A national review of emerging practice on the use of Personal Development Planning for postgraduate researchers

If 'better researchers do better research'[1] , how can Personal Development Planning support the development of effective researchers?

Introduction

The UK GRAD Programme commissioned this review in response to requests from the sector to audit current activities within institutions around Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Training Needs Analysis (TNA) specifically for postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers. Institutions are keen that UK GRAD provides an overview of current systems in order to share good practice, help inform their PDP/TNA development and avoid 'reinventing the wheel'.

Our report summarises key issues in respect of the role of PDP for postgraduate researchers (PGRs). It looks at current practice, within the context of an increasing emphasis on personal development in all higher education degree programmes in the UK, and a growing focus on embedding personal and professional development in research degree programmes (RDPs).

We aim to highlight some of the key factors for successfully supporting postgraduate researchers' personal development planning processes, as evidenced within a growing database of reported practice[2], and responses from current postgraduate researchers.

We have chosen the word 'practice' to mean any practice,
either singly, or in any combination, that involves aspects of:
1 skills needs identification
1 skills development
1 reflection on experience
1 action planning
1 recording of achievement

During workshop discussions[3] at a UK GRAD Scottish Hub in March 2004 participants stated that they would like to see models from other institutions. The outcomes also suggest that staff in the sector felt they would benefit from information or resources that provide positive arguments for PDP presented in 'research friendly' language, and which build on processes within the research degree programme. There was also a call for information about the reality of implementation, and how to avoid potential pitfalls.

The UK GRAD Programme, the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA)[4] and the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC)[5] worked in collaboration to carry out this review of current practice.

1 Professor Norman Staines, King's College London, 'Graduate Skills Development Programme' submission to
   UK GRAD PDP database
2 UK GRAD Programme PDP database at www.grad.ac.uk
3 Dr Sara Shinton, PDP: Report for UK GRAD Scottish Hub Postgraduate Skills Training Workshop, University
   of Glasgow, March 2004
4 Centre for Recording Achievement is a national body that supports good practice and the sharing of experience
   in Recording Achievement, Personal Development Planning and Progress Files within educational institutions
   and professional bodies, www.recordingachievement.org
   researchers get AHRB grants

In order to inform the sector, we have developed an online searchable database that allows individuals and institutions to record their current practice and to highlight the rationale, benefits and challenges. Registered users of the database can use this resource to inform the direction of their practice. We hope also that users will continue to contribute their experiences and chart their progress as PDPs become more established in RDPs.

We have also undertaken an online survey[6] through the NPC website and email list of the experiences and views of postgraduate researchers on the use of progress review systems within RDPs. The scope of this survey (1387 respondents from 93 institutions) was wider than looking solely at the use of PDPs as it covered reporting systems such as annual progress reports and formal reporting. It was supplemented by a PDP workshop held at the NPC 2004 annual conference and attended by 52 participants, including 24 postgraduate representatives from 22 Institutions. The messages emerging from the workshop and survey are equally applicable to the use of PDPs and give excellent guidance on how to avoid the 'pitfalls'.

How to use this report?

We hope that our report, and the database that it describes, will be of interest to a wide range of audiences:

For HE policy makers, members of funding bodies and other national agencies, we hope that the report will illustrate the range of ways in which policy is currently being implemented in the varying contexts of the institutions represented within the database.

For institutional staff involved in the development of PDP we hope that our report will provide an insight into current practice and highlight key issues raised by both HEIs and researchers as to how to develop a meaningful personal development process.

If you are a postgraduate research supervisor, we hope it will be useful to explore the perceived benefits of PDP for:

- researchers' progress and development
- the research project
- the supervisor and supervisory team

We also hope that the views of PGRs about their experiences of supervision, progress monitoring and review will provide an insight into how PDP processes can be used effectively.

For current postgraduate researchers you might be interested to see how other researchers perceive PDP practices and processes. Looking at the perceived uses and benefits from the institutions' perspective may also help you to put the processes that you interact with into a broader context.

The national policy context

Providing access to PDP processes for researchers is embedded in various current national initiatives.

The policy statement[7] regarding PDP, endorsed by CVCP, CoSHEP, SCoP and QAA includes the following key information[8] :

- a detailed definition, ie 'a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning,

5 National Postgraduate Committee is a student run body that represents the interests of both taught and research postgraduates, www.npc.org.uk
6 The full survey results are available on the UK GRAD website, www.grad.ac.uk
7 www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/policystatement/contents.htm
8 Ward, R. (2004) Getting to grips with PDP in RDPs: A think piece. 'On Reflection' - The Electronic Journal of the CRA. Issue 7, www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/RobWard0604.pdf

performance and/or achievement and to plan
for their personal, educational and career
development'

₁ that objectives should be related explicitly to
student development; to improve the capacity
of students to understand what and how they
are learning, and to review, plan and take
responsibility for their own learning

₁ a timescale for implementation with students
(by 2005/6 academic year) at all levels and
within all programmes, agreed by the sector
through its representative bodies.

The new QAA Code of Practice for Research Degree
Programmes[9] which formally embeds the recommendations
made in the UK Funding Councils' Improving Standards in
Research Degree Programmes report[10] includes a precept
relating to PDP. It states that 'institutions will provide
opportunities for research students to maintain a record of
personal progress, which may include reference to the
development of research and other skills'. Specific reference
is made to PDP in the explanation that 'research students
may find it useful to use the PDP tools provided by their
institutions to record their personal progress and
development, including reference to research and other
skills'.

The Sir Gareth Roberts' Review Set for Success[11] also
stated that '…major funders of PhD students should make all
funding related to PhD students conditional on students'
training meeting stringent minimum standards.' and
'…should include the provision of at least two weeks'
dedicated training a year, principally in transferable skills…'.

This recommendation is about ensuring that researchers
have access to training and development appropriate to their
individual needs. We see a PDP process as key to realising
the ethos of the Roberts' review.

Online database of practice

In order to audit current practice we developed an online
database which aims to be a developing resource for anyone
interested in finding out what is happening with PDPs for
postgraduate researchers. We invited all UK HEIs to submit
a record of their current practice.

By late July 2004 there were 12 from the following HEIs

Anglia Polytechnic University	Northumbria University
University of East Anglia	University of Nottingham
University of Exeter	University of Plymouth
Kings College, London	University College London (2 examples/submissions)
University of Leeds	University of Warwick
Loughborough University	The University of York

This represents a mix of institutions (pre and post 1992), by
type, by region and by research income. Eight of these
institutions are also members of the CRA.

It is from these submissions that we answer the question
'what is currently being done for postgraduate researchers in
terms of PDP'?

---

9   www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/cop/draft/CircularCL0408.htm
10 www.grad.ac.uk/3_2_2.jsp
11 www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise_and_productivity/research_and_enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

What is currently being done?

We asked institutions to tell us where their current practice was being implemented. Eight institutions have implemented cross-institutional practice and three at faculty, school or department specific level targeted at particular disciplines: science, health and engineering. One institution reports practice designed for international students, working at a distance, who may access the web-based material from their home country 'for keeping in touch rather than for development'.

We asked about the mechanism for recording personal development. The majority of examples submitted use some kind of paper-based resources (nine examples) with five using electronic support and three, web-based. Some practices make use of more than one medium for delivery.

Some institutions also mentioned other mechanisms; including an editable electronic portal, working orally in groups, and giving personal presentations as other ways for recording personal development.

The current dependence on paper-based systems was echoed in the response from the NPC survey: 82% of respondents are using paper-based systems for review mechanisms. Clearly there is plenty of opportunity to utilise the benefits of electronic media.

In terms of the scale of practice and there was a range of provision from that aimed at small cohorts of researchers, i.e. 25 postgraduates and 15 postdocs, to that covering all postgraduate researchers within an institution.

The majority of the illustrations of practice explain that the work described is still at an early stage, even where antecedents are acknowledged, and that there is much scope for ongoing learning from, and further developing the practice.

The rationales for practice currently underway within institutions, range from:

- developmental: a focus on student reflection and review, skills development, supporting continuing professional development (CPD)
- institutional: the need to comply with policy requirements, a framework for checking progress or storing records
- aspirational: the desire to provide distinctive provision, to develop a community of practice within and 'beyond the PhD', to promote cultural change

Levels of confidentiality of any records and reflections associated with the process differ in the reported practices. They range from confidential to the PGR concerned, to forming part of institutional records.

The issue of confidentiality was of major concern to the respondents of the NPC survey. Only 21 respondents of the NPC survey reported using a planning system that is confidential to the researcher. There is a real tension in trying to combine systems that are genuinely for the benefit and development of the researcher with institutional methods for recording progress. Where confidentiality exists it can be seen as very positive. Conversely, when this is broken it can be very damaging to the integrity of the system.

'If you have a complaint about lack of support or development you can voice this confidentially without confrontation with your supervisor.'

'It does give you a chance to bring up any points that you have with supervision, but they are not always kept confidential.'

Focus of practice

(See table 1) The focus of practices submitted encompasses the full range of options offered to respondents in the UK GRAD database template:

₁ Training needs analysis (TNA) (12)

₁ Personal reflection and review (12)

₁ Skills assessment (10)[12]

₁ Planning training (9)

₁ Research log (9)

₁ Collecting CV information (9)

₁ Research planning (6)

₁ Input into HEI transcripts and institutional records (2)[13]

₁ Departmental records (1).

The diversity of practice seen in the institutional database was clearly echoed in the PGR response (See table 2) . The majority of respondents used a mechanism for recording the progress of their research. Encouragingly, 50% of the sample, also found these useful mechanisms for personal reflection on progress.

'Gives a chance to reflect on your achievements so far and helps to set future goals.'

'I do think it makes the student reflect on the progress he/she has made throughout the year and where they may need to improve in the coming year.'

Almost a third of respondents used systems for assessing skills and identifying training needs – although from the responses this was very heavily focussed on 'research specific' skills development.

'It's very easy to get buried in the research and neglect personal development. Without a formal requirement (and reminders) to do so I would probably forget all about it.'

Very few (3%) reported using systems to record information towards their CV and future employability.

'I think the system is also useful to keep a log of your activities, so that compiling a CV is made easier.'
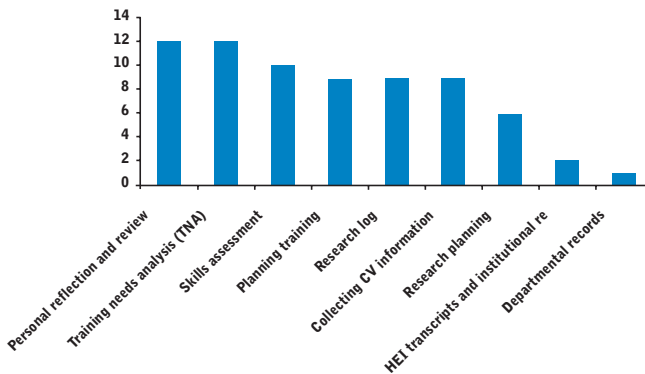

Table 1: Institutional database, diversity of reported practice (12 HEIs)

---

12 A number of submissions link the practice to the Research Councils'/AHRB Joint Skills Statement www.grad.ac.uk/3_2_1.jsp

13 The low number of responses to this section of the submissions is interesting, considering the 2005/6 agreed implementation date for all aspects of the HE Progress File. Brennan, J. and Shah, T. (2003) Report on the Implementation of Progress File at www.ltsn.ac.uk/application.asp?section=generic&app=ext_resources.asp&process=full_record&id=274
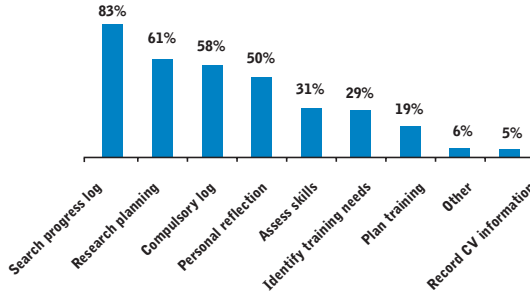
Table 2: NPC Survey, diversity of practice of progress reporting systems (1387 respondents)

Centrality of practice to the supervision process

There is a markedly different approach in different situations. Some practice seems to be quite independent of the research supervisory process. Other examples describe a 'mode of engagement' for supervisors and PGRs. Two institutions reported '...supervisory relationships...' as an additional focus for their practice.

The NPC survey offered some interesting insights into whether progress reporting offered any support to the 'supervisory process'. Opinion was divided into three camps:

1. Those who felt it generally enriched the supervisory process (See table 3) . More than half the respondents (52%) to the NPC survey identified benefits of having a progress review system. The most common benefits were a mechanism to increase 'awareness of skills and reflection on progress' and an 'impact on research management'. 14% of respondents to this question stated benefits directly to the supervisory process.

'Progress reviewing allows better feedback and interactions with the supervisory team.'

'Helps to see bigger picture of the project, understand its aims and plan future work. Good to talk through work with two academics other than supervisor'

'Opportunity to formally review my progress and to plan its development. To discuss with others rather than supervisor. Opportunity for reflection - pushes me to do more work and clarify what I have done!'
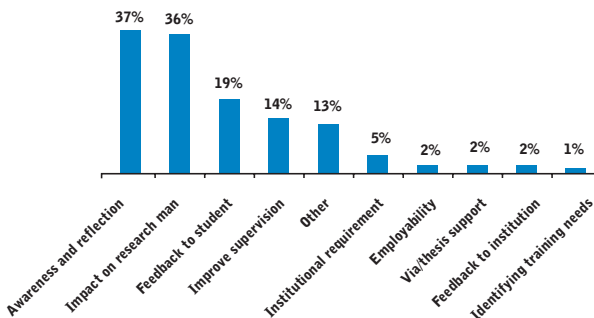

Table 3: NPC survey, benefits of review processes (728 respondents)

2. Those who had a good relationship with their supervisor and felt that the exercise was bureaucratic and didn't contribute to the supervisory process (See table 4) . Half the respondents to the NPC survey identified failings of the review system. The principle complaint was that it was bureaucratic, time consuming, inflexible and influenced by departmental politics. Other failings included little or no engagement of the supervisor or feedback to the student.

'As I have a good relation with my supervisor and see him about once a week, it seems a bit superfluous to write down every six months that we agree on the plans concerning my work for the next six months'.
'For me, this is just a piece of paper signed by me and my supervisor to allow me to progress to the next year. I have a good relationship with my supervisor, and feel any specific needs are met in our tutorials.'
'It's a bureaucratic exercise and not really regarded as a progress/personal review'

3. Those who have problems and saw the process as a useful way of getting feedback or raising issues, particularly with supervisory process (See table 5) .

'It's good to have a session with other academics where you may get good input on your work, also it's the only place where you can raise issues of difficulty with your supervisor.'
'It's a chance for you to raise any concerns you have with your research and its progression, your supervisor and colleagues and any other problems you may have.'
'It provides one of the few opportunities I have to assess my work since my supervisor tends not to take an interest.'
'The best thing it offers is time to see my supervisor – which is normally impossible!!'

The quality of supervision is still a major issue for PGRs. The NPC survey asked PGRs how 'engaged and helpful your supervisor is in the progress review process?'. 55% reported that their supervisor was very engaged (6-9). However, a fifth of respondents reported that their supervisor was not engaged at all. Given that the NPC survey predominately focussed on progress review systems directly related to the research studies, it raises the question of how engaged supervisors will be in PDP processes that encompasses a much broader remit that the just the research.
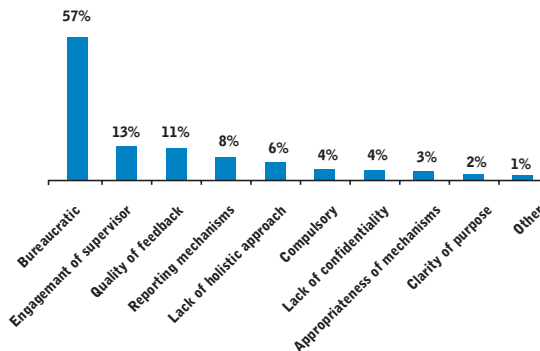

Table 4: NPC survey, failings of progress review systems (671 respondents)
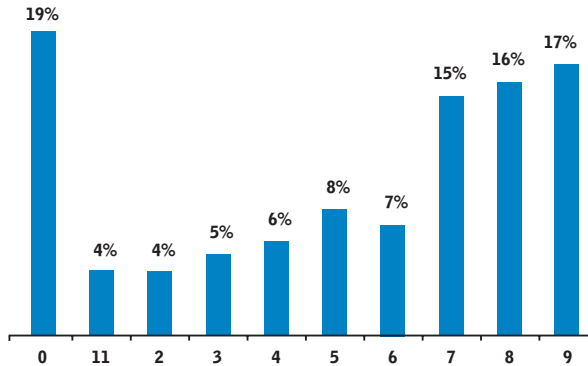
Table 5: NPC survey, engagement of supervisor in the progress review process
(1387 respondents, 0 not at all – 9 very engaged)

Why implement a PDP process?

We asked both institutions and researchers, to identify the benefits they perceived that PDP would offer different groups of stakeholders. We have themed the responses.

Benefits for the individual researcher

These ranged from the impact on their capability to complete their research and to take control of their own learning, to the benefits of owning their careers. Areas highlighted by institutions include:

[1] Impact on developing skills and completing research

Institutions

'…an opportunity to reflect more widely on the development of skills, with an emphasis on those practised through activities associated with their research project rather than formal training sessions

'…a form of personal training needs assessment'

'helps the student to …prepare for their dissertation/thesis'

Researchers

'I think it should offer the opportunity to discuss progress and achievement, strengths and weaknesses, development of transferable skills, and goals for both short and long-term.'

[1] Empowering researchers and taking control of learning

Institutions

'helps the student to …become a more reflective learner and therefore more strategic and effective in their approach'

'helps student to …take control of learning process'

Researchers

'The manner in which the review is carried out empowers the student. There is the opportunity for frank and open communication.'

'More emphasis on a regime of learning that would help broaden students' horizons and address any weak points in their CVs.

[1] Career management

Institutions

'…students learn and are empowered to take command of their careers'

'helps the student to …assess, list and document skills, attributes and achievements which will be useful for their career management'

'…awareness of their own skills, encouragement of reflection on practice, personal development planning, evidence for CV etc'

'…the student is assisted in reflecting on the skills that they are developing in order to become more explicitly aware of them, and to thus be able to articulate them to employers'

'…professional training and introduction to continuing professional development (CPD) methodologies'

Researchers

'Career planning aspects including the possibility to develop skills not directly related to the research topic/work would be useful.'

'There should be a far greater emphasis upon personal development outside of the research topic.'

'I would like there to be more on career planning particularly for those of us in the latter stages of our research.'

Benefits for the supervision process

We were interested that the most commonly omitted section in the institutional responses relating to the anticipated benefits of PDP is for the category 'research supervisor, supervisory team, supervision process'. It may be that the 'better researchers do better research' message is still waiting to be evidenced. Certainly looking at the benefits of PDP on the supervisory process would potentially create a strong rationale for implementation.

However, as we highlighted earlier, some researchers see the benefits to the supervisory process much more clearly. Those that stated benefits for the research supervisor, supervisory team, and supervision process included:

Impact on developing skills, monitoring progress and completing research

Institutions

'helps with …assessing training needs of the student'

'helps with …planning skills development opportunities for the student'

'helps with …monitoring progress and skills development'

'Recording the progress of the project, recognition of potential risks…'

Researchers

'It helps me to manage research, to review and reflect own progress and plan for the future.'

'The system is invaluable as a means of target setting, progress monitoring and general academic feedback from a panel of three including my supervisor'

'It gives me deadlines and goals to work towards, and the discussion on my progress is open, frank, and inclusive.'

Easier supervision of researchers who take ownership for their own personal development needs

Institutions

'…a more reflective student – clearer identification of skills needs and achievements generally'

'…a more autonomous and self-directing researcher, and this enables a more productive relationship to develop with the supervisor and supervisory team'

'…in principle, more independent and self-managing research student with records of key meetings'

Researchers

'The process reconfirms ownership of the research project for the student and allows the student to reflect.'

Structured framework for the supervisory process and to have discussions about personal development

Institutions

'…It provides a clear framework for discussion of personal development issues, that can run in parallel with the development of the research project'

'…structured framework for the supervisor'

Researchers

'Focus for identifying strengths and weaknesses of the research and for re-motivating me.'

'Allows the student and supervisor to assess the movement and direction of work done and to be done.'

'…helped to manage my research and discussion of my

research skills because we had to put this in writing rather than just talking about it.'

Benefits to the research project

We also asked about the impact of a PDP process on the research project. These included:

1 **Project management skills, including time management, setting goals and defining expectations**

Institutions

'helps with … time management'

'helps with …realistic planning'

'helps with …clear outcomes'

'helps with …project management tools, communication protocols, planning and organisation and problem-solving strategies'

'…sets professional standards and defines expectations'

Researchers

It helps the time management and understanding research. Enables research management by helping to see the stage it is at and also potential 'holes' in research programmes. Helps with research management by taking stock of what has been accomplished so far and assessing what further work is required.

1 **Ownership of personal development meaning that postgraduates overtly develop and are aware of appropriate skills for effective research**

Institutions

'…the student's project work benefits from the student reflecting on and recording skills required for undertaking the project'

'Better students do better research'

'…helps the student …to consider themselves as researchers beyond the specific project. It encourages a dialogue between student, peers and supervisor about the skills developed throughout the project and beyond, and helps build a community of practice throughout'

Researchers

'It gives the student a way of reviewing their progress. This can be assessed in terms of past and future achievements. Areas of concern can be identified and a plan for the future can be developed.'

'The most important benefit is that I am gaining more confidence in my work and in my communication skills…but I feel that… I am able to stand my ground and communicate more and more effectively.'

'…it has helped me in developing my communication skills, understanding research, improving research skills and networking.'

Benefits to the institution

In terms of how you felt that PDP provided benefits for the institution, the following were included:

1 **Meeting external and internal requirements, including completion rates**

Institutions

'…satisfies the requirements of the sponsors of studentships and training fellowships'

'…informs university that skills training has been done'

'…assist the University in discharging its obligations to it research students to ensure that they are aware of, and make use of the training opportunities available… and

…students who are aware of their training needs, and are assisted to act on them, become more competent researchers, and are more likely to successfully complete their RDPs on time'

'…we anticipate that value added will come through in better completion time and rates, (and) in better feedback'

Researchers

'It may help me to be more careful and effective in doing research so that I will be able to complete it in time.'

₁ **Fit with strategic vision for the institution**

Institutions

'..will link into the Universtiy's managed learning environment (MLE) which will provide other benefits for students and their departments'

'…I believe the development of this kind of reflective practice, shared, builds a community of practice for the university as a whole which lasts beyond the individual PhD (evidenced by …a yearly symposia of research development…joint publications, teaching visits etc.)'

Researchers

'Reassurance that the institution is keeping an eye on my progress.'

₁ **Mechanism for training needs analysis and profiling the training programmes available**

Institutions

'provides …a mechanism for the assessment of generic and transferable skills'

'Helps to …ensure students are aware of the skills agenda, their needs in relation to skills development and the availability of skills training programmes'

Researchers

Helps the university track students' progress, and identifies where they can provide the necessary training to fill skills gaps.

Key Challenges and Issues to take forward

We were interested in what you perceived as the critical factors that needed to be in place to make PDP a meaningful and useful process for all stakeholders. Here are some of the highlights:

₁ **High-level institutional support** to create a culture that supports training and development, and **embeds PDP** within existing review processes. Ensuring an effective use of

any evidence-based log/recording tool is important, but ALONGSIDE a well-developed skills development programme which provides face-to-face interaction and opportunity for feedback.

3 Check that the PDP systems and materials that you develop meet the requirements of policy, codes of practice, and existing processes, and are accessible and inclusive.

₁ **The importance of buy-in at all levels** is a key message. The challenge of engaging already over-stretched academic supervisors was highlighted by postgraduates at the NPC conference. They indicated that regular involvement of supervisors was crucial to ensuring that the thinking and consideration needed to make this a useful process was present.
The need for effective internal marketing was also mentioned in the HEI responses along with the importance of the perceived relevance to all stakeholders of the skills sets being developed.

₁ The perceived **need to engage the hearts and minds** of the research community was evident as well as the perceived need for co-ordination of provider groups within the HEI.

'…uniform buy in from faculties, schools and supervisors'

'…A common approach to internal marketing of provision (skills courses and other experiences) of many different types.'

Some of these comments illustrate the potentially damaging effects for PDP processes where buy-in is not present or whole-hearted.

'…general resistance in the academic culture – and - …in some instances this has resulted in participating students being hostile or minimally compliant.'

 '…lack of alignment among providers – in a context in which - …the predominant student mindset is one of compartmentalisation'

'My supervisor is head of school, and has so far not seen the purpose in such reviews' (PGR)

3 Find ways of engaging both postgraduate research students (and other student groups) and staff (supervisors, supervisory teams, and the wider research community) with your practice.

[1] At a supervisor level PDP can help **facilitate effective supervision.** However, there is also a need to address **emerging staff development/staff training** needs in order that they can support their researchers in the process.

Institutions
'… to support what is perceived to be likely to be … a very different mode of engagement between PGR students and their supervisors.'
'…engaging senior academics in understanding the importance and value of training outside the primary research activity'
'…achieving the necessary selves of support from academic supervisors'

Researchers
'…supervisors are not trained or supported enough to address problems raised in the review so that often any problems are left to the student to solve by himself.'
' My supervisor is not knowledgeable about how to review my progress.'

3 Acknowledge that the practice you envisage might not be common sense to the staff and PGRs you hope will embrace it. Design staff development and PGR induction and training activities with this in mind.

[1] The importance of **student ownership** of the process is a crucial message from both postgraduates and HEIs. Gaining student uptake and enthusiasm is crucial. Universities highlighted peer group support, the impact of compulsory workshops, responsiveness to researcher need, and the benefits of engaging mentors or peer group as key things to consider. Postgraduates called for their input at all levels of design, delivery and on-going development of PDP processes. '…designing something students perceive as engaging, useful and highly relevant to both current practice and future lives' '…a website where we can track our progress and review things we have done, and put future deadlines in. It should automatically send reminders, and be linked to useful resources. It should store papers we use and reference, and find similar papers…'

3 Develop your practice in the light of the experience of users. What works well now might need to be modified to work well in the future. Increasingly PGRs will engage in PDP processes as part of their school, college and undergraduate experience, and these experiences will affect their expectations and motivations. Will PDP impact upon admissions processes in the future?

[1] The need for a **'consistent process with integrity across the whole institution'** was key for postgraduates. They identified a system whereby students from all disciplines should be able to channel their owns needs through one system. They emphasised the need for appropriate/ tailored support for PDP and recording for PGRs in the light of the diversity of their backgrounds, interests and needs. '…A single system of supervision log, skills portfolio and training record is a particularly powerful aspect of the system – it provides the student with an integrated facility for recording and reflecting on their personal development.' '…We provide an open framework for development in which the participant is charged with the development of a persuasive case for their current standing and recent development, based on evidence. There is considerable scope within this framework for variation between individual

backgrounds and preferences, disciplinary differences and other contextual issues (e.g. in employment applications and interview techniques). This flexibility has the potential to make such a programme widely applicable across the institution and in other settings.'

'…the log is continually under review and…is being modified to meet particular degree and disciplinary requirements'

'…to recognise different needs, starting points and learning styles'

3 Design your practice to be sympathetic to your own institutional or school, department or disciplinary context. Can current PGRs and supervisors/supervisory teams have input to your design and ongoing development? Does your practice link - where possible - to other institutional and sector developments?

1 **Confidentiality issues and clarity on the purpose of the practice** were key themes in a process that potentially has the dilemma of wanting student ownership and whilst still fulfilling institutional monitoring requirements.

'A clear explanation to STUDENTS as well as supervisors as to what the purpose of this log is, who it is for, what the information will be used for, why we should fill it out and how we should fill it out.'

'The whole of the review system was never explained prior to starting my studies. It should have been discussed as part of the postgraduate research training at the university as to why it is implemented and what it sets out to achieve.'

Postgraduates were keen to emphasise that PDP should not be about monitoring progress and data collection in a formal way, but a flexible system that meets the style of the individual.

'More personal feedback and more personal contact. A review that is adapted to the needs of the student rather than simply being a bureaucratic exercise designed to gather information for the purposes of compiling university records.'

This is also acknowledged at institutional level.

'…There are key issues about the ownership of the data. It may be that students will wish to record information that they would not wish, say, their supervisor to see'

3 Consider levels of confidentiality for any information recorded. Level of confidentiality can influence the quality of the information recorded and the usefulness of the process to various users.

1 A consideration of the **resources required for successful implementation** of the practice including taking into accounts any technical issues e.g. the incompatibility of C&IT systems.

'…significant academic input…'

'…significant time to monitor, trouble-shoot, and continue to develop.'

3 Consider what resources are available for the development work and the implementation. Build what is appropriate for the resources you have or can acquire.

1 **The need to establish minimum requirements for good practice.**

3 Look out for examples of related good practice and linked agendas in your own and other institutions. Visit the UK GRAD PDP database.

Conclusions

Policy in the areas of PDP and skills development for postgraduate researchers is intended to enhance the experience of these researchers and the quality of their research.

From the examples in the database we observe that there is a range of PDP practice/emerging practice within the sector and that there is significant interest within the sector about what is happening and what is developing in this area within institutions across the sector.

Developing PDP practice for researchers is a difficult but worthwhile challenge. Research degree programmes are ideally suited to the process of reflective learning. For their part, PGRs have high hopes for their research degree experience, and high expectations about the personal development opportunities this experience will provide. It is clear from the NPC survey that there is considerable support for the concept from PGRs – provided we get it right. The principle lesson from the review of progress systems is that it is all too easy to set up systems that are administratively burdensome and bureaucratic.

Conversely, the survey also shows that it is possible to get it right. Supervisors and supervisory teams are seen by researchers as key to their experience, their progress, achievement and learning. It is their engagement in the process that makes the difference.

Final thoughts

The practice reported in the database presents a wide range of creative responses, both to policy imperatives, and to the lessons learned from earlier practice within the field of PGR supervision, support and development.

The emerging and developing practice offered within the reports in the database, and the experiences of PGRs students captured within the NPC survey and at the NPC conference, represent some of the different conceptions of progress review systems, personal development planning, research supervision etc. that are current within HE. We have made no value judgments about practice or experiences, but highlight – we hope – some interesting issues and comparisons to inform ongoing work in the sector.

The database of illustrations of practice is a dynamic resource, which over time can present a picture of developing practice, informed by the views and experiences of staff and researchers within HE. Please add your practice, and remember to revisit the site to update your contribution to this important area of practice for research for the future.

We leave you with the description of the 'perfect PDP' that emerged from the NPC workshop:

First off the most important thing is that it would be student focused and student driven, so students would be involved in the development of the process and also that everything will be motivated by the student not by academics and not by national targets. Next thing is it needs to be an interactive programme, with no paperwork, so ideally it's online so that anyone can get to it on any computer in any institution...

... it needs to be consistent and needs to have integrity across the institution, so that basically whether you're a chemistry student, or a physics student, or a biology student, or whatever, you are still able to channel your information and your needs into that programme.

... there should be links on there, so there should be a volunteering hub, a course hub, a social hub, so that [if you] think 'hey! I want to develop fencing skills' – or something like that. ... [then] you can actually go on there and find out if there are any fencing social groups... so that you can actually develop yourselves and its all there on one site. Next thing is that you need to have regular meetings/tutorials with your supervisor to ensure that your actually doing it, its not just typing it in for five minutes every two weeks and thinking 'oh! I have done my PDP I don't have to worry about it anymore, fantastic!' You actually get that thinking about it ...which you need for it to work.

Lastly the most important thing is that you have to get buy-in from the academics and the students. ... from working on a PDP in my institution in the last year, the most important thing is convincing people, especially academics that it is a good thing to happen. ... at the end of the day, this is about reflective learning and people say, 'I am at an institution to learn about my course, why do I need to learn about how I am learning? I've got a choice, I can revise about myself or I can revise about the material that I am working on, or writing a thesis on'. A lot of people put their academic priorities first and I think that's going to be the hardest battle that we have to fight when it comes to PDP. But hopefully its one that we will win.

UK GRAD Programme, C/O CRAC, Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge CB3 0AX
e admin@grad.ac.uk w. www.grad.ac.uk t. 01223 448510 f. 01223 311708