

# A progress report on progress files

*The experience of one higher education  
institution*

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**ABSTRACT** In order to facilitate personal development planning (PDP), the UK higher education sector is committed to introducing progress files. This article explores the experience of one institution in seeking to establish a system of progress files. It identifies the main practical problems in doing this, highlighting the lack of agreement on the skills that higher education students are expected to acquire and focuses on resourcing and strategic decision-making as keys to success. Effective implementation of progress files is seen as enhancing the learning experience of students. However, some concerns are expressed on whether this will be achieved across the whole of the UK higher education sector.

**KEYWORDS:** *employability and learning skills, personal development planning, progress files, reflection*

## Introduction

The UK higher education sector is currently committed to each higher education institution (HEI) implementing a system of progress files for students on all taught courses. The impetus for this came from the Dearing Report in 1997 (see recommendation 20 of the National Inquiry into Higher Education 1997 [the ‘Dearing Report’]). Following its endorsement by Government, the representative bodies within higher education – the Quality Assurance Agency, Universities UK (then CVCP), Universities Scotland (then CoSHEP) and the Standing Conference of Principals – issued a joint statement, in May 2000, directing all HE institutions to establish a system of progress files (Universities UK, 2000). This provides that, by 2005–6, all students on all taught courses will have the opportunity to use a progress file.

## What are progress files?

Progress files are a central feature of Personal Development Planning (PDP). As set out in the Joint Statement, PDP aims to encourage each student to reflect upon the skills necessary to be an effective learner:

The primary objective for personal development planning is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning. (Universities UK, 2000: para 29)

PDP requires HE institutions to establish policies and structures that provide guidance and support for their students, so that they become more effective, independent and confident learners. The essential characteristic that PDP seeks to develop in students is reflection, whereby students are able to identify and review their own learning skills constructively, including recognition of where they might have a 'skills deficiency' and to take steps to address this. As the Joint Statement puts it:

PDP results in . . . enhanced self awareness of strengths and weaknesses and directions for change. The process is intended to help individuals understand the value added through learning that is above and beyond attainment in the subjects they have studied. (Universities UK, 2000: para 32)

A progress file is one of the most important mechanisms for PDP. A progress file is 'owned' by the learner. It involves putting together evidence showing how the student has identified their learning needs, along with an audit of their learning skills and, over the period of study, the ways that they have developed and enhanced these skills. Progress files are also seen as increasing the employability of graduates as the skills they seek to develop, such as teamwork skills, effective communication, both in writing and verbally, and self motivation, are also skills that are highly valued in the workplace. Thus, the Joint Statement defines a progress file as:

. . . an individual's *personal record* of learning and achievements, progress reviews and plans. These records are used to clarify personal goals and provide a resource from which material is selected to produce concise personal statements (e.g. CVs and application forms) required by employers and admission tutors. (Universities UK, 2000: para 5)

However, some advocates of PDP express a note of caution about the motivation behind both the Dearing Report's recommendation and the Government's position. Jackson, for example, states:

Let us remind ourselves why PDP is being introduced. It is because PDP has the potential to improve student capacities to learn through reflection and experience [and thereby] to improve student learning. This was not the way

the NCIHE [i.e. Dearing] recommendation to higher education was framed, or the government's response to the recommendation. Both were framed in the mindset of public information for employers – pieces of paper on which were written what students knew and could do. The policy developers, and the people who cared enough about policy to contribute to its shaping, shifted the emphasis from information product to learning process [based on the idea] that it is inherently good for a human being to reflect on his or her experience of life and to learn and grow from that experience. (Jackson, 2001b: 4–5)

### **Implementing progress files: General comments**

The Joint Statement directs all HEIs to provide ‘... a structured and supported process’ to assist learners to reflect on their own learning experience and, where necessary, take steps to improve their performance. Crucially, however, no rigidly prescriptive regime is advocated, nor is there any type of ‘regulatory driver’ agency to monitor compliance. Rather, individual HEIs are required to develop their own approaches. As Jackson states:

Policy is deliberately formulated to encourage people and institutions to think for themselves to avoid the compliance culture that we seem to be slipping into. It requires interpretation, discussion and reasoned argument to make it work. . . . It was clear early in developing policy for the Progress File that the apparently simple recommendations of the NCIHE [i.e. Dearing] Report have enormous ramifications for change. We could have made it easier for ourselves by agreeing to adopt a standard process with a standard product. But quite apart from the institutional and professional autonomy issues this raises we know that the potential to support and promote student (and staff) learning is far greater if we can design PDP-type processes for the different contexts of learning. . . . So the policy framework is geared to encouraging diversity and customisation. (Jackson, 2001b: 6–7)

One concern with a policy geared towards each HEI developing its own process is that some may fail to engage in the process successfully. In fact, Jackson is quite explicit about this potential outcome:

The introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in higher education is a unique event in the history of UK HE as it is seeking pervasive and significant change in academic and institutional practices without (so far) additional resources and without a regulatory driver. Without such drivers the take-up of PDP is dependent on voluntary actions by institutions and individuals. Such actions will only occur if people believe that PDP will support the primary goals of quality enhancement in higher education – to improve students’ learning and their learning experience, and to improve the responsiveness of HE to the needs and interests of society. . . . Only time will tell whether the enterprise will be . . . successful but what is clear is that it will not be successful if we

cannot create the conditions that will support and facilitate the necessary changes. (Jackson, 2001b: 1)

## **Implementing a system of progress files: the experience of one institution**

In November 2001, the writer was appointed as progress files tutor to develop progress files within the University of Glamorgan. From November 2001 to the summer of 2003, a number of steps were taken towards achieving the above objective.

The first step was to take an audit of existing practice within the University in respect of PDP and the use of progress files, student portfolios, reflective logs, etc. along with identifying examples of good practice in respect of the development of skills by learners. This revealed a number of examples of good practice within the University's eight teaching schools. Some developments had been stimulated by the demands of professional bodies, such as in nursing, while others had been developed by small teams of committed lecturers, as was the case in the Business School.

The audit also identified a number of enthusiastic academic staff who could act as 'champions' of PDP and progress files within the teaching schools. Further 'champions' emerged following staff development workshops to explain and promote PDP and progress files.

A Progress Files Steering Group was established to advise on issues surrounding progress files implementation. This Group consists of approximately 20 individuals. Most are academic staff who might be termed 'enthusiasts' (and are current or potential 'champions' as referred to above), but its membership also includes a representative of the University's Careers Service, the Student Union's sabbatical officer for education and welfare and the manager of the University's IT-based student record system.

Following a review of the literature on progress files, along with visits to other HEIs and attendance at a number of conferences on PDP and progress files and some tentative early attempts at using progress files with students, a draft University policy on the development of progress files was produced. Its discussion, at various University fora, led to its revision and the final draft was endorsed as official University policy in the spring of 2003.

A crucial part of the University's policy is the progressive 'rolling out' of progress files over the period to 2005–6. Consequently, in the academic year 2002–3, a number of 'pilot studies' were established where each student on a chosen programme of study used a progress file. Harnessing existing good practice and the enthusiasm of a number of key 'champions', 14 such pilot studies were established. The number of students involved in

these pilot studies ranged from over 300 on the pre-degree Foundation Studies programme to just four studying on a franchised HNC programme at a local FE College.

The progress file that has been adopted by the University is paper based. The potential for an IT-based regime had to be left for future consideration as the University is currently involved in a radical change in its computerized student administration records.

It is necessary at this stage to highlight an important development within the University of Glamorgan that has had a major inhibiting factor on the promotion of progress files. In the previous two years, all University programmes had been revalidated, as the institution abandoned semesters and reverted back to year-long modules. This limited opportunities to embed progress files in the curriculum. Nevertheless, it has proved possible to build on existing pockets of good practice (e.g. in the Business School), while the work of one enthusiastic lecturer saw PDP embedded into the first year undergraduate psychology programme during the academic year 2002–3. However, the limited opportunities to entrench PDP and progress files within curriculum delivery and assessment meant that the main focus was on the tutor system. In most pilot studies, therefore, the system of progress tutors, whereby a tutor provides advice and support to students, has been the framework within which the use of progress files by students has been promoted although, as outlined later, this approach has had to be amended for some of the pilot studies, in light of difficulties that arose.

## **Problems and some suggested solutions**

The implementation of a system of progress files in a modern higher education institution is a complicated process. The rest of this article explores two of the main issues that need to be addressed in implementing progress files and outlines how they have been approached in one HEI. The first relates to the objectives of PDP, whilst the second concerns the crucial matter of resourcing the use of progress files.

### **i) PDP: what is being developed?**

There are two aspects to consider when examining what PDP, via the use of progress files and in other ways, is seeking to develop. The first focuses on the so-called 'skills agenda', the second, on PDP's wider role in promoting reflection.

In respect of skills development, much of the literature on PDP and progress files emphasizes two sets of skills – those that will improve the ability of learners to study more effectively and 'employability' or 'work-based' skills. Of the latter, the HE sector has increasingly been informed by

employers that graduates tend to lack competence in such skills. The use of progress files, as a central feature of PDP, is seen as a major mechanism for addressing this. In fact, as previously mentioned, the above two sets of skills do substantially overlap, in that many of the skills that facilitate successful learning are also valuable workplace skills. Effective communication, both verbal and written, numeracy, the ability to work with others and to reflect on one's performance enhance work-related performance and effectiveness in HE learning. Despite this, there has been some concern, as discussed earlier (Jackson, 2001b: 4–5), that the Dearing Report and the Government place undue importance on developing workplace skills.

Another issue in respect of the 'skills agenda' is that there is no consensus as to the set of skills most appropriate for HE students to acquire in order to improve both their learning performance and subsequent employability. Whilst the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has developed a nationally agreed system of Key Skills in six areas – communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, improving own learning performance and problem solving (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2002) – HEIs have not, by and large, taken these as a framework for skills development. Instead, there has been a plurality of approaches adopted:

Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) . . . are using the QCA key skill unit specifications [but m]any other HEIs [are] not. . . . There is no single picture of uniform development or implementation. (Gillespie, 2002)

The trend towards using a range of 'home grown' specifications has been facilitated by the development of subject 'benchmark statements'. Promoted by the Quality Assurance Agency, each of these statements has been developed by a team of leading subject specialists, e.g. in history, accountancy, law, and sets out what a graduate in that subject is expected to have acquired on completion of a degree programme (Quality Assurance Agency, 2002). At the time of writing (second half of 2003) there are 47 such subject benchmark statements. Not surprisingly, there is substantial variation between the statements on the skills that graduates in the various subject specialisms are expected to acquire. Understandably, individual HE departments are likely to be heavily influenced by the appropriate subject benchmark statement.

The University of Glamorgan's approach to the skills agenda has been to embrace a set of nationally recognized skills that are well established within the HE sector, namely the EdExcel Key Skills. Despite the name, these differ from the QCA Key Skills, although there is a substantial degree of overlap. EdExcel has the following set of seven Key Skills: managing and developing self; working with and relating to others; communicating; managing

tasks and problem solving; applying numeracy; applying technology; applying design and creativity. One of the merits of using this set of skills is that, in a post-1992 university, many staff are familiar with them, as they constitute the 'common skills' that are an integral part of the assessment regime on HND and HNC programmes. The EdExcel Key Skills have, consequently, been the skills upon which the University's promotion of PDP, via the use of progress files, has been based although, in some of the pilot studies, e.g. on the accountancy degree, these have been hybridized with the skills contained in the relevant QAA subject benchmark statement.

The second important issue in respect of what PDP seeks to develop is that its role is not restricted to the development of skills. The key to PDP, as previously mentioned, is reflection and, as Hinett highlights:

Reflection is not restricted to skills development, but can also be used as a tool to support understanding of a particular subject area. . . . Put simply, reflection is about maximising deep and minimising surface approaches to learning. Reflection is a way of getting students to realise that learning is about drawing on life experiences, not just something that takes place in the classroom. It enables a student to think about *what* and *how* they learn and to understand that this impacts on how well they do. (Hinett, 2003: 21, 6)

In other words, reflection, via the use of a progress file (and in other ways), can facilitate a learner's improved knowledge and understanding of the subject area of their chosen programme of study. Those in higher education who are sceptical about the 'skills agenda' may, therefore, be prepared to embrace PDP and progress files by focusing on their role in enhancing learners' knowledge of the subject matter of their programme of study.

## **ii) Resourcing progress files**

This would appear to be the major issue in respect of successfully implementing a system of progress files, as it will require many academic staff within HEIs to engage in the operational process. Yet, when made aware of progress files, staff attitudes invariably range from enthusiasm through ambivalence to outright hostility. Negative attitudes are likely to increase if staff involvement in this process is seen as imposing an additional burden on busy academics who, in the last decade or so, have had to deal, inter alia, with the additional responsibilities attendant on the move to a system of mass higher education. However, unless the issue of 'winning the hearts and minds of those who will be responsible for implementing and using [progress files]' (Jackson, 2001a: 4) is addressed, then progress files are unlikely to be successfully implemented within a HEI and, as Ross comments, 'if a . . . burdensome system is imposed from above, it will be resisted by staff' (Ross, 2001: 3).

This dilemma has been approached, in the University of Glamorgan, in a couple of ways. First, the initial strategy was to establish a small number of progress file 'pilot studies', thereby making a wide range of academic staff in each school familiar with progress files, even if not directly involved. It is hoped that this will produce a more sympathetic approach from staff as progress files are 'rolled out' throughout the University in forthcoming years.

Secondly, as previously mentioned, most of the pilot studies operated progress files via the progress tutor system. Tutors periodically met each student on a one-to-one basis, for a 20–30 minute period, with the student having previously compiled evidence in their progress file. Discussion centred on the student's progress, both in their studies generally and, in particular, in respect of the seven Key Skills. While this increased the amount of staff time absorbed by the tutor system, largely because the student/tutor meetings tended to be around double the length than had previously prevailed, no additional resources were made available for this. On most of the pilot studies, therefore, use was made of 'champions', those lecturers who saw the benefits of PDP and the use of progress files and were thus prepared to go the 'extra mile'.

However, for two pilot studies – Foundation Studies, with over 300 students, and the first year undergraduate law programme, with 120 students – a radically different approach had to be adopted. At the beginning of the academic year in September 2002, it soon became apparent that, for a variety of reasons, there would be no tutor support for running progress files. This meant that either these pilot studies would not run or an alternative approach would need to be found. In both cases, however, the University progress files tutor was teaching on a module on the programme. This provided the opportunity for these students to use progress files. At approximately six-week intervals, the tutor–student meetings were replicated during workshops in the aforementioned modules, with students divided into pairs and, in turn, role playing the tutor's role in a 'progress file interview'. Whilst providing the opportunity for students on these programmes to use progress files, this approach, borne out of necessity, was originally seen as clearly inferior to using staff as tutors. Interestingly, however, this assumption has, partly, been challenged in student feedback. In over 120 returned questionnaires from students on these two programmes, there was overwhelming recognition of the value of progress files in PDP, with no identifiable difference in support than for students on other pilot studies where the progress tutor system was used. There were anecdotal comments along the lines of, 'It did help somewhat but I would have found it better to have the interview with a member of staff', which outnumbered those such as, 'A good idea, as students are all in the same



situation and could benefit from each other's insights.' The latter statement does, nevertheless, suggest that 'student-student' meetings might have a contribution to play in effective PDP.

## Conclusions

The aforementioned strategies have been directed towards establishing a policy of progress files implementation within an HEI. However, if PDP and progress files are to be established in a way that substantially enhances the learning experiences of all students, they need to be properly resourced, otherwise many staff are likely to resist becoming involved. It can be argued, therefore, that, in the same way that teaching, research, scheme administration and management and other duties place a demand on staff resources, the operation of a successful system of progress files should be part of any decision-making, at institutional and departmental level, on allocation of staff resources. While clearly this is a somewhat problematic issue, with battles having to be fought over resource allocation, it is pertinent to note that much can be done in respect of promoting PDP and progress files with few extra resources. As Jackson comments:

The lack of time is often the biggest barrier to change. Financial support buys time and can provide an incentive to change. Over and over again we see that small amounts of funding that provide a small incentive and show that efforts are being valued can have amazing effects. PDP is one area which could be supported through a whole series of small incentives if earmarked funding was provided. (Jackson, 2001b: 4)

Many HEIs, for example, have a tutor system where staff provide advice to students on academic and other matters. Experience at Glamorgan supports the idea that embedding progress files into this process can give it substantial 'added value'. The use of a progress file means that a student can readily provide a more transparent account of their individual progress in their studies. This should inform the tutor's support and advice role, making the process more worthwhile for staff and students alike. Yet, setting up such a regime might be achieved merely by running a series of staff development workshops for tutors outlining the features of PDP and progress files. Alternatively, providing those staff who engage in PDP and progress files with some formal recognition, such as an abatement to their teaching load, might not only enhance their self worth but also send a message to other staff about the value being placed on this.

This can also be facilitated if HEIs, particularly many of those in the pre 1992 University sector, re-evaluate their criteria for staff promotion and career advancement. As Andrew Morgan, of Swansea University, points out:

'The reality is that promotion is based on research' (*Times Higher Education Supplement* 14 Nov. 2003: 10).

Increased recognition needs to be given to other criteria based on providing students with an effective learning experience. This most obviously embraces classroom 'teaching' skills but also includes participation in the support mechanisms, including progress files, which complement the classroom experience.

Having said this, the value of PDP and progress files need to be clearly established and a major stumbling block here is the lack of convincing research evidence:

It is . . . widely acknowledged, even by the enthusiasts, that direct evidence for the benefits and claims made for PDP, in terms of improving student learning and experience, is relatively thin. (LTSN Generic Centre, 2002)

Consequently the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre (now the Higher Education Academy), based at York, has commissioned a systematic review of relevant research literature (Gough et al., 2003) and established a 5-year research strategy designed to produce the knowledge that provides an informed approach towards promoting learning through PDP. However, the LTSN Generic Centre claims that the literature research has already:

provided evidence of positive impact on student learning. A wide range of positive outcomes were reported including: improved practical and cognitive skills, self identity/affective outcomes, attitudes to learning and reflection, knowledge of learning styles, autonomy and achievement. (LTSN Generic Centre, 2003)

Consideration also needs to be made of strategies appropriate to increasing the priority accorded to PDP in institutional decision-making. Bingham (2002), of the Learning and Teaching Institute at Sheffield Hallam University, has argued that a crucial factor in promoting PDP and progress files within that institution was the existence of a 'champion' within the University's directorate who ensured that, when appropriate, its development was an integral part of management decision-making. Aside from other benefits, a proactive commitment by institutional management is important in influencing decision-making on PDP and progress files at a departmental level, by providing a strong 'steer' on what the institution's policies and objectives are. Without this, decisions made by disparate decision-makers throughout an institution are unlikely to prioritise PDP and progress files consistently and uniformly.

Currently, most, if not all, HEIs would, no doubt, claim that there is such a commitment, if only because their representative bodies have signed the HE sector up to this Dearing-inspired and Government-endorsed policy.

However, unless the promotion of PDP and the accompanying use of progress files is proactively developed, there is a distinct likelihood that some HEIs will be tempted merely to put in place a 'symbolic' system of progress files which is not widely used and, as a result, does not play a significant role in the learning experience of most of its students. This could, nevertheless, be presented to the QAA, in its auditing capacity, and to other external stakeholders, as the institution meeting the requirements imposed on it. Crucially, one feature of the May 2002 Joint Policy Statement (Universities UK, 2000) in effect encourages such a sham development. It requires HEIs to set up a system of progress files so that, by 2005–6, the opportunity is available for every student to compile a progress file, if they so wish. Thus, it is mandatory for institutions to set up the system but, quite reasonably, students who do not wish to engage in the process can choose not to do so. HEIs who go down the 'symbolic progress file' route, either because they have failed to implement a substantive system of progress files successfully or have not even attempted to do so, could nevertheless claim to have met the requirements of the Joint Policy Statement in that a system is in place but students have elected not to engage in it. This may hide the reality of some HEIs never truly participating in the process of promoting PDP and developing an effective system of progress files.

I would anticipate that some individuals who have been given the responsibility of promoting progress files in HEIs may well identify with the last point and feel that they have been entrusted with this responsibility without the resources and institutional commitment necessary to establish a credible system. Yet it will be a major failure within the HE sector if such a 'sham' is the eventual result, intended or not. PDP and progress files can be important mechanisms in improving the learning experience and expertise of learners. Significantly, the majority of University of Glamorgan students who have used progress files appear to endorse this view. Of the students who completed questionnaires on four of the pilot studies in 2002–3, over 70 percent expressed positive statements on the value of progress files in facilitating their learning experience. It would be a grave pity, therefore, if, in a few years' time, those who are currently in positions in higher education to determine the success or otherwise of progress files implementation were to reflect on the current period as a missed opportunity.

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