21st BILETA Conference:
Globalisation and Harmonisation in Technology Law

British & Irish Law, Education and Technology Association **April 2006, Malta.**

Using ICT to Support Reflective Learning and Personal Development Planning within a Blended Learning Environment

Bloxham, S.M., Cerevkova, A. & Parrish, R.

1. Introduction

This paper describes the development and implementation of a first year undergraduate law module which has been re-designed to enable the embedding of Personal Development Planning (PDP) within the curriculum and which has been delivered through a combination of both face-to-face classroom and online activities using a virtual learning environment (VLE). The institutional background consists of two main elements. Firstly, recent policy changes now require that PDP for first year undergraduates is assessed either as an independent module or by being embedded within the existing curriculum. Secondly, both institutional and departmental policies promote the use of the VLE – a WebCT platform - for the delivery of all modules as part of a broader strategy to support more flexible, student-centred, learning.

The paper will identify the pedagogic rationale for the approach adopted and demonstrate how the use of the VLE has enabled tutors to create an integrated framework for the delivery of skills training, the provision of learning resources, online formative and summative assessment tasks, interactive discussion forums for learning support, an administrative structure for tracking and supporting student progress and for students to compile a record of their achievement. Finally, the paper will present a provisional evaluation, drawing on student feedback, tutor evaluation and evidence of student performance. Further evaluation is being undertaken during March 2006 as students come to the end of the module, the findings of which will be incorporated into the presentation at the BILETA Conference in April.

2. Institutional Background

Edge Hill College of Higher Education, currently accredited by Lancaster University, has recently secured taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) and is currently applying for University title. The first year of study on the LLB programme, which began in 2003, consists of four, 30-credit modules (Legal Methods and Systems, Constitutional and Administrative Law, Contract Law and Tort Law), three of which are assessed through a combination of essays, problem questions and examinations. The Legal Methods module, the focus of this paper, was originally assessed via an essay with research summary sheet, an oral presentation and an examination. Although students were supported by an institutional induction programme, there was no dedicated induction programme within the LLB, the skills being developed explicitly through the Legal Methods module. Alongside this was an institutional PDP programme, supported by the personal tutor system. Although not formally assessed, students were required to complete this in order to matriculate to Year 2. A feature of the personal tutoring system was that all academic staff were allocated a number of tutees regardless of whether they taught the student in year 1. Two years experience of the LLB revealed three main problems which were identified as: the longitudinal problem, the assessment problem and the PDP problem.

These problems will be discussed in detail below, together with an exposition and provisional evaluation of the approach that has been adopted to overcome them. However, at this point it is intended to identify the pedagogic rationale for the adoption of an approach which is designed to create an integrated framework for the delivery of skills training, the provision of learning resources, online formative and summative assessment tasks, interactive discussion forums for learning support and an administrative structure for tracking and supporting student progress.

3. Pedagogic Rationale

The main impetus for the introduction of PDP into UK HEIs can be traced back to the 1997 Dearing Report on Higher Education, which proposed the introduction of Progress Files for the recording of student achievement as "a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development"[1]. Subsequently, this was endorsed by the joint UUK-SCOP-QAA Progress File Policy

---

[1] Dearing (1997) National Committee of Enquiry, Recommendation 20, at http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ncihe/ (last visited 10/03/06)

statement of 2000[2], which required all UK HEIs to introduce "opportunities" for Personal Development Planning by 2005-06, as a "structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal educational and career development".

Clearly, the thinking behind the Dearing recommendations was concerned with issues of career development and employability in an era of widening access to higher education. However, the policy of the subsequent joint statement also recognises and enables the development of PDP as a mechanism for enhancing student learning through personal development and reflection. HEIs have been granted relative autonomy in the manner in which PDP is implemented and it is this enabling, rather than regulatory, feature that has led Jackson to conclude that it encourages "people and institutions to think for themselves to avoid the compliance culture…", arguing that it requires "interpretation, discussion and reasoned argument to make it work" and that it demands "diversity and customisation"[3]. PDP, therefore, has the potential to address two important issues at the core of higher education in the 21st century: the development of learners' skills to enhance their employability and the development of learners' reflective abilities to enhance their ability to learn. In the specific context of legal education, the Law Benchmarks[4] identify subject-specific, general transferable intellectual and other key skills which have been part of the Qualifying Law Degree (QLD) curriculum for some years. However the task of developing learners' abilities to reflect on, and learn from, their own learning experience is one which has attracted less attention. The integration of skills development and reflective learning within a PDP programme thus presents a significant challenge.

In the context of an HEI that places widening access and employability at the core of its mission, this challenge is of particular importance because both skills development and personal development opportunities have been identified as key factors in improving retention rates of "non traditional" students[5]. A HEFCE study of nine HEIs that had been successful in dealing with student diversity identified "curriculum-linked opportunities for student personal development" and "early assessment of

---

[2] QAA (2000) Policy statement on a progress file for Higher Education, at
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/policystatement/default.asp#pdp (last visited 10/03/06)

[3] Jackson (2001) "Building capacity to support PDP: An optimistic vision of large scale and complex change". LTSN Generic Centre

[4] QAA Subject Benchmarks, at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/default.asp (last visited 10/03/06)

[5] Warren, D (2003) "Improving student retention: a team approach", Annual Conference of the ILTHE, Coventry, 2-4th July

students' skills and needs" as being key ingredients in that success[6]. More recently, a survey of six UK universities performing above their benchmarks for widening participation, retention and completion, identified, *inter alia*, the "integration of skills development, employment and careers education, and personal tutor systems" as areas of practice associated with success in this respect[7]. Both these studies also identify further features of successful strategies that improve retention rates, namely recognition of the importance of a co-ordinated approach involving both academic and support staff[8] and "a student-centred institutional approach aimed at enhancing students' sense of belonging and academic, social and cultural inclusiveness through high quality teaching and effective student support involving all staff in the institution"[9].

However, a number of studies have identified particular challenges to the successful implementation of PDP. Probably the main challenge is that of overcoming the scepticism of both learners and academic staff, neither of whom may see the value of PDP[10]. Studies have shown that students often fail to relate to institutional descriptions of the skills that are required to be developed and do not always see the relevance of "add on" skills modules that are not embedded within the curriculum of their chosen subject[11]. As we identify below, variable levels of student participation in our own institutional PDP programme tends to support this view. The lack of enthusiasm of academic staff is explained by very different factors though, as East's study of the implementation of PDP in the law school at Glamorgan University indicates[12] (East). Here the main problem was identified as being a failure to properly resource the personal tutor system, upon which an embedded PDP programme relies. In addition to the resource issue, many academic staff do not regard the employability focus of PDP as being central to their role[13]. Furthermore, the fact cannot be ignored that, for most academic staff, promotion and career prospects hinge on research output rather than on teaching innovation and support. In this respect there may be significant differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions which may have implications in terms of the models adopted in the respective types of institutions. In either case, the implementation of any

---

[6] HEFCE (2002) "Successful student diversity. Case studies in learning and teaching and widening participation", Bristol. HEFCE

[7] Yorke, M. & Thomas, L. (2003) "Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups", Journal for Higher Education Policy and Management, 25 (1), 63-74

[8] *Op. cit.,* note no. 6

[9] *Op. cit.*. note no. 7

[10] Cottrell, S (2003) Skills For Success: The Personal Development Planning Handbook. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

[11] Lucas, U., Cox, P., Croudace, C. & Milford, P (2004) 'Who writes this stuff?': Students perceptions of their skill development. Teaching in Higher Education, 9 (1) p55-68

[12] East, R. (2006) "A progress report on progress files: The experience of one higher education institution". Active Learning in Higher Education Vol 6(2): 160-171

[13] Jenkins, A (2000) It's a long hard road in Fallows, S & Steven, C. Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education London: Kogan Page

PDP programme needs to be preceded by an institutional commitment to investment in appropriate staff development as well as the provision of adequate resources in support of a robust personal tutor system, combined with more relevant and transparent exposition of the benefits it will provide for students.

Despite the difficulties discussed above, there is evidence from case studies within legal education that suggests it is possible to develop and implement PDP programmes successfully. East's study concluded that, despite the resource and IT problems, there was overwhelming approval from students who saw the value of progress files. Prince's earlier study of the introduction of an online PDP programme (PESCA) at Exeter University law school also identified a high level of IT related problems but nevertheless concluded that students who had not experienced such difficulties were positive in their evaluation of its usefulness. Interestingly, over 90% of students had used PESCA for the purpose of preparing an evaluative report which, in conjunction with tutor reports on tutorial performance, formed part of the assessment[14]. The importance of embedding PDP within the assessment structure is also emphasised in the study of the use of progress files at UCE law school, which also concluded that the benefits outweighed the costs of implementation[15].

Ward, in his review of the LTSN case studies, suggests an approach which may overcome some of these problems is to embed PDP within the existing subject curriculum in a way which is both meaningful to learners and which supports and enhances the study of the subject matter itself[16]. To a large extent, such an approach is supported by the inclusion, and identification, of skills in the Law Benchmarks. However, one potential problem in this respect has been identified, namely that there may be reservations or even opposition on the part of academic staff to the embedding of PDP on Level 3 modules where a higher level of engagement with the subject matter is required to achieve learning outcomes[17]. The same authors also identify the need to integrate Careers Service staff into PDP programme implementation, which may present further problems within a higher education culture where such collaboration between academic and support staff has been limited.

---

[14] Prince, S. (2001) "PESCA: introducing personal development planning at Exeter", (LTSN Generic Centre, Case Study No 4), at http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/pdp/exeter.html (last visited 10/03/06)

[15] Humphreys, V. (2001) "Introducing personal development planning at the University of Central England", (LTSN Generic Centre, Case Study No 5), at http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/pdp/uce.html (last visited 10/03/06)

[16] Ward, R. (2001) Developing and Implementing Institutional Policy on Personal Development Planning in Ward, R. & Jackson, N. (Eds) Personal Development Planning: Institutional Case studies. York: LTSN

[17] Slight, A. & Bloxham, S. (2006) "Embedding Personal Development Planning into the Social Sciences". Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences (forthcoming)

Both the case studies at the Universities of Glamorgan and Exeter identify IT problems as being one of the key obstacles to success. However, this potential problem needs to be set against the evidence that creative use of ICT applications can enhance the student learning experience, as well as promoting improved skills development and reflective practice. It has been argued that the use of hypermedia and web-based resources enables interactivity and/or more active learning which can lead students to take "greater responsibility for their own learning" and to adopt "reflective learning attitudes"[18]. A more detailed exposition of the research evidence that supports this view can be found in a earlier paper which sought to present a rationale for the adoption of a wider ICT strategy for the overall delivery of the present LLB programme at Edge Hill[19].

To summarise, the literature on PDP suggests that the processes of recording achievement and engaging in personal development planning can support the twin purposes of heightening learners' awareness of their skills development for career planning purposes and of developing a more reflective approach to their learning of the curriculum content. However, against these benefits, a number of potential difficulties have been identified – lack of understanding of the purpose of PDP on the part of learners; scepticism about its purpose on the part of academic staff; inadequate resourcing of personal tutor systems which are needed to support the process; cultural opposition to, or at least unfamiliarity with, a collaborative approach by academic and support staff; IT problems. It was with these possibilities and challenges in mind that the authors, in collaboration with the Careers Service, Learning Services and Learning Technology staff, embarked on the process of designing and implementing an embedded PDP programme, delivered through a combination of classroom teaching and online delivery through the VLE, within a first year law module for the 2005-06 academic year. The remainder of this paper describes that process, evaluates the results to date and reflects on the experience.

4. Problems (Challenges) of the Existing Institutional and Departmental Structures

As has been indicated above, certain problems associated with the lack of a dedicated legal skills induction programme and the "bolt on" nature of the institutional PDP programme had been identified with the existing structure of the LLB programme. The three main problems, which will now be

---

[18] Maharg, P. & Paliwala, A., (2002) "Negotiating the learning process with electronic resources", in Effective learning and teaching in Law, Burridge, R., et al, *Effective Learning & Teaching in Law*, ILThe, Kogan Page, pp 81-104

[19] Bloxham, S.M. (2005), Widening Access and the use of ICT in Legal Education, International Journal of Legal Education (Law Teacher), Vol. 39, No. 1, pp 93-105

addressed, were identified as follows: the longitudinal problem, the assessment problem and the PDP problem.

4.1 The Longitudinal Problem

The longitudinal problem arose due to the lack of a dedicated induction programme. Because the skills workshops ran longitudinally within the Legal Methods module, it became evident during the first month of the first semester that the lack of certain skills was acting as an obstacle to student progress within other modules. For instance, tutors on the three substantive law modules required students to demonstrate both research skills and subject knowledge at a point before Legal Methods could cover them. For example, students were expected to locate and read case law and appreciate the rules on statutory interpretation and judicial precedent before these topics had been adequately dealt with in Legal Methods. This problem was compounded by two further issues. First, primary LLB resources are held almost entirely in electronic format. Consequently the early stages of the Legal Methods module needed to concentrate on ICT skills. Second, many of the students recruited to the programme were from non-traditional backgrounds and basic academic skills were lacking. Consequently, before Legal Methods could adequately cover the basics of the English legal system, it needed to first focus on basic skills such as ICT training, including workshops on basic word-processing and email management; legal research skills, including the use of electronic databases and the internet for legal information retrieval and the use of IOLIS courseware. Given these problems it became clear that the Legal Methods module, delivered longitudinally, was being asked to deliver too much and that its delivery was out of synch with the requirements on the other modules.

4.2 The PDP Problem

On entry to the programme students were allocated a personal tutor drawn from academic staff. First year students followed an institutional PDP programme, customised for the LLB programme in 2003, which consisted of five elements. Section 1 required students to complete personal details and meet with their personal tutor in week 1 of the programme. Section 2 required reflection on the newly introduced induction programme[20], completion of an individual skills audit and a meeting with their personal tutor to discuss matters arising from their first month in higher education. Section 3 required reflection on Semester 1 generally, including reflection on assignment feedback, and the production of a CV which was discussed at a December personal tutor meeting. Section 4 was designed to encourage further reflection

---

[20] See below, Section 4 – Implementing Changes, *Reflective Practice Log (RPL)*.

on assignment feedback with a further meeting being held within the first two months of the second semester. Section 5 required reflection on Year 1 performance and the production of an updated CV. At this meeting the student's progress file was signed off by the personal tutor. As the PDP programme was not embedded into a Year 1 module it was treated, for the purposes of the end of year examination board, as a free standing module coded as either 100% or 0%. The central problem with this was the perception of students that PDP lacked relevance. It was seen as an additional task for which no reward accrued and consequently it received a low status. With a strong institutional focus on employability, widening access and improving progression/retention rates, it was clear that the current PDP programme was not fulfilling its function. Experience institutionally suggested likewise and consequently a decision was taken at Faculty level to request departmental ownership of the PDP process and the embedding of it into an appropriate module. There were, therefore, two strong reasons for the department to review its approach to PDP.

4.3 The Assessment Problem

The assessment problem was closely linked to the PDP problem. The focus of the existing PDP on skills and career planning was not satisfactorily linked to the curriculum with the result that there was little alignment of the learning activities, the learning outcomes and the assessment tasks on the Legal Methods module. An opportunity existed for the Legal Methods module to develop subject knowledge which was linked more closely to the goals of the PDP. To achieve this synthesis, the assessment strategy needed redesigning. Whilst the oral presentation was fit for the purpose of enhancing verbal communication skills, the essay and examination were ill equipped to develop the subject specific abilities, general transferable intellectual skills and key skills stated as learning outcomes in the module validation documents.

5. Implementing Changes

In order to affect the necessary changes to the Legal Methods assessment strategy a partial revalidation of the module was required. The documentation submitted to the relevant College committee articulated the rationale for the proposed changes in the following terms:

- Enables full embedding of the PDP into an appropriate level one module.

- Enhances the role of the personal tutoring system, as personal tutors are more closely involved in curriculum delivery, monitoring and assessment. Personal tutor meetings are timetabled into the

curriculum.

- Enhances the profile and value of skills development and reflective learning.

- Links skills development and reflective learning more closely with subject (curriculum) knowledge.

- Enhances student employability and involves other Edge Hill services (Careers) in the curriculum.

- Better prepares the level one student for level two study / PDP commitments.

- Positive impact on external benchmarking requirements[21] .

As the principle of embedding PDP within an appropriate Year 1 module had already received institutional support, discussion within the committee focussed on the substance of the proposal with the result that the following changes to the Legal Methods module were approved:

5.1 A Revised Personal Tutoring System

An important change to the Year 1 personal tutoring system was accepted. Rather than all academic staff acting as Year 1 personal tutors, the decision was made to allocate Year 1 LLB students to the five staff who taught on the Year 1 programme. With student enrolment currently no more than 50, the resource implications were manageable, although this may need to be reviewed in the future. The rationale behind personal tutor marking was to forge a stronger link between the personal tutor and the personal tutee. In previous years implementation of the PDP had become burdensome for staff, particularly in relation to students missing scheduled meetings. With personal tutor meetings now timetabled and with tutors being able to offer assignment grades and feedback, it was anticipated that personal tutor meetings would receive a higher priority amongst the student body. It was also expected that by more closely tracking student progress throughout the year, personal tutors would acquire a much better understanding of their tutees. This, it was hoped, would ease the transition into higher education and contribute to improved retention and progression rates. However, as a consequence of the new personal tutoring system, students would need to switch their personal tutor when entering Year 2 in order to avoid overloading the year 1 tutors with tutees. Personal tutor continuity would therefore be lost, although it was anticipated that this would be outweighed by the advantages of a more robust Year 1 personal tutoring system.

---

[21] *Op. cit.,* note no. 4

5.2 Reflective Practice Log (RPL)

The Reflective Practice Log replaced the essay. The RPL assessment encourages legal skills development and self reflection on learning and performance. It comprises of: (1) an induction programme key skills audit related to subject specific research which takes the form of a WebCT skills quiz that tests students' online library/research skills; (2) a 600 word court visit exercise designed to expose students to court proceedings and encourage reflection on issues such as the representivity of the judiciary and legal services; (3) a research log comprising of a detailed account of the research and writing methodologies used in the production of a formative essay located in one of the other Year 1 modules; and (4) a 600 word 'assignment reflection' exercise to be submitted at the end of semester 2 and designed to encourage reflection on Year 1 performance. The combined value of the Reflective Practice Log is 40%. In order to satisfy essential competency requirements, reassessment of RPL 1 was permitted throughout semester 1.

5.3 Careers Management Portfolio (CMP)

The Careers Management Portfolio, which was designed in conjunction with the careers service, replaced the exam. An existing feature of their service was an optional certificate in careers awareness which was available to all students on completion of a number of generic careers related tasks[22]. The basic structure of this certificate was maintained but the tasks were specifically tailored to the legal profession, thus establishing a strong link between the curriculum (subject knowledge) and PDP. The CMP is comprised of three parts: (1) the production of a power-point presentation on the nature and structure of the legal profession and the qualifications, skills and personal qualities required for work within it. This was supported by WebCT resource pages with links to legal services and other legal careers materials; (2) a legal/personal skills audit covering the students' current skills position, which leads to the production of a 1000 word reflective essay and an initial skills/careers development plan. This was supported by WebCT resource pages including links to sites which include online skills audits such as Prospects[23] and Windmills[24]; (3) the production of a curriculum vitae which is designed to encourage early recording of, and reflection on, achievement. Students wishing to acquire the institutional careers certificate are required to complete a fourth element (on interviewing and assessment) which has been integrated into the Year two LLB PDP. The value of the Careers Management Portfolio is 30%.

---

[22] The approach is based upon the "DOTS" model , as explained in Law, B. (1996) "Careers education in a curriculum" in Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance, Watts. A.G., Law, B., Killeen, J., Kidd, J.M., & Hawthorn, R., London, Routledge

[23] http://www.prospects.ac.uk (last visited 10/03/06)

[24] http://www.windmillsprogramme.com/ (last visited 10/03/06)

5.4 Oral Presentation (OP)

The oral presentation was the only feature of the existing Legal Methods assessment strategy to survive the partial revalidation. The oral presentation requires students to research a problem question linked to the curriculum and deliver presentation on the issues contained within it. Students are then exposed to a short question and answer defence of the presentation. The value of the oral presentation is 30%. Whilst the oral presentation is designed to assess curriculum knowledge, it also develops general transferable intellectual skills and key skills and exposed students to an environment akin to an interview.

6. Supporting WebCT Infrastructure

As has been indicated in the preceding section, a decision was taken to make full use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) – in this instance, the institutional WebCT platform - to provide an online supporting infrastructure for delivery of the new, embedded, PDP programme. This decision clearly was not without inherent risks, as the case studies of the experience in law schools at the universities of Glamorgan, Exeter and Central England have shown[25]. However, those experiences need to be set against the evidence from elsewhere of the potential benefits of the creative use of ICT applications to support skills development and reflective learning[26].

Positive student feedback on the use of ICT in the delivery of their undergraduate law programmes can be seen from research conducted at Coventry University[27] and at Lancaster University[28]. The Coventry study also reported improved skills development, a feature that was also identified in an earlier study at Lancaster[29]. These conclusions are further supported by research on postgraduate programmes at Glasgow Graduate School of Law[30] and at Glasgow Caledonian University[31], where it was found that the use of multi media learning resources had a beneficial effect on the skills development of postgraduate students.

---

[25] *Op. cit.,* note no. 12, 14, 15

[26] *Op. cit.,* note no. 18, 19

[27] Davidson, A. & Orsini-Jones, M. (2002) "Motivational factors in students' online learning", in Fallows, S. & Bhanot, R*., Educational Development through Information and Communications Technology*, SEDA, Kogan Page, 73-86

[28] Bloxham, S. M. & Armitage, S. (2003) "What a LUVLE way to learn Law", *International Review of Law, Computers and Technology.* Vol. 17, No. 1, pp39-50

[29] Jones, C. and Bloxham, S. M. (2001) "Networked Legal Learning: An Evaluation of the Student Experience", International Review of Law, Computers and Technology. Vol 15, No 3 pp 317-329

[30] Maharg, P. (2001) "Multimedia: enhancing student learning", BILETA conference paper, at http://www.bileta.ac.uk/Document%20Library/1/Multimedia%20-%20Enhancing%20Student%20Learning.pdf (last visited 10.03.06)

[31] McKellar, P. & Barton, K. (1999) "The Virtual Court Action: Procedural Facilitation in Law" Seminar on Getting More from Electronic Conferencing CTI Law Technology Centre, University of Warwick, at http://www.law.warwick.ac.uk/seminars/99-1-pm.html (last visited 10.03.06)

An earlier study of undergraduate students at Wolverhampton University[32] had also concluded that online delivery can contribute to improved levels of achievement for weaker students, even when the assessment criteria was designed to reward deep, as opposed to surface, learning. These studies provide convincing evidence of the potential advantages of using appropriate ICT applications to support and enhance student learning and it is against this background that the teaching team decided to deliver the new PDP programme through the institutional VLE – the WebCT platform.

However, the studies cited above were all conducted in the context of existing modules where the main focus was on curriculum content and skills development. None of the studies involved the development of PDP either within those modules or as independent modules. Nonetheless, there were additional reasons to believe that the use of a VLE might enhance the delivery of the new PDP-embedded module. One advantage was perceived to be in the ability to track and monitor student participation and involvement through the WebCT facility. This ability to track performance has been identified as one of the factors that impacts on non-traditional students' ability to integrate into the HE culture and achieve academic progress, thus supporting improved retention rates[33]. A further advantage was seen in the ability to create online tests and quizzes which would enable tutors to undertake early assessment of students' skills and needs and to provide appropriate formative feedback, both of which were identified in the HEFCE study[34] as factors that improve the performance of non-traditional students and which support improved retention rates. Consequently, despite evidence that "IT problems" were often one of the major obstacles to the success of PDP programmes, it was felt that by using the tried and tested WebCT platform, which all staff had experience of using, the risk of such problems emerging would be minimised and the potential benefits would hopefully be demonstrated.

As has already been indicated, both institutional and departmental policies promote the use of WebCT for the support of all modules, as part of a broader strategy to encourage more flexible, student-centred, learning. Originally, WebCT acted primarily as a source of access to all necessary learning resources. However, the tutors felt that this did not engage students sufficiently with the subject of law and did not allow for the reflection or appropriate skills development that was required for an effective PDP

---

[32] Migdal, S. & Cartwright, M. (2000) "Electronic delivery in law: what difference does it make to results?", [2000] 4 Web Journal of Current Legal Issues, at http://webjcli.ncl.ac.uk/2000/issue4/migdal4.html (last visited 10.03.06)

[33] Hall, J., et al (2000) "Widening Participation – what causes students to succeed or fail?", Educational Developments, 2 (1), 5-7; Comfort, H., et al (2002) "A qualitative study investigating factors which help and hinder learning progression from FE to HE". Report on the "Transitions Project", Leicester College (unpublished), cited in Warren, D (2003) "Improving student retention: a team approach". Annual Conference of the ILTHE, Coventry, 2-4th July

[34] *Op. cit.,* note no. 6

programme. The changes described above represent a more proactive approach involving the use of WebCT to support skills development, reflective learning and personal development planning in a number of ways and at various levels. This is achieved by provision of: (1) learning and teaching resources, including interactive discussion forums for learning support; (2) online formative and summative assessment and feedback; (3) an administrative structure for tracking student engagement, performance and progress; (4) a mechanism for the creation of student records of achievement.

6.1 Learning and Teaching Resources

The foremost, and perhaps most employed, characteristic of WebCT is that it provides online access to all necessary course resources, including the general module information, lecture handouts, seminar materials, and the assessment instructions and criteria. This ensures that students have access to all course materials at times and locations appropriate to their personal circumstances.

Another important feature of WebCT is that it acts as a tool for continuous communication between students and personal tutors, as well as communication amongst students themselves. Interactive discussion forums have been created to provide online support and to encourage collaborative learning and active student participation and involvement with the subject. Provision of messages in a form of banners on the module homepage ensures that students do not miss necessary information and the latest updates.

One of the advantages of WebCT is that it can provide students with access to all necessary resources in one place. Additional resources have been created in collaboration with the Careers Service, Learning Services and Learning Technology staff. The module is linked with the Law Emporium pages, which are maintained by the Learning Services staff[35]. The Law Emporium provides additional learning resources, including learning support pages, skills pages, and IT support, as well as a range of legal sources, subject pages, 'test your knowledge' quizzes and crosswords, and links to relevant legal and study sites. Finally, administrative notice boards and discussion forums enable not only year1, but all law students to interact and support each other.

---

[35] We would like to acknowledge the work of Janice Hartnell, Learning Services Law Academic Liaison Adviser, in developing this resource.

6.2 Online Assessment and Feedback

WebCT enables tutors to assess student coursework online and to provide almost immediate feedback in an electronic form. Assessment pages contain all necessary information about the assignments, including the assessment instructions and criteria. In addition to paper submissions, students are also required to submit their coursework via the Assignment Drop Box facility. All module assignments are marked by year 1 personal tutors[36].

For the Reflective Practice Log 1[37], an interactive quiz was created, consisting of a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions. This enabled students to complete, and tutors to mark, the induction skills audit exercise online. Although the creation of such a quiz was time consuming, it ultimately resulted in easy completion and submission. Once the quiz was assessed, feedback was immediate. There was no need for tutors to provide feedback because the answers were incorporated when the quiz was created, this saving tutors' time when assessing students' answers. Inclusion of the html links within the quiz meant that students had instant access to the Westlaw and Lexis-Nexis databases, electronic law journals and related online legal sources. An additional advantage of the quiz tool was that there was no need to upload and download the Word documents, using the Assignment Drop Box. Finally, online completion of the quiz enabled students to develop their ICT and legal research skills. It is essential that students possess these abilities, as library holdings of primary sources of law and academic journals are exclusively electronic.

In collaboration with the Careers Service[38] and Learning Technology staff, separate online 'content pages' have been created for the Careers Management Portfolio[39]. These summative assessment exercises are, apart from an introductory lecture, delivered and completed entirely online and comprise of three sessions. Each online 'content page' comprises of the session aims and learning outcomes, the assessment instructions and criteria, and the relevant resources, including additional links to various online legal careers sources and self-assessment skills audits. Again, the assignments are submitted via the Assignment Drop Box and are marked by personal tutors. Marks are released and feedback from tutors is returned electronically prior to personal tutor meetings.

---

[36] See above, Section 4 - Implementing Changes, *A Revised Personal Tutoring System.*
[37] See above, Section 4 – Implementing Changes, *Reflective Practice Log (RPL).*
[38] We would like to acknowledge the work of Christine Waddelove, Law Careers Adviser, without whose contribution, the development of the CMP would not have been possible.
[39] See above, Section 4 - Implementing Changes, *Careers Management Portfolio (CMP).*

6.3 Tracking Student Engagement and Performance

The 'track students' tool on WebCT enables tutors to monitor student usage and engagement with the pages. This identifies the extent to which students access the relevant learning resources and discussion messages as well as their level of engagement with those discussions. This is monitored by personal tutors and discussed with their tutees during the personal tutor meetings. This is a valuable tool for tutors, which enables them to track student involvement beyond the level of traditional indicators of performance. The importance of this tool is further underlined when one takes account of the fact that WebCT is also extensively utilised as an administrative notice board for the communication of urgent notices and updates, making it essential that students access WebCT on regular basis. The latest figures show that students visit this module's resources often. The hits range from 244 to 1,084, with an average of 553 hits per student. The usage statistics demonstrate the popularity of WebCT with students and confirm its importance as a learning support tool.

In addition to moderating student engagement with WebCT, the 'manage students' tool enables tutors to track student performance on twofold basis: an individual student progress, as well as overall assignment and/or module performance. Tutors are able to collate individual student marks and if needed, to intervene at early stages. Student progress is regularly discussed at personal tutor meetings. The overall assignment and/or module performance page provides records of the highest, lowest and an average mark. This, amongst other things, enables tutors to reflect on and evaluate the assessment criteria and to ensure that same marking standards are employed by all year 1 personal tutors.

6.4 Student Recording of Achievement (Progress Files)

Student marks for their assignments are released via the Assignment Drop Box. This enables students to keep track of their own performance and to record their achievement. Since all assignments and exercises are submitted electronically, students have access to their work online and in one place, although they are also encouraged to copy their files to a disc, CD or hard drive. In addition, the advantage of the 'My Grades' facility is that students are able to see all their marks for individual modules in one place and at the same time. Finally, RPL 4, the assignment reflection exercise[40], will provide students with a record of their progress, summarising their achievement across all year 1 modules in one document. This will form basis for their progress file in years 2 and 3.

---

[40] See above, Section 4 – Implementing Changes, *Reflective Practice Log (RPL).*

To summarise, it has been demonstrated that WebCT plays an important role in supporting the module and provision of PDP for Year 1 programmes. It not only provides access to learning and teaching resources, but it also enables tutors to assess students and provide feedback online and to track student progress. Finally, and most importantly, it encourages active student participation and reflective learning as well as providing a mechanism for students' recording of their achievement. In future, it is intended to develop further online quizzes, self-assessment exercises and collaborative learning tasks, and to make a greater use of discussion forums, in order to enhance the student learning experience and to realise the full potential of the VLE for interactive, student-centred, learning.

7. Evaluation

At this stage of the academic year a full evaluation of the PDP programme is clearly not possible because students have not yet completed their modules. However, student feedback has been gathered on the skills development aspect of the programme. This, together with data on student achievement to date and the reflective evaluation of the tutors, provide some indication of how successful the programme has been in achieving its aims and of what issues remain to be resolved.

7.1 Skills Development

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to their experience of the skills development (induction) programme, which formed the basis for the RPL 1 assignment. Questionnaires were completed by 26 of the 39 students who were enrolled on the LLB programme at the time - a response rate of 67%. The first question asked about satisfaction ratings for the overall programme. Responses were generally positive but, as is indicated in Table 1 (below), certain aspects were less successful than others. Some explanation for these differences can be found in the responses to more detailed questions on specific aspects of the programme. For instance, the lowest levels of satisfaction (58% positive) were in respect of "organisation and efficiency" of the programme. This appears to be explained by an unfortunate mix up that occurred in relation to room bookings for two IT skills training workshops which resulted in those sessions being cancelled. The responses to specific questions about these sessions clearly reflect that. The remaining questions in the overall satisfaction section all produced positive ratings with the overwhelming majority of students either "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" that the programme was "effectively designed" (93%) with "clear objectives" (89%), "helpful documentation" (81%) and a "manageable workload" (85%). Thus from a "student satisfaction" perspective, this aspect of the module appears to have been broadly successful.

Table 1:

Overall, the Skills Induction Programme	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
was effectively designed	3 (**12%**)	21 (**81%**)	2 (**8%**)	
its objectives were clear	7 (**27%**)	16 (**62%**)	3 (**12%**)	
was well organised and efficiently run	3 (**12%**)	12 (**46%**)	9 (**35%**)	
the documentation was helpful	8 (**31%**)	13 (**50%**)	5 (**19%**)	
the workload was manageable	9 (**35%**)	13 (**50%**)	3 (**12%**)	1 (**4%**)

Sample: 26 responses

7.2 Attendance and Achievement

As has already been indicated[41], one of the problems associated with the previous PDP programme was that students did not see it as being important. Consequently, personal tutor meetings to check on progress with the PDP tasks were very poorly attended with the overall co-ordinator of the programme having to spend considerable time chasing up those students who failed to attend throughout the year. This year, by contrast, very few students have failed to attend their personal tutor meetings. It would appear therefore that the combination of the fact that these meetings were scheduled into the Legal Methods timetable and the fact that the personal tutors were discussing students' assessed coursework at the meetings, has resulted in this problem being substantially reduced.

At present, only limited data is available on student achievement because not all the coursework assignments have been assessed and the end-of-year exams do not take place until May. However, a preliminary analysis of coursework marks to date provides a provisional indication of student performance. The number of students still enrolled has reduced since the beginning of the academic year and currently stands at 32. The evidence from the Legal Methods module, based on six separate short assignments (RPLs 1-3 and CMC) constituting 60% of the overall module assessment, suggests that 3 or 4 students may be failing to achieve a standard that will enable them to progress to year 2. The evidence from the other three modules, based on one essay constituting 25% of the overall module assessment, produces similar figures for two modules but on the final module this "failure rate" increases to 6

---

[41] See above, Section 3 - Problems (Challenges) of the Existing Institutional and Departmental Structures, *The PDP Problem*.

students. These figures show a slight improvement in progression rates from the previous year but, based as they are on such limited evidence, it would be premature to place too much reliance on them at this stage.

7.3 Tutor Reflection

The tutors' experience of delivering the new module has been educational in itself. Some of the issues that were identified in advance as being potentially problematic have in fact been successfully managed, while other issues have emerged which have yet to be fully resolved. The following summary of the tutors' reflections, which focuses on the personal tutor system and the assessment process, should be read as a provisional and tentative analysis.

The personal tutoring system, which had the potential to place excessive demands on staff resources, has in general operated successfully. The re-structuring, designed to ensure that all year 1 students were allocated to a tutor who taught on year 1 modules, has ensured that the potential strain on resources has not materialised. Indeed, by comparison with the previous year, the responsibility for ensuring that students attended personal tutor meetings has been less onerous because, as indicated above, the absenteeism problem has diminished. However, it has yet to be seen whether the change of personal tutor at the end of year 1 will have any adverse effect in the future. It is also the case that more direct involvement with the process of assessment and general academic progress of the students has given greater relevance and meaning to the meetings for tutors. Nevertheless, some tutors have suggested that a more structured format for those meetings would contribute to ensuring that all students received the same levels, and quality, of support for their personal development planning, and at the same time provide a more effective mechanism for quality assurance.

The assessment process, as has already been indicated, appears to have had a beneficial effect on students' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, personal tutor meetings. Although it is too early to assess the impact on academic achievement, the provisional indications are that progression rates may have been improved, at least on the Legal Methods module itself. However, the tutors' impressions have revealed one important issue of concern in relation to assessment. Although yet to be confirmed by more detailed analysis of the full data, the indications are that students appear to have struggled with the reflective writing elements. In many ways this is unsurprising as they are unlikely to have had much prior experience of the genre, but given that one of the objectives of PDP is to develop this particular attribute, this is of some concern. Although clear guidance was provided it may be that consideration will have to

be given to providing additional support, perhaps by the addition of dedicated workshops to the initial skills development programme.

The assessment process has also raised a potentially problematic issue for tutors. Although the "assessment burden" (extra marking) has been managed reasonably successfully, ensuring fairness through the moderation process has, at times, been more difficult to manage. The unfamiliar nature of some of the coursework assignments resulted in some significant differences in marking practice. Although this phenomenon is more widespread in higher education than is generally acknowledged, it may have been exacerbated due to insufficient time being spent in advance on developing a shared understanding and commitment to the objectives of the assignments – a staff development issue. Another possible explanation may be that there is a need to develop clearer and more detailed marking criteria for some of the coursework assignments, in particular those involving reflective writing. Despite these concerns, the problem was partially ameliorated by the use of the WebCT feedback facility which enabled tutors to compare and contrast their own marks with those of other tutors, prior to release of the marks and feedback to students. This process not only enabled the module leader to make adjustments to individual marks as necessary, but also provided transparency as to individual tutor's judgments about particular pieces of coursework. This issue is especially important when one takes into account the fact that all year 1 tutors, including those who had no other formal involvement with the delivery of the module, are responsible for assessment. Furthermore, those tutors are marking their own personal tutees' work. In such circumstances, it is essential that the moderation process operates as a robust and effective quality assurance mechanism.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has sought to describe how tutors have developed and implemented an embedded PDP process within a Legal Methods module for first year undergraduate students. The approach adopted has been located within the context of the research literature that identifies both the pedagogic rationale for PDP and how the use of ICT applications can support skills development and reflective learning. A detailed description of the learning tasks that students have undertaken and the ways in which WebCT has been utilised to support the process was then presented. Finally, the paper has provided a provisional evaluation, based on a combination of student feedback, evidence of achievement and reflections of the tutors.

Further student feedback data is still being gathered and, when the module is completed in June 2006, final data on student achievement and progression will also be included in a more comprehensive evaluation. The preliminary findings suggest that additional work needs to be done on improving and clarifying criteria for the assessment of the reflective writing assignments, on developing additional online skills tests, including automated self assessment tests, and on structuring the format of personal tutor meetings. Other issues may emerge as the additional data becomes available and the tutors intend to conduct a full review of the process to identify further changes that may need to be implemented for the next academic year. In overall terms though, the tutors are reasonably satisfied that the new module is effectively designed to achieve the intended educational objectives and will continue to critically reflect on the process with a view to introducing further changes as and when necessary.