Engineering: Managing my Learning, PDP pilot

The School of Engineering addressed QAA Scotland targets for implementation of Personal Development Planning (PDP) for undergraduates by introducing a pilot PDP programme for Engineering 1 students in AY 2008/09.

**School/Subject Area:** School of Engineering

**Target Audience:**Engineering 1 students

**Staff Involved:** Engineering academic staff, Careers Adviser, Employability Consultant

**Date**: Initial pilot 2008/09, continued in 2009/10

Key features

The Director of Teaching in Engineering, Tom Bruce, decided to take the initiative in addressing QAA Scotland targets for implementation of Personal Development Planning (PDP) for undergraduates by introducing a pilot PDP programme for Engineering 1 students in AY 2008/09. He was keen for the School to take an early lead in this to allow them to find a route to fit their needs, which was manageable in terms of workload and was tried and tested with a pilot cohort before being rolled out across the School. In addition, this pilot project aimed to address the University’s Strategic Theme of enhancing the student experience through facilitating the transition to University and improving the quality of the student induction.

Resources were adapted from the HE Academy’s Engineering Subject Centre to design self appraisal questionnaires for Engineering 1 students, which would link to the Director of Studies support system.

Planning

Tom presented the idea to the School’s Teaching Policy Committee and subsequently to an academic meeting staff meeting and the Teaching and Learning Strategy Group. This was followed up by discussions with staff from the Careers Service and the Employability Consultancy.

Two questionnaires on the theme of ‘Managing My Learning’ were adapted from similar work carried out at the University of Exeter. These provided a structure for students to reflect on their transition to university study and formed a basis for group discussions with their Director of Studies.

Project

Students were emailed a Managing my Learning form in Semester 1 and 2 and encouraged to spend time reflecting on the prompt questions. They were asked to submit their completed form by email to their Director of Studies and then attend a ‘structured group chat’ lasting around 1 hour with their DoS and fellow students. These meetings were designed to help DoS get to know their students and, through working through the questions on the forms, uncover any areas where they needed help. The group setting was also designed to encourage peer learning and support.

The focus of the **Semester 1 form** was induction, covering: adapting to study at university, the Edinburgh system, time spent outside study, computing, practicalities and keeping on track (encouraging them to seek support if they are struggling).

**Semester 2**focussed on academic goals, study skills and plans and introduced the idea of wider transferable skills in the following sections: current programme and targets, settling-in, private study, using lectures and obtaining help, time management, finding information, communication skills, team skills and reflecting on development.

A small cohort of students experimented with completing their forms using the PebblePad e-portfolio software in Semester 2, with limited success. Future development of this aspect will involve setting up more structured support for staff and students.

Resources

Development time was reduced by adapting resources already available from the School of Engineering at the University of Exeter. The questionnaires were customised by Engineering staff, with input from the Careers Service and Employability Consultancy.

Since the pilot was designed to fit into the existing DoS system, the main focus was on communicating the new process to DoS, explaining the mechanics and highlighting the benefits to staff and students. DoS were expected to spend time preparing for group discussions by reading their directees’ questionnaires, then facilitating the discussions and following up difficulties on an individual basis, if required.

Evaluation

The pilot enjoyed mixed success in the first year – it was introduced later than intended, so there was limited opportunity to offer training to DoS. This was addressed in the second year of the pilot when a wiki was developed to support DoS in the process.

Timetabling difficulties in 2008/09 made scheduling of group discussions particularly problematic. Administration of the system was streamlined in year 2 by making the forms and guidance notes available on WebCT, which students then emailed directly to their DoS. The Engineering Teaching Organisation provided support in the booking of DoS/directee meetings and making available meeting space.

A focus group was held with DoS at the end of the first pilot to help refine it. There was some very positive feedback about lively discussions in meetings, counterbalanced by some more difficult scenarios with students less willing to participate. One DoS commented on the satisfaction of being able to spend “real quality time” with one of her students and the great benefit the student gained from it. In some cases there was evidence of peer learning and support with animated multi-way discussions and students “bouncing ideas off each other”.

In an ideal world, discussions with students about ‘managing their learning’ should happen on a one-to-one basis and be compulsory, as it is often the less engaged students who need this sort of support most and it may help reduce the drop-out rate. It is recognised, however, that this may make the system unmanageable

Student take-up varied, with substantially fewer participating in Semester 2 than in Semester 1. To encourage more participation in the second year of the pilot, students received a presentation explaining the process and underlining the value the School placed on personal and professional development. This presentation was co-hosted by the Careers Service, linking in to the year 1 Careers in the Curriculum session (Making the most of your time at university) to encourage joined-up thinking in students’ minds.

Advice

* Communicate with staff as early as possible to encourage them to get on board with the idea. Support them as much as possible through training and detailed guidance notes.
* Fit in with existing structures, where possible, to keep workloads manageable. Using the DoS system and encouraging group meetings, minimised the extra burden on staff, in addition to encouraging good working relationships between DoS and their directees at an early stage and promoting peer learning and support.
* Communicate with students in person to underline the importance the School attaches to the idea of personal and professional development and its longer-term benefits.
* Seek assistance in scheduling meetings and providing meeting space. Consider making use of IT facilities (e.g. drop box in WebCT for submission of forms) and administrative support as much as possible to encourage the system to work smoothly.

Key contacts

Dr Tom Bruce, Director of Teaching, School of Engineering

Dr Dave Laurenson, Senior Lecturer, School of Engineering

Ms Ruth Donnelly, Employability Consultant

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/cse/pdp-pilot>