

Guidance for students

The PDP connection

Introduction

As a student you are expected to engage in Personal Development Planning (PDP). It may be called something else in your university or faculty, but it will involve you in regularly recording details about what you do while at university on your course, and from life and work in general. You will have been asked reflect on and improve your learning, and develop your knowledge, skills and attributes.



This PDP thinking helps you to make the most of your time at university and will build your self-esteem.

This article makes the connection between PDP and LinkedIn. LinkedIn offers students 'a shop window' - one which can be regularly refreshed as a space for presenting your professional profile and demonstrating your graduate qualities.

Maintaining a LinkedIn presence challenges you to re-dress your shop window frequently in a professional way and can help you to drive and focus your engagement with PDP during your time at university.

Professionals never stop learning, so this habit of refreshing your LinkedIn profile is something you need to practice as a student. It's a lifelong skill.

Beyond the online CV

At a basic level LinkedIn is sometimes referred to as the online CV that employers expect from all graduates seeking employment. Indeed, students should pay attention to the guidance provided on this site, by LinkedIn, and from others about providing a complete, well organised and professional set of information.

Students should assume everybody is doing that as standard. So how does a student stand out?

Beyond having an 'online CV' to demonstrate your essential statistics (i.e. educational background, skills, work experience and volunteering experience), you need to demonstrate your capabilities and confidence based upon your active and reflective engagement with your course and your life experiences more generally. You can do this by using LinkedIn more fluently.

Think of this as establishing and maintaining your professional profile.

Key tools for continually refreshing your LinkedIn profile

Think about how you might develop your ability to produce effective posts, skills lists and portfolios with the support of others before moving to into the public sphere. Spend some time looking at how more experienced students and alumni represent themselves. Reflect on how effective you think they are.

Consider the following,

- **Long-form posts** - LinkedIn users can create short article posts as well-written reflections on aspects of their course. While great care needs to be taken with writing in a public and professional space, learning how to present yourself critically and confidently as a “becoming professional” is an important skill which requires practice. Such reflective writing is particularly apt for placements or special project work, but needs to be developed around your day-to-day experiences throughout your time at university too. Get into the habit of reflecting on what you have learnt and then bring these thoughts together into regular posts.
- **Skills** - The skills section on your LinkedIn profile in which you can add up to 50 skills to your profile. When you have listed some skills your connections can endorse you for them.

It can be hard to articulate skills or to see how they've developed over time. In your first year you might want to reflect on communicating skills, for example, in a general way. As you progress you need to develop this into more specific topics such as

Building your target audience

Your audience is your network. Think of your network in two ways:

- the people who know you, and
- the people who you want to know you better - your target group.

This second group is the one that can help you work LinkedIn to meet your more advanced needs. Whenever you do anything on LinkedIn think about your target group and ask yourself whether your postings will impress them and be useful to them. Everything you do on LinkedIn matters and your nominal target group will help you decide about the quality of your postings and actions.

“communicating to non-specialist audiences” – a key skill required by lots of graduate schemes. Ask your tutor about how you can discuss your attributes in more focused ways as you progress.

- **Building a portfolio of examples** – e.g. linking to Slideshare presentations, linking to documents you’ve produced, posters etc. A portfolio allows you to house everything in one place and build a commentary around your work.
- **Summaries** - The summary section on a profile requires real self-awareness to write without it sounding trite and impersonal. The best student summary sections are written by students who have developed a strong understanding of who they are now and where they are heading. Ask people who know you well to give your profile an honest appraisal. Take their comments seriously and revise your summary accordingly.
- **Recommendations** i.e. the reference section – as well as adding “weight” to what you have said about yourself, recommendations can encourage you to re-write your summary or to add additional skills to your profile. If you have yet to enter the working world and have not yet experienced an appraisal, this may be the first time that you have received feedback about yourself since school. Make the most of comments to get a sense of how your “professional self” is viewed by others.
- **Alumni** - The alumni tool brings together profiles from graduates from a particular institution. Students can view “live” skills information from a range of profiles relating to their intended sector. This can help you to reflect on any gaps in your skills or it can give you an appreciation of the wide range of skills and experience that professionals possess beyond those that are immediately obvious.

The interactive and confident professional

Professionals are socially confident. They not only present themselves well, they are able to interact with peers in a focused way. Confident interaction has to be learnt and practiced, though many students think some people are just good at it! This is not usually the case.

This can be hard in the real world, but it is one of the advantages of the digital world. In LinkedIn, for example, it is not only easy to metaphorically exchange business cards (i.e. connect), it is also easier to publicly acknowledge each other.

If you know someone, endorse their skills - don’t just wait for *them* to make the first move. A confident and attractive graduate is one who is capable of taking the lead in appropriate situations.

If you have something intelligent to say, for example a useful comment to make on someone else’s blog post, - make that comment. But keep it clear, straightforward and positive. Your first move will signal your awareness and interest in a topic and may go on to reveal the depth of

your expertise and something positive about your character.

If you have a link to information that you find useful, then sharing it is likely to indicate how supportive you can be in other situations. All of these small interactions can create impressive signs of how confident and professional you are.

Sharing your reflections

Walz (n.d., p. 3) says,

Habits of thinking, the ability to take a critical approach to a problem and then choose and implement the right research strategy ...are more important than functional competency or facts.

When publishing the outcomes of your PDP reflections in a synthesis blog post, focus on your critical approach to reviewing your learning and practice. Don't get bogged down in descriptive detail. Focus on your writing style. Keep it clear, brief and interesting. This will reveal something about you rather than just your subject.

Reflect specifically on your developing skills and attributes. If you have done a group assignment, for example, reflect on your developing team-working skills. Other dimensions you can bring out include communication, leadership, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and abilities for managing tasks and situations.

Example: Reflecting on being inspired

What does reflective thinking look like?

Do you ever feel inspired on your course? I hope so! Recognise these moments and reflect on them.

- **Who inspired you?** What was it about that person you admire? Are you like that? Can you aspire to be like that? What do you need to develop then? Or perhaps you are just different and have different strengths? What are they?
- **What inspired you?** Have you read something and had a Eureka moment? Take it to the next stage: what exactly is it that you have learnt? How has this method or style really helped you and the way you learn?

Analyse your inspirational moment so you can recognise new opportunities for inspiration.

Employability now!

Don't wait for your employability module before you post on your progress - employability factors can be found in most modules and nearly everything you do in and out of the classroom.

Think about the attributes you should be able to demonstrate for your chosen career and then look at all of the situations you encounter each day where these occur - in your course, in your extracurricular activities and in your working life.

Example: So what?

Asking yourself "So what?" helps you to use what you have learnt. Forming and maintaining a personal action plan is part of being a reflective learner - and so, a reflective professional. Convert your reflective thoughts into active thoughts.

"Employability and good learning have a lot in common" - Yorke (2003, p. 13)

Conclusion: PDP is a professional habit

Some students will set up a personal PDP blog to reflect on practice, others a ring binder, and some students may be full of good intentions but never get round to doing anything.

Having to maintain a LinkedIn profile should spur you on to develop your reflective habit. Professional profiles need to be fed!

The important thing about PDP is learning about yourself and applying what you learn to improve what you do later. Employers expect university graduates to know themselves well and will value seeing evidence of imaginative and thoughtful graduates.

PDP is more than what you learn in lectures, class activities and assessment. Your time at university, from the day you first make contact, is full of useful learning opportunities. And it's not just about things you do while you are actually studying in university.

Develop the PDP habit and maintain your profile.

References

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