've just come in and they're trying to settle down to concentrate on their studies. Sometimes it can take them a while to start thinking that OK after this course I need to be thinking about my career because [that is] the whole reason that I'm here …it makes life much easier."

However, it must be noted that the above was the same student who had worked in a careers service, who had had chance to reflect and had seemingly understood the value of PDP through firsthand experience. Many international students have not had that opportunity but could still recognise the value of it. PDP could help to fill some of the perceived skill development gaps within their programmes.

Some recognised the value of PDP in encouraging decision making and forward planning, which are often delayed until the end of the programme, when they are arguably of reduced value. One student who thought that PDP was a good idea, said it had helped them to develop self-awareness. They went on to say that it was implicitly part of every programme and it would be helpful to make it more explicit. Another student said that:

"I would have really loved it if this [PDP] was part of our academic curriculum… we could sit down and …somebody could talk to us…I think this would have been more helpful…sometimes our lecturers are busy…we need information like this but… if it were part of our academic work it would be very very helpful.

PDP was perceived by students to be potentially a good introduction to understanding the systems current in UK universities, and the desirability of building good channels of communication with staff right from the start was emphasised:

"Some strangers [international students] come in, they don't know what is at stake, they don't know the environment, they don't know how to go about things…especially international students… if they are given this opportunity to explain to them what to do, how to go about it, create an avenue for them to ask questions, don't just presume they know...it's going to help international students."…"If they don't have an avenue to be able to know …what the system is about, how it is run and everything, the interest might not be there to come [to UK] so I think it's gonna be a good help."

3.5.2 Written records

Very few students have considered producing a written record of their thoughts and plans for the future, but the value of this when implemented appears clear. One student reported that since coming to the UK they had started to:

"write things down… this makes you…more focussed…I originally had the ideas in my mind and I tried to regularly think about them…Now it is much better when I write it down, it gives you a better way of improvement."

And another said that:

"When you come with an idea you have to write it down otherwise …you will forget about this idea, you will lose that thing… I think so [it should be part of the course]…"

Tutors could help with this process, for example:

"how to organise the ideas you have, how to solve problems".

This implies that there could be some student involvement in the design and personalisation of PDP, making it at least partly their own.

> **Recommendation**: Students have emphasised the value of maintaining written records of their PDP work and require a tool which can involve some personalisation. It is recommended that this is an integral component of the PDP process.

3.5.3 Specific perceived benefits of PDP

The students perceived several benefits of PDP, grouped into three main areas: transferable skills and employability, lifelong learning, and self-awareness.

3.5.3.1 Transferable skills and employability to help secure a job in a competitive market

While students recognised the value of being employable, only some students could relate this to transferable skills developed on their programmes.

There was awareness amongst some more mature or experienced students of a complacent attitude amongst international students towards a UK degree being "a golden ticket" to successful employment. However, with the increasing ubiquity of UK degrees held by international students, the quality of the degree experience is of key significance, and this can be enhanced by developing employability skills:

"…one mistake people make is most of them still think that coming to the UK and getting a good degree is actually [enough]…once you have a foreign degree, you're sure that you're going to get a good job, but now because of that, everybody is coming to get a foreign degree. It's now the quality of the foreign degree and…[that] is basically based on these employability skills that you can develop… Once you have these employability skills… that are systematically supposed to be taught along with academic, then you will be relevant in so many ways, and you stand a better chance of being employed time and time again."

The same student went on to make the point that it is critical to stand out from the crowd and how PDP could facilitate this:

"Now you have to be competitive, you have to be a step higher. Those [employability] skills really count. Your PDP should be towards acquiring …and demonstrating certain skills to make you competitive, not just having made a very good scoring."

Another student summarised this well:

"It's not that you've just studied a particular course that matters, it's the whole package, it's the whole individual, when you get a job, the employer looks at the whole individual."

The same student recognises that learning other, perhaps less obvious skills would also have been beneficial in order to have more skills to offer the employer:

"Also the lecturers have a part to play. They should also kind of place these skills. The basic skills they try to teach us is group working,… we do a lot of group work, presentational skills. But there are other skills they need to make us aware of… Now you have to be competitive, even if you have a Masters here,… you need to have a skill set that is acceptable to employers…like project management skills, sales selling skills, negotiation skills, problem solving skills, and critical thinking skills. All those skills are actually what employers now seek for rather than your qualifications… They should refer to those skills from time to time so that we know how to relate what we are doing. In addition to getting some academic knowledge and skills, we can also in life be aware. Because I believe that we are mature students, especially… Masters students. We can actually try to learn those skills ourselves but…they should make us aware that those skills are really required rather than focussing us on exams."

In the above section, the fact that international students may be mature means that they may be able recognise the necessity of additional (non-academic) skills in order to be different from the many other UK Masters degree holders. There is also the sense that the individual can take some ownership and responsibility for learning skills themselves.

> **Recommendation**: PDP resources must enable students to identify, develop, articulate and promote their own transferable skills. Developing PDP resources and activities with an employability focus, such as auditing transferable skills, understanding and refining application forms and CVs, and understanding the requirements of employers will address the survey findings and the students' needs.

3.5.3.2 Lifelong learning

There was an appreciation shown by some students of the desirability of the PDP process to be ongoing throughout life. One student identified PDP as providing skills which would help them continue to plan and develop after graduation and into their future lives. Another student highlighted the importance of following through with any areas of weakness, not just on the programme

"They [The University] were very helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses or our personalities,…and we left it at that, there was nothing to follow that up – if you're not assertive, how do you become more assertive?...that was a little…not there… I was unhappy with it, I went to the library and I got books and I read about it but I did that myself. They didn't do anything. I know for a fact that other students didn't really bother…Their mindset was that there was nothing you can change, and I believe you can…you can make yourself better."

3.5.3.3 Self-awareness

Students thought that PDP would help them to become more self-aware. There is an indication of the desire for assistance to help crystallise thoughts:

"I think I don't know how to put it down on paper. I think maybe you need someone to put it in perspective for you."

It was recognised that

"personal goals I think relate to the person… but it would be helpful to discuss them".

Some people felt that sharing ideas about themselves and possibilities about the future would help them at a very personal level:

"It's about "maturity, emotional stability. A lot of people…don't know what they are doing… It's not about getting a result… How will my tomorrow be?"

Students therefore appear to recognise the value of a formalised structure for thinking about their aims and capabilities, and for discussing possibilities for their future.

> **Recommendation**: Students should be allocated support from an individual with whom to discuss their thoughts to help them to contextualise their ideas, to become more focussed and self aware.

3.6 Current sector engagement with PDP

Current provision of PDP to taught postgraduate students appeared to be patchy and highly variable between discipline and institution. Many students were not engaged in PDP at all.

3.6.1 Students' perceived potential benefits

Where students have engaged with PDP, they appeared convinced of its merits. Several students recognised that they have benefitted from PDP with respect to learning about their own capabilities and weaknesses by completing SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses. One student said they did not realise they had certain strengths until the analysis was performed.

Others acknowledged that they did not think they had any weaknesses until they did this analysis:

> *"…there are some things you just assume you know already but don't realise… I realised that indeed I really did have some weaknesses, I mean I knew they were there but I just thought they were insignificant. Now I know about them…I know how to tackle them…I know the importance of writing down…I always knew that it was good to write down but it was never officially [stated]…now the importance of writing things down was clear and emphasised… because of that I have developed a system, I have a folder where I write down ideas, anything I think of, I write it down."*

On a similar vein, another student reported that:

> *"I have spoken to a couple of them [tutors]… They were able to give me a snapshot of my personality in terms of words instead of how I think or what I do...when you have the words,… it makes it a little more real… I was able to match it to jobs that I thought I might possibly enjoy."*

The Prospects website was used as a resource here. This student also spoke to some lecturers who work in areas similar to those in which the student would like to work:

> *"yes I do sometimes pick their brains, send them an email, I'm applying to this place, what do you think?"*

This showed that they also made good use of the communication channels to support investigations into possible jobs.

One individual described how personal development sessions had supported their initial career ideas:

> *"Before I came here I already had a rough idea of what I wanted to do after the [programme] as that was the reason why I was doing the programme in the first place, and I kind of got confirmation that what I want to do was probably the right thing for me during the … programme. We had a lot of personal development e.g. personality tests, …understanding conflict… etc."*

PDP was noted as being helpful in skills development. Group activities were found to increase communication skills. One student reported that the class members were encouraged by tutors to think about what they were doing in terms of past experiences. Reflection was built into the assignment and gave rise to positive new ideas. There was a perception from the student that their writing skills also improved. Other pertinent points raised by individuals include:

- it was helpful to do research into UK industry and practice applying for a job and being interviewed
- it was useful to have people who could help and encourage the students in the right direction

- reflective report writing as part of PDP on a compulsory taught course had allowed the student to think and focus on what they really wanted to do
- sharing reflection with others including tutors and colleagues was beneficial and students reported having learned a lot.

Recommendation: Interviews conducted for this project indicate that students are convinced of the many potential merits of PDP. However, few students have engaged with PDP at undergraduate level, so it is important to introduce reflective activities, goal-setting and creating action plans to support PDP engagement.

3.6.2 Potential issues:

Whilst the benefits of PDP were appreciated by most, it did not always attract positive comments from some of the international students interviewed. However, it is quite possible these comments could be attributed more to style of delivery and lack of understanding by the students and indeed the staff implementing the procedures, rather than inadequacy in the process itself.

3.6.2.1 Staff attitude to PDP de-motivating their students

It is clear from a number of students that academic staff add value to the PDP process and their attitudes can strongly influence student engagement:

> "It [PDP] was mentioned once when we were introduced to the programme and it was mentioned that we can do it but it is not mandatory...I mean there was a link on a website but we never bothered because there wasn't much emphasis on it."

One aspect, again associated with staff, is the treatment of PDP as a ritual or a box to be ticked. One student described how, during a one-to-one session with staff, it was felt that the staff member's priority was to fulfil the number of hours and fill in some papers. The same student also described feeling awkward because the staff didn't really understand what the student wanted or maybe it was a case that the student couldn't communicate it very well. The student went on to say that more sessions with quality time would have been better. As it was:

> "when it becomes something everybody's in a queue, I feel it's just [a] formal…ritual… and you just want us to get it over with".

> **Recommendation**: It is essential that staff feel fully confident that they are comfortable with the delivery of PDP materials and recognise the value and benefits for the students. It is also important that sufficient dedicated time is set aside for PDP to enable staff to deliver it effectively, otherwise the value for the student is substantially reduced.

3.6.2.2 Staff approachability and support

Students frequently said that they wanted one-to-one support from staff members, illustrated in the example below:

> "Lecturers need to really make us feel that we can come to them any time. It's not just about telling us in the mail I'm available any time, but really emphasising it. 'If any of you have any problems you can meet me', really emphasise it. If you write it on paper, students may not feel confident. But if you keep emphasising it, doing it in class, 'if any of you have any problems you can meet me', you will actually encourage people to see you. I'm sorry to say quite a number of them don't do that."

Another student commented that they would have:

> "loved some advice from my tutors".

Lack of personal attention was regularly raised as an issue for students, illustrated by the example below where PDP was delivered to a class of 40-50 students.

> "It is hard to generalise for all these people. There was [sic] some people in the class who would not give very good responses in the class…some of them…asked stupid questions all the time... It just takes your mind and it takes the professor's mind off things too, so by the end of the class you don't really get much out of it…Some people by the fourth or fifth class just thought it was a waste of time because there would always be people asking silly questions. So a lot of people stopped attending classes…people who actually contributed to a class like that... To improve, you could have small groups of people…if you had a class of

40 or 50 people, generalising issues doesn't really make sense... If it's just five people that would give people the incentive to actually come and attend because… you're going to be missed... How they outlined the programme I think is good enough… but I think personal attention is one big thing…that is not there."

Another student suggested that more sessions with quality time would have been helpful for discussing and developing their thoughts.

> **Recommendation**: Tutors appear to be the most desired facilitator for one-to-one sessions with students regarding their PDP. Staff must be approachable, and to make it clear to students if, when and in what capacity they are able to help them. Group sizes for PDP should be kept as small as practically possible, as generalising across large groups of people is unproductive.

3.6.2.3 Portability post-graduation

Some students saw difficulties in sustaining and building on what they had learned:

> *"How do you sustain it? If you learn something new, it's very easy to forget once you leave. Most postgraduate programmes are only a year, so you are doing it for the year but that doesn't necessarily mean you are going to do it afterwards, which is the aim of the PDP sessions."*

This implies a need for guidance on how students can develop and follow up skills development after leaving university. However, this is something for which students have to ultimately take responsibility themselves. If the students have already developed techniques of self-reflection and planning as part of their programme, it will be much more likely that they will continue this process later in life.

> **Recommendation**: If students understand the process of PDP, they can adapt that learning to any other 'lifelong learning' context. To help students continue to develop, there is a need for PDP content and information to be captured digitally to enable portability and transferability to another PDP framework or CPD scheme.

3.6.2.4 Assessment and timing

Assessment of PDP is a controversial issue. Students tend to be reluctant to devote their valuable time to areas which do not have direct tangible outcomes to them, such as a mark. If no assessment is there, there is no impetus to partake seriously in the PDP exercise.

One student reported that the online system used for PDP was mentioned in the programme induction, and they participated in a tutorial session on its operation. This resource was available to all postgraduate students, but because its use was voluntary and not required, the student failed to use it.

So, if PDP were a compulsory part of the programme, it could be argued that students would be more motivated to participate if they were assessed on the work they did. However, it is very difficult to assess PDP, not only because it is meant to be "personal", but also because its marking is very subjective. The criteria for marking might depend on whether the student has shown improvement or just participated in the class or exercise, or depend on the extent to which they have managed to demonstrate good reflection skills, or whether they have shown proven development in an area etc. Assessment also comes with the potential disadvantages of writing for the audience and to pass, as highlighted below:

> *"I must confess that the essay I wrote regarding my future career plans and everything, I wrote it just to pass, I didn't really, you know... it wasn't from the heart... It was because it was a compulsory assignment. I wasn't quite ready... I didn't quite know, I had a deadline to reach. The honest truth is that I really didn't*

*know what I wanted at that point in time, so I just wrote that to meet the deadline...
I was doing it to pass, just to get a good grade."*

The timing of the personal development planning, not only within the academic year, but in combination with the other modules is very important. For example, a reason for not attending the second PDP class was cited as the student having gone home for Christmas so they had to miss the class. This is particularly true of international students who have further to travel home and are likely to leave earlier and return later to avoid expensive seasonal travel prices.

Although one student was motivated by a workshop to maintain a journal, after a few weeks it was found that the course clashed with these workshops and so the student could no longer attend classes, which in turn reduced the momentum to sustain the journal-keeping.

> **Recommendation**: Students should be alerted to PDP in the induction session, and if appropriate, PDP sessions should be placed as soon as possible thereafter, in the beginning or middle section of the course, avoiding likely times of high activity and assessment, and student absence such as the beginning and end of holidays.

3.6.2.5 Personal issues

The vast majority of students reported no concerns with sharing their personal development planning process with their peers and/or tutors. However, there will always be an exception to such a generalisation. One student considered that working with others was not beneficial:

> *"it's best not to... others just slow you down".*

Sometimes students already have their own personal systems in place, and one student stated that they found this much more useful than the online resource provided to them by their university.

Another issue raised below is the idea of PDP being entirely personal, not for others to view. Whilst an online system can be very helpful, it can cause further difficulties such as perceived security issues, as:

> *"I don't want anybody else to see what I want to do… I'm really not comfortable with that. I know what I want to do and I want to be the only one knowing that… This is a priority, so I would rather just not take the risk. This is really important to me… In my head it's [the online system is] not secure."*

> **Recommendation:** Whilst most students are very willing to share their ideas with others, some students feel that because of its personal nature, PDP should remain private to them. Therefore, any material should be delivered sensitively and diplomatically, and students should be encouraged to take ownership for their own PDP.

3.7 Reasons for reluctance to participate in PDP

While the vast majority of students were in full support of the implementation of PDP, a small minority of students were not so enthusiastic. Some have already have work experience and are gaining qualifications to get a better paid job. Some are being sponsored by their home Governments or are on paid leave from work, so they are obliged to go back to their employer, hence don't think they need to do PDP. Effectively they don't feel they have the time on this short one year programme to devote to 'distractions' which aren't directly related to the programme. For instance, one student commented that:

"I am overloaded with information from the course and the deadlines are very short, so my high priority is to finish the dissertation and the course successfully and get hopefully a good grade and after that… I will think about things in more detail."

Another student commented that:

"I don't find it very useful. Maybe for a fresh graduate…looking for a career goal would be useful for them…I presume that [because] I'm a mature student doing a Masters, I chose that course because I want to develop,…or I want to change my career… so they have in mind what they want to do… I think it could be one of the indicators of myself but when you are 25 or 26 you should have more idea already…It could be better for the younger students"..

Similarly, another student said:

"you should already have some skills when you start on your Masters",

whilst another student said that:

"advice [from tutors] is always welcome but I believe at this stage…we should know what we want to do".

Another student made the point that:

"for me it's not about writing things down, it's about living it every day… I had a list of priorities, this is what I want to get done"

but unfortunately the student did not go back to re-visit this list. However the student does have evidence of training (certificates) to show to the future employer.

One student said that there was little reason in planning too carefully for the future because as international students have already moved to another country once, they can do it again, should they find they need another qualification later in life. This superficially blasé attitude in fact inadvertently highlighted the benefit from partaking in PDP.

3.8 Implementing PDP: suggestions from international Masters students

This section covers suggestions and preferences from the students about how to implement and deliver PDP to them. This includes views on the model type, timing and frequency, who should deliver it, and ideas for topics.

3.8.1 Model of delivery

Of the students who commented about the model of PDP, most of those asked stated that they would like to see PDP as part of the programme, which implies the model should be integrated and embedded within the curriculum, the remainder saw PDP as either a linked model, whereby there are crossovers between the programme and the PDP programme, or as a discrete model i.e. a bolt-on extra. For model definitions see "Personal Development Planning and Employability", (Higher Education Academy, 2009). There were mixed opinions about whether PDP should be assessed, although there was more agreement that it should be made compulsory.

The majority view is summed up by the following:

> *"Well if it was built into the course it would be even better, because …you are doing the whole thing together whereas if it's a service on the side, some students don't use the service because they are busy with their studies... so if it's part of the course then they would do that."*

Whilst most students thought that PDP should be part of the programme, very few had actually experienced PDP firsthand: as such, there may be insufficient evidence to support a positive decision about which model is the most appropriate way forward. Indeed, one student envisaged that PDP would not be part of the programme itself but they would have to take it, similar to a library course, implying a compulsory bolt-on approach. This also adds support to the idea that the delivery should be flexible, both in terms of model and with regard to staff members.

Writing thoughts and ideas down as opposed to just thinking and talking about them, is seen by the students to be very important for developing themselves personally, and as already discussed, some students were able to identify the value of having done this.

> **Recommendation:** Most of the students in this research favoured PDP delivery as part of the taught postgraduate programme, with an integrated approach. However, for many, this was a theoretical choice, as very few have experience of PDP as part of their formal education, therefore more thorough research, and a period of trialling would be valuable. Resources developed in phase 2 of the project, should therefore be tailored and have the flexibility to be used in different ways depending upon the nature of the programme.

3.8.2 Timing and frequency of sessions

There was a strong feeling that introduction of PDP would be useful at the beginning of their time at university, perhaps during their induction sessions.

One student thought it would be best to start PDP at the beginning of the academic year, to give them an introduction, and then review it in the middle of the programme, whilst another said:

> *"at the beginning what they need is something to make them feel welcome and to help them settle down…at that time telling someone about a job wouldn't really… be their priority…Towards the end of course you are thinking about a job but you are also thinking about 'Oh I need to get this done because if I don't, then I'm not getting my Masters'. So I would suggest middle of the course itself because then*

you have settled down… and you are also not under pressure as you …are at the end”,

Clearly, working on PDP before they start applying for jobs is a benefit that the students recognise and can articulate.

No strong views were expressed regarding the frequency of sessions within the programme, although one student highlighted the fact that before and after public holidays e.g. Christmas was not a good time for them, as they were often travelling at this time.

One student who thought it should be part of the programme said that it would be useful to:

“develop skills not all at once but over time and focus on what you want or need to do”.

Another student said that PDP should be part of the Masters programme and there should be about 2-3 sessions per semester to brief students about opportunities.

In summary, students wanted to be made aware of PDP right at the very beginning of their programmes, with sessions to reinforce and support the PDP process taking place either at the beginning or in the middle, but not at the end of their programmes.

> **Recommendation:** Students should be alerted to PDP in pre-entry information and in the induction sessions. PDP sessions should be scheduled as soon as possible thereafter.

3.8.3 Staffing

When asked “who is the best person to advise you?”, the response from one student was clear:

“The person [tutor] who disseminates the knowledge is the best person to advise you.”

This was supported by general agreement from other individuals. Of those who were asked this question specifically, all were in agreement that their tutors would be the best placed to offer advice and deliver sessions:

“as they have experience in the field”.

Whilst many students wanted one-to-one sessions with tutors, others acknowledged that this was not always feasible, and could result in no-one having quality time with the tutor.

One student pointed out in addition to the tutor, their respective careers service could help with PDP, whilst another said that:

“the careers service is kind of broad… whereas the tutor would know specifically what the course involves and what the world out there is looking for graduates from that specific course, so they would be able to guide students specific to the course that they are doing...”

Another student had a slightly different perspective, and when asked if tutors should be involved, replied:

“personal goals normally have to come from the person first…advice [from tutors] is always welcome towards your personal goal”.

There is a strong desire for discussion and guidance on an individual basis, preferably from the programme co-ordinator or lecturer, although there was also acknowledgment that other organisations, for example the careers service, could play a role. Ultimately the planning and goal setting should come from the individual student.

> **Recommendation:** It is recommended that where possible, academic staff deliver PDP, with the support of careers service or support service staff as appropriate. However, should this not be feasible, other individuals within the careers service or similar are also well placed to deliver the material.

3.8.4 Group working

The vast majority of students stated that they were very happy to share the PDP process with their peers and with tutors, although two would rather only share with tutors and others only with peers. One student would rather not share it with anyone. The perceived major benefits of sharing ideas with their peers, were:

> *"when you do this you learn new things and learn from each other".*

Another student said:

> *"It is worth sharing…you will get different ideas so you might learn from the others…the tutors have more experience than us with the working in different places and might have different ideas."*

Some students had experience of working on PDP in groups of more than 40 students and they felt this was not productive and saw the value of having smaller groups of about 5-6 people:

> *"Generalising all of their issues together it does not really make sense... If it were just five people it would give people an incentive to actually come and attend because… you're gonna be missed. How they have outlined the whole programme for personal development, I think it good enough on its own but personal attention is one big thing out there that is not there."*

There were only two students who were reluctant to share their views with fellow classmates: one individual who held the view that their plans are completely personal to them and therefore should not be shared with anyone, and another who believed that sharing with peers would provide too many viewpoints which would make it harder to narrow down their own options.

The majority saw interaction with both peers and tutors as important and:

> *"…would like to improve on the interaction between the students and the tutor. There has not been enough. There is no interaction. The school needs to organise activities to help international students to interact."*

This also further reiterates the value placed by the students on a good relationship between students and tutor, and between students and their peers.

One student was of the opinion that the more people are involved, the better, as a way to obtain more ideas.

In summary, most students were happy to work in one-to-one sessions or in groups, provided they were not too large, and to share their ideas with their peers and their tutors.

> **Recommendation:** Students would find it helpful to receive PDP both as one-to-one sessions as well as in small peer groups. Students can learn a great deal and receive invaluable support from one another in peer groups, and sharing experiences is also an effective use of resources. PDP resources developed in stage 2 of the project should be designed to be as flexible as possible to accommodate different methods of delivery.

3.8.5 Topics and content

There was a wide range of good suggestions from the students regarding PDP content. These have been extracted and are summarised below.

3.8.5.1 Orientation-related activities

The students felt a need for some orientation-type activities to help them to become familiar with life in the UK. Orientation-related activities can be built into PDP to encourage integration and build relationships and interactions between peers and with tutors, with one student suggesting a tour of the city or other relevant location. Another would find introductory computer and library courses helpful.

Others would find a briefing on the culture, customs and expectations of the university and indeed the UK useful:

> *"I think it would be useful to …give some information about the culture and the country, rules in the university and about the content of the subject…[tell us] you have to attend classes…if there is coursework…"*

Another student felt that resources and services should be signposted to enable students to utilise resources effectively, highlighting again the unfamiliarity with the individual Institutions' systems and the UK way of working.

3.8.5.2 Transferable skills

- Team working/breaking down barriers

There was a desire for group activities to encourage team working, with one student suggesting that activities to encourage students to interact with each other would be helpful, as frequently international students find themselves spending time only with others from the same country. One student suggested the incorporation of team working activities into an outing. The students expect other students to share what they have been doing in their home countries with their peers, so they can learn from each other.

- Self awareness

One student suggested there should be a section on the individual addressing points such as:

> *"what they feel, …what skills an individual has, what is it that an individual hopes to do [have], …what skills they feel that they would need to feed into those plans, and where can those skills be acquired?... How will I know if I've arrived there?"*

Another student found that activities such as the SWOT analysis and Belbin team roles and other means of promoting self awareness had been very helpful and would like to see it as part of the programme.

- IT skills

There was a feeling that IT skills classes would be helpful for those who need it.

- Employability

There was a demand for careers guidance relevant to seeking work in the UK and abroad. This includes advice on UK (and possibly international) CVs and covering letters, and also information about UK job opportunities.

3.8.5.3 Careers awareness/business experience

There was a desire for internships as it was perceived that this would help students not only to obtain international experience, but also assist with their dissertations.

There was also recognition of the value of speaking to tutors about the tutors' prior experience:

"They [tutors] have a lot of experience industrially and academically. I think it would be easy for them to share [that information] and enlighten more on what you can do after school [university]."

There is demand from several students for invited talks from professionals in different fields, and one student suggested that the students could go on visits to businesses, as it was perceived that this would help the students to decide on their career path.

The students think that opportunities to go out to companies would allow them to see how they work and what they do.

The above activities would not only allow the students to have a greater understanding of the workplace and industry, but would allow them to partake in networking for their future career.

Reflective writing is a key component of PDP, and some students commented that, if it were approached properly, they would find it very helpful. As this is a different concept to academic writing, and few students know what it is, or how to go about doing it, it is therefore very important to provide support and guidance in this area.

Owing to the levels of prior work experience and probable maturity amongst international taught postgraduate students, it is highly important that any resources developed should not be patronising to them.

> **Recommendation:** Emphasis should be placed on tangible outcomes of PDP, such as CVs and covering letters, to best promote the benefits of PDP immediately to the students.

4 Conclusions

As funding for HE institutions becomes more unpredictable, British universities are showing an increased reliance on international students, particularly at the taught postgraduate level, as a significant source of revenue. Scotland is no exception to the UK-wide trend.

If the UK, particularly the Scottish sector, is to continue to maintain and indeed see growth in the number of international students on taught postgraduate programmes, it needs to heed the views and perceptions of its students. Many international students' decisions to come to Scotland are, at least in part, influenced by institutional reputation, both in terms of league tables, and also by word of mouth by talking to friends, family and colleagues who have already studied in Scotland and recognise the high value of a foreign, particularly British degree. As the number of students with a British degree rises, it becomes increasingly important to provide added value to increase the quality of the Scottish educational experience by enhancing the potential employability of students educated at Scottish institutions. This can be achieved by encouraging and supporting them to develop skills and attributes relevant not only within, but outside their discipline-specific areas. PDP has been identified as being a useful approach to achieve this as it enables students to develop skills applicable for life.

Compared to undergraduate and research postgraduate students, a range of different challenges face taught postgraduate students. These particularly relate to the short length of the programme, and the strong emphasis on assessment. This study has highlighted that these issues are further compounded by international students possessing unique characteristics, these being mainly:

- differences in culture
- different approaches to work and study
- language difficulties
- differences in educational background/varying quality of first degree
- (cultural) isolation and disorientation felt upon arrival, or, if there are several students from the same country, the potential lack of cultural integration and understanding.

This was, however, balanced by the potential increased likelihood of high self-motivation, work experience, maturity, and increased co-operation through shared experience. There was also a desire expressed from them not to be treated differently from home students, and indeed many imagined there would be more home students on their programme.

Staff must be enthusiastic about, and believe in the benefits of PDP, otherwise only certain students will be self-motivated enough and have the foresight to buy-in to the concept and show enthusiasm and commitment themselves.

These differences mean that all instructions and guidelines must be completely clear and delivery must be enthusiastic.

The implementation must not be patronising or condescending, but carefully delivered and worded. Gauging students' prior knowledge and experience of PDP at the start of the degree, would enable staff to more appropriately tailor the content to students' needs.

A model of PDP delivery integrated within the programme of study appears to be the most favoured option for implementation. However, the stand-alone (bolt-on or discrete) and linked models were also highlighted as being potentially useful, further emphasising the requirement for flexibility and tailored resources so PDP can be used as and when each school or department feels necessary at various stages through the degree.

In terms of timing of delivery, opinion appeared to be divided. Most students were of the opinion that PDP should feature in their formal induction, and indeed as such it could be included in the orientation process in order to help in building relationships with tutors and peers, to build up confidence and security within the students to ask for help when necessary. Others, however, were of the opinion that right at the beginning of the programme there were

too many other demands on their time, such as finding accommodation, and that it would be better to wait, perhaps a few weeks or months, until they had properly settled in. There was general agreement that towards the beginning of the programme there would be fewer other commitments such as assignments and exams, and that introduction of PDP at the end of the programme should definitely be avoided.

Delivery need not necessarily come from the tutors or staff members directly involved with the lecturing of students, but some form of coherent delivery would be beneficial. There is also a role for the careers services or similar bodies in the home institutions to play in supporting elements of PDP.

In summary, the benefits of and demand for PDP from international taught postgraduate students in Scotland is clear, and delivery needs to be flexible, timely, enthusiastic and tailored to the different needs of this particular student cohort.

Overall, the bank of PDP resources created by the PIPS project should be flexible, customisable, not just tutor-led, and capable of being adapted by the HEI using it. In order to measure success, feedback should be sought from students, academic staff and employers to evaluate the developed PDP resources in the next project phase.

5 Key findings and recommendations

This section makes a number of recommendations to facilitate the development of appropriate PDP resources for the next project phase. These are grouped under three overarching headings for clarity. These groupings are based around issues of resources, implementation and support. It is recognised that there will be inevitable overlap between some of these areas.

5.1 Recommendations for the development of taught postgraduate PDP resources

5.1.1 Perceived potential benefits of PDP

Interviews conducted for this project indicate that students are convinced of the many potential merits of PDP. However, few students have engaged with PDP at undergraduate level, so it is important to introduce reflective activities, goal-setting and creating action plans to support PDP engagement.

5.1.2 Language skills

A major challenge that faces many international students is English language skills. It is fundamental for the success of this project to develop PDP resources using "plain English" to cater for the wide variations in students' English language proficiency encountered in the survey interviews.

5.1.3 Written records

Students have emphasised the value of maintaining written records of their PDP work and require a resource which can involve some personalisation. It is recommended that this is an integral component of the PDP process.

5.1.4 Topics and content

Emphasis should be placed on tangible outcomes of PDP, such as CVs and covering letters, to best promote the benefits of PDP immediately to the students.

5.2 Recommendations for the implementation of taught postgraduate PDP

5.2.1 Personal attention

Group sizes for PDP should be kept as small as practically possible, as generalising across large groups of people is unproductive.

5.2.2 Timing and frequency of sessions

Students should be alerted to PDP in the induction session, and if appropriate, PDP sessions should be placed as soon as possible thereafter, in the beginning or middle section of the course, avoiding likely times of high activity and assessment, and student absence such as the beginning and end of holidays.

5.2.3 Pressures and demands

With the many demands facing international students, it is important that sufficient emphasis is placed upon providing added value to students from their university experience, and it is recommended that PDP is included within the programmes so that it is not seen as an extra burden and therefore of reduced value.

5.2.4 Personal issues/participation

Whilst most students are very willing to share their ideas with others, some students feel that because of its personal nature, PDP should remain private to them. Therefore, any material should be delivered sensitively and diplomatically, and students should be encouraged to take ownership for their own PDP.

5.2.5 Model of delivery

Most of the students in this research favoured PDP delivery as part of the taught postgraduate programme, with an integrated approach. However, for many, this was a theoretical choice, as very few have experience of PDP as part of their formal education, therefore more thorough research, and a period of trialling would be valuable. Resources developed in phase 2 of the project, should therefore be tailored and have the flexibility to be used in different ways depending upon the nature of the programme.

5.2.6 Careers services

The careers services within HEIs have a vital role in meeting the demands of students, not only for careers-related and employability advice but also in the implementation of PDP. Careers services can provide academic staff with support and guidance on PDP, but will require further resources and support to achieve this. This should be enabled through sharing of tailored PDP resources, to optimise co-ordination of effort within and between careers service staff. Proper induction packages which clarify the nature of the role of the careers services to the students would be helpful, to avoid careers services being undervalued, dismissed, and underused by students who could benefit from them.

5.3 Recommendations for supporting staff and student use of PDP

5.3.1 Employability

PDP resources must enable students to identify, develop, articulate and promote their own transferable skills. Developing PDP resources and activities with an employability focus, such as auditing transferable skills, understanding and refining application forms and CVs, and understanding the requirements of employers will address the survey findings and the students' needs.

5.3.2 Staff approachability and support

Tutors appear to be the most desired facilitator for one-to-one sessions with students regarding their PDP. Staff must be approachable, and to make it clear to students if, when and in what capacity they are able to help them.

5.3.3 Portability post-graduation

If students understand the process of PDP, they can adapt that learning to any other 'lifelong learning' context. To help students continue to develop, there is a need for PDP content and information to be captured digitally to enable portability and transferability to another PDP framework or CPD scheme.

5.3.4 Self-awareness

Students should be allocated support from an individual with whom to discuss their thoughts to help them to contextualise their ideas, to become more focussed and self aware.

5.3.5 Staff attitudes

It is essential that staff feel fully confident that they are comfortable with the delivery of PDP materials and recognise the value and benefits for the students. It is also important that

sufficient dedicated time is set aside for PDP to enable staff to deliver it effectively, otherwise the value for the student is substantially reduced.

5.3.6 Staffing

It is recommended that where possible, academic staff deliver PDP, with the support of careers service or support service staff as appropriate. However, should this not be feasible, other individuals within the careers service or similar are also well placed to deliver the material.

5.3.7 PDP support

Students would find it helpful to receive PDP both as one-to-one sessions as well as in small peer groups. Students can learn a great deal and receive invaluable support from one another in peer groups, and sharing experiences is also an effective use of resources. PDP resources developed in stage 2 of the project should be designed to be as flexible as possible to accommodate different methods of delivery.

6   References

Higher Education Academy (January 2009). Personal development planning and employability (revised edition)
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/employability/PDP_and_employability_Jan_2009.pdf [accessed 21 April 2010]

Higher Education Policy Institute and The British Library (January 2010). Postgraduate education in the United Kingdom. http://www.hepi.ac.uk/files/45%20Postgraduate%20education%20full.pdf [accessed 13 May 2010]

Higher   Education   Statistics   Agency   (statistics   webpage)
http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com_datatables/Itemid,121/task,show_category/catdex,3/ [accessed 30 April 2010]

Maxwell, G., Scott, B., Macfarlane, D., Williamson, E. (May 2009). Employers as stakeholders in postgraduate employability skills development. International Journal of Management Education 8(2) 1-11.

Prospects website http://www.prospects.ac.uk

Prospects   (Transferable   skills   webpage)
http://www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Applications_CVs_and_interviews/Job_applications/Selling_your_skills/p!eXfdpk#Transferable%20skills [accessed 10 May 2010]

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2009a). Personal development planning: guidance   for   institutional   policy   and   practice   in   higher   education.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/PDP/PDPguide.pdf [accessed 14 May 2010]

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (June 2009b). A toolkit for enhancing personal development planning strategy, policy and practice in higher education institutions.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/PDP/PDP_Toolkit_Final.pdf [accessed 16 April 2010]

Universities UK. (May 2009). Taught postgraduate students: market trends and opportunities.
http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/RR_TaughtPostgraduateStudents.pdf
[accessed 10 May 2010]

7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1 – Interview questions

Interview schedule for first stage interviews with postgraduate students (July 2009)

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview, and thanks for completing the form.

We are undertaking this research with international taught postgraduate students in Scottish universities in order to develop some materials which will be used with students like yourself to help them think about their studies and to plan their future careers and lives.

We would like you to help us understand why you came to Scotland and something about your plans for yourself, your future studies and your future career.

Anything you tell us will be entirely confidential. That means that we will not reveal your name, or any other way of identifying you, to anyone else.

With your permission we would like to record this interview, so that we can look over what you say as part of our research.

The interview will take approximately 20 minutes.

Do you have any questions?

Do you agree? Can we start?

Interview Questions

Experience of planning for your personal future	Categories
Why did you decide to come to Scotland for your taught postgraduate study?	Career decision making/ Scotland
How did you arrive at this decision? Did you receive any advice at your previous university? What form did that take?	Advice received
Can you explain how you went about planning for your future career and studies?	Career decision making/ future career
If so did anyone help you with this? If so who? (Prompt: Did anyone at your previous university help in any way?)	Advice received Previous university
Is there anyone else you would have liked to have received help from? (prompt: For example from your tutors at university.	Advice – open question
Did you ever write down your plans in any form? If so how?	Reflective writing
Skills Learning	
What subject-related skills do you think you have learned while on your present course?	Skills/ course based/ academic/ job-related
As well as skills relating to your subject have you learned skills that will be useful to you in your life or in your job?	Skills/generic/ job-related
Have you been encouraged to record the skills you have learned/acquired?	Record of achievement
What skills have you learned from your experience of being	Skills/ generic/ lifeskills

in Scotland – outside your programme of study?	
Planning your future work or further studies now	
Do you know what you will be doing next year?	Future planning/ short term
Do you have longer terms hopes and plans for your work and/or studies?	Future planning/ long term
What did you take into account when you made these plans? (Prompt: Did you think about what you were good at? Or what you would most enjoy doing? Or are you thinking about how to earn money?)	Future planning/ reasoning
Have you received any help with planning your future while you have been in Scotland?	Future planning/ advice received/ Scotland
YES: Has it been helpful? NO: do you think it would have been helpful?	Evaluation of advice received
What would most help you to carry out some personal planning about your future?	Future planning/ needs
Prompt: Would it be helpful to think what you are good at in your university studies, and where you need to improve (for example your skills in speaking English or your research skills?	Future planning/ self-evaluation
Do you write down your thoughts about your own learning – in a diary, or journal? Do you think it would help to write down your thoughts about your personal career planning?	Future planning/ reflective writing
How would you feel about sharing these plans with others – say other students or tutors?	Future planning/ sharing with others
Thinking about your personal goals	
Do you think about what you personally want to achieve in your life?	Personal goals
Could you explain your ideas about your personal goals?	Personal goals/ reasons
What do you think are the main influences on your future planning?	Personal goals/ influences (factors)
Who do you talk to about planning your life?	Personal goals/ influences (people)
Do you think the university can help you plan? If so how?	Personal goals/ role of university
PDP	
Have you heard of Personal Development Planning – if so what has been your experience of PDP? (if not - briefly explain)	PDP
What do you think a PDP should contain? What would be useful to you to reflect on/record? (eg modules/assessment/skills)	PDP
Do you think the PDP process is a useful one?	PDP
How do you think you could be best supported by tutors? What would be useful?	PDP process

7.2 Appendix 2 – Invitation to participating students

Dear

You are invited to participate in some research that is being undertaken with international taught postgraduate students in Scottish universities

The purpose is to develop some materials which will be used with students like yourself to help them think about their studies and to plan their future careers and lives.

We would like you to help us understand why you came to Scotland and something about your plans for yourself, your future studies and your future career.

Anything you tell us will be entirely confidential. That means that we will not reveal your name, or any other way of identifying you, to anyone else.

Full details of our ethics protocol is attached.

Your interview will be held at…………………… (time and date) at ……………………………………………..……..(place)

7.3 Appendix 3 – Consent form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research.

The purpose is to develop some materials which will be used with students like yourself to help them think about their studies and to plan their future careers and lives.

We would like you to help us understand why you came to Scotland and something about your plans for yourself, your future studies and your future career.

Anything you tell us will be entirely confidential. That means that we will not reveal your name, or any other way of identifying you, to anyone else.

Before the interview we would be grateful if you could complete the following information about yourself.

Your name	
Your university in Scotland	
The programme of study you are currently following.	
Your country of origin	
The subject(s) you studied for your undergraduate degree	
The college or university (or universities) you studied at before coming to Scotland	

7.4   Appendix 4 – Ethics Protocol

What the project is about

This is a cross-institutional project, commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN), to develop, pilot and evaluate Personal Development Planning (PDP) resources specifically designed for international taught postgraduates.

Where the money is coming from for the project

SHEEN is a joint initiative of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Universities Scotland. SHEEN supports institutions in implementing, monitoring and evaluating their employability strategies, by providing a forum for Scottish University institutional employability champions.

Confidentiality

Findings will be presented in such a way that respondents cannot be identified unless they expressly agree otherwise. Institutions will not be identified in any documentation circulated as part of, or resulting from, the project without formal permission being obtained from the nominated SHEEN representative. Any information provided as part of the project will be used exclusively for the purposes of the PIPS project, and will not be passed any third party. All data collected will be destroyed after one year from the end of the project.

Information already in the public realm is not subject to these constraints, but care will be taken not to link it to data gathered through this research in such a way as to undermine these principles.

Right of withdrawal

The SHEEN representative in participating institutions is welcome to remove any information from documents that she/he believes to be sensitive for commercial or other reasons. Participants in interviews have the right to withdraw at any time, to decline to answer any question, to ask for recording to cease or to require that information given should not be used in any way.

Security

Interviews will be recorded by note-taking and/or digital audio-recording. Only the researchers will have access to this documentation. Upon request we shall send interviewees the notes/transcript of their own interview so that they may check for accuracy. Any documentation provided will also be kept in secure offices. All records of interviews and other documentation will be kept in an archive until the completion of the project, but we shall destroy the records of those who request us to do so.

Dissemination

Reports of the project will be provided in the first instance to the Steering Group established to oversee the PIPS project. Any other dissemination to wider audiences will be undertaken with the agreement of the Steering Group and will be subject to the provisions of this protocol with respect to confidentiality as outlined above.

Any other papers or presentations produced based on research undertaken as part of this project will be subject to all the same provisions with respect to confidentiality as outline above.

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York YO10 5BR