

Personal Development Planning Made Easy!

A guide to recording experience and learning from it

What is Personal Development Planning?

Studying at university is not just about learning a lot of things that are fascinating in themselves but—at least in the case of most Arts subjects—rather disconnected from ‘the real world’. At the same time as you develop your knowledge of your subject and the skills required to perform well in it, you’re actually developing a whole range of skills and intellectual abilities that can be transferred to other areas of life, including your future employment. Arts subjects don’t generally equip you for a specific job; they actually equip you to undertake almost any job that doesn’t require specialised scientific training. Moreover, university life is intended to present you with all kinds of chances to develop yourself as an individual with a range of interests and experiences, and not just as someone reading books, writing essays and taking exams. An Arts graduate should be versatile, imaginative, critical, flexible, incisive, confident and articulate, and so ready for any challenge or task—if only you can recognise these abilities in yourself.

This is where Personal Development Planning (PDP) comes in. With an ever-increasing number of well-qualified graduates entering the labour market each year, it is crucial to your success after completing your studies that you know exactly what skills you have to offer—academic, work-related and personal—when you start applying for jobs, and that you can provide solid evidence of those skills. Your studies will have helped you develop crucial transferable skills and personal attributes, and so will many of your extra-curricular activities; you just have to be able to articulate these to prospective employers. PDP helps you to keep track of what you’ve learned, how you learned it, and what you might do with that learning later on; it can also help you to plan for the future and to identify what skills or attributes you may need to develop in order to achieve your goals. Getting involved with PDP should help you to:

- Consider what you really want to do
- Make the right academic, personal and professional decisions
- Set personal goals and targets
- Identify programmes and extra-curricular opportunities and training to help you develop your skills
- Plan ahead to achieve your goals
- Evaluate your own progress
- Record different kinds of achievement¹

Personal Development Planning is one part of your university ‘progress file’. This is not an actual document but a combination of any personal development planning activities that you engage in and record, as well as the formal academic transcript of your marks that your university provides you with at the end of your studies. It offers a detailed, rounded account of everything that you have achieved at university.

In recent years, universities have become more aware that their students need to be highly employable, and that means not just graduating with a good degree but being able to demonstrate a whole range of skills and abilities that will help you to gain and maintain the employment you want. Getting used to setting targets for yourself and evaluating your progress now will stand you in good stead for success in your future working life, and one of the key aims of an Arts education at Bristol is to help you realise that learning is a truly life-long activity, not something that stops when you leave university. We want, therefore, to encourage you to reflect regularly on your performance; we aim to provide useful guidance on how to go about this, for example through this guide, and to provide regular opportunities for reflection and discussion, above all through the personal tutor system. Ultimately, *you* have to take responsibility for your own personal development, but we’ll do our best to help and support this process.

Do I need Personal Development Planning?

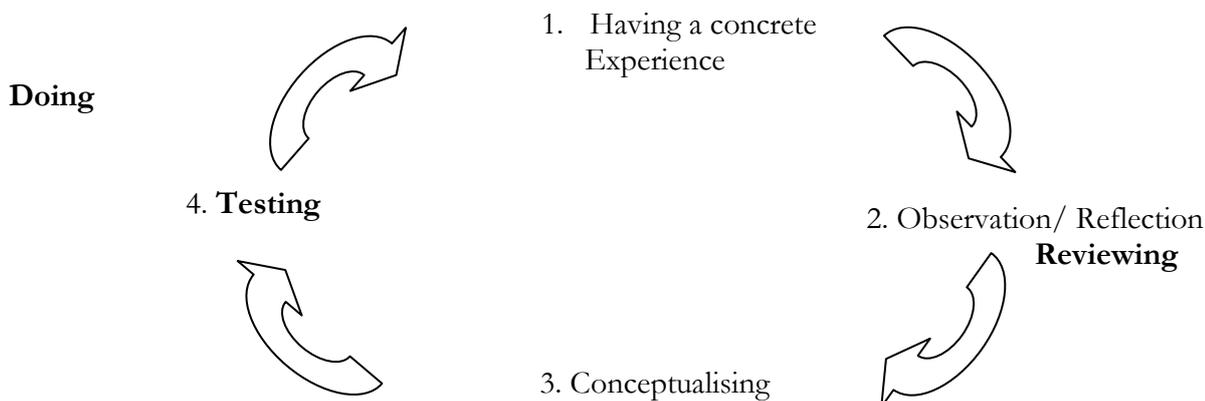
Try this self-evaluation exercise. For each of the following statements, rate your responses: *strongly agree* = 0; *agree* = 1; *sort of agree* = 2; *disagree* = 3; *strongly disagree* = 4.

1. I am certain that I can keep myself motivated towards achieving my degree for the next few years
2. I am very clear what my goals are for the next five years
3. I am confident that I have planned sufficiently to enable me to achieve my goals
4. I am very clear how my degree fits into my life plans
5. I am clear which skills employers are looking for
6. I am confident I have the skills employers are looking for
7. I am very clear about the importance of reflective activity to professional life
8. I am comfortable that I am able to undertake structured reflection without guidelines
9. I am confident that I can develop an effective strategy to meet most circumstances
10. I am confident that I can set well-formed targets
11. I have a clear understanding of how to evaluate my own performance
12. I am confident that I know how to improve my performance in most circumstances
13. I know how to apply my expertise in one area to a very different field
14. I am confident that I can see myself as others see me
15. I am confident that I have effective listening skills
16. I am an assertive person
17. I am a good 'self-starter'
18. I am aware of the best roles for me to fill for team work
19. I am confident at problem-solving
20. I am confident that I know how to make best use of my mind
21. I am confident that I will take a creative approach to most problems
22. I am confident about making competence-based applications for jobs
23. I am always very clear about which skills I am developing
24. I can see clearly how my skills apply to a wide range of other situations
25. I know where my own 'developmental edge' lies

The higher your total score, the more likely it is that you need to undertake some form of personal development. Even if you feel that you do not need this right now, this may change over the course of weeks or months, as you need to keep self-evaluating and identify key areas for development as your circumstances change.

Learning From Experience

If the self-evaluation exercise has left you feeling that you need a lot of personal development—or that you don't even understand what half the questions are getting at—don't worry. Chances are that you already have a great deal of learning behind you to draw on; you just need to learn how to articulate it clearly. We all learn from experience, and PDP will help you to get into the habit of regularly recording that learning as well as thinking about how it could be applied in the future.



Concluding

This is known as Kolb's Learning Cycle. A simple example is that of a young child's first experience with fire:

- Stage 1** Child puts hand in or near to fire and feels pain.
- Stage 2** Child reflects on what happened.
- Stage 3** Child begins to form a theory or conclusion that contact with fire produces pain.
- Stage 4** Child may approach the fire again in order to test out or check the theory that fire equals pain.

Fans of *The Simpsons* may recall the episode in which Lisa runs an experiment on 'Is my brother dumber than a hamster?'—illustrating the perils of *not* learning from experience.

There are two challenges involved. Firstly, most of us don't take the time to think about and reflect on what happened, what went well and what didn't—we'll look at how to reflect critically on our own performance a bit later on. Secondly, learning through experience can be disorientating and sometimes stressful, especially when things don't go according to plan. To progress and develop means reviewing the ways in which we usually act, but change can be difficult. If you are looking to improve your performance in a particular area (get higher essay marks, give a confident presentation, be a better listener) this often means altering your existing habits and patterns of doing things. Basically, if you keep doing things in the same way as you always do them, you'll keep getting the same results... Make some small changes, and things might turn out quite differently, and hopefully in the way that you want them to. This is known as leverage—making small changes to get big results.

Spending some time recording what you are doing, what results you're getting and then planning ahead is a process of critical reflection. If you take on board the fact that employers cite self-awareness as a crucial graduate skill, you can see how important this process is to your future prospects, as well as helping you to improve your academic learning right now.

Reflecting On Your Learning

Many areas of work now require a 'reflective practitioner' approach which is built into the work cycle in some way, such as through reviews or appraisal. Typically, this means taking personal responsibility for:

- Your continuing professional development (CPD)
- Making a fair and reasonable evaluation of your personal experience, strengths, qualities and skills
- Identifying ways of using your strengths well within your professional area
- Identifying personal limitations and areas that could be improved through training, practice or informal learning
- Recognising the effects of your own responses and behaviour and taking responsibility for these
- Making useful contributions to team discussions
- Improving individual and team performance
- Identifying your own contribution to the results of a task, project or outcome
- Your own mistakes and your team's mistakes²

It's standard practice in Arts that you should reflect on your progress before meetings with your tutor; you should make use of the 'Progress Review Form' available on the Faculty webpage (www.bris.ac.uk/arts/docs/review.doc) and let your tutor see this in advance of the meeting.

Depending on your degree programme, you may also be asked to reflect on and record your learning and skills development as part of a particular unit or a study abroad year. Having PDP opportunities built into your degree makes it much easier for you to start recording and reflecting, but that doesn't mean that reflecting under your own steam isn't necessary or extremely beneficial to your progress!

If you already keep some sort of diary — one where you write about your thoughts and feelings, not just keeping track of your appointments — then you will have a head start on recording and reflecting on your experiences and achievements. It's important to record your thoughts in a way that appeals to you, so that you feel more inclined to do it. If you like to use a PC then do so — maybe you're already a keen 'blogger', or maybe this is something that you've thought about trying! However, many people find that the physical act of writing can stimulate reflection and critical analysis, so find a notebook that you like and start using it.

People's preferences can differ widely when it comes to writing about their learning and experience. Some students like to write at set times and establish a routine — every Sunday evening, for example, looking back over the previous week and setting some goals for the next one. Others are only prompted to write when they have experienced something significant and meaningful. Do whichever suits you best. Recording and reflecting on experience is a highly personal activity so do it in the way that has most meaning for *you*. Writing freely like this about your experiences and learning is known as *open reflection* and is just one way to get started with this useful skill.

Adding Some Structure to Reflection

If you're trying to build up a useful resource or portfolio of your skills and experience for use later on — when putting together a cv, for example — then it will help you if you get into the habit of structuring your thinking and organising what you record. Again, it is up to you how you do this — perhaps by areas such as Academic Skills, Career, Work-related, Interests, and so on. Remember that this portfolio of evidence is for your use — it is unlikely that an employer would ever ask to see it in its entirety — and that you should be able to get at key information and evidence quickly so that you can answer application form questions or prepare for job interviews.

To get yourself started with the reflective process it can also help to have some questions to ask yourself until the whole thing becomes a bit more natural. Reflecting is a type of thinking. It is associated with deep thought aimed at better understanding. It includes a mixture of elements, such as: making sense of experience, standing back to get some perspective, going over something several times, striving for honesty, evaluation of your performance or skills, aiming for clarity of understanding, making judgements and drawing conclusions.³ There are some templates for these sorts of questions available on the webpage, www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/skills/self-evaluation/pdp/templates.html, but here are some initial ideas:

You might want to start by reflecting more generally on your personal and professional development:

- What skills are you developing? Are there obvious gaps in your profile of skills and experience? Will these matter when you apply for jobs?
- Are your programme choices the right ones for the type of career that you have in mind?
- Are you focusing too much on study at the expense of other experience which would help your career?
- Are you making the best use of all that university has to offer to develop your skills, experience and CV?
- Is there some kind of work experience you could undertake to develop your people skills in the workplace?
- Are you making good (and early) use of the Careers Service and its resources?
- Would it be useful to have a mentor from the area you are considering for a career?⁴

Maybe you want to reflect on a *critical event*, like a group presentation or a job interview. Try these questions to assess your performance and decide what action you need to take:

- What happened generally - the context?
- What did you do - your own role?
- What were the outcomes or consequences of your actions?
- What alternative actions could you have taken?
- How might you prepare differently for a similar occasion?
- How did your performance or action differ from your performance on other occasions? What were the reasons for this?
- How did you use or how could you use feedback from other people?
- What is the one main area where you need to focus to improve your performance? What do you need to do in order to take this forward?
- What did you gain and learn from the experience?⁵

Employability and Career Skills

Regular reflection on your experience and performance will help you build up a highly useful resource to use later on when you start applying for jobs. It's not enough to trot out jargon such as, "I'm an effective team player with a proven track record in problem-solving" unless you've got the evidence to back it up. From the other direction, however, maybe you became Production Manager on the play that your friend was putting on just to help out and/or for a bit of a laugh, and maybe that's all a potential employer would think—until you reflect on how many different skills of organisation, managing and motivating people, thinking on your feet and improvising solutions it actually involved.

What Are Employers Looking For?

Apart from a solid class of degree in your chosen subject, employers are looking for evidence of all the transferable skills we've mentioned so far, as well as several more that you might not expect.

Generally, employers are looking for an 'all-round individual'—someone who didn't just focus on their academic studies but who can also offer some work experience and some evidence of involvement in extra-curricular activities. Another phrase you may hear is 'someone who can hit the ground running'. This means that employers value students who have already had experience in the world of work and are aware of professional behaviours, displaying a mature approach to their role; someone who has learnt how to learn, and so can learn on the job. It's also increasingly the case that employers do not specify a degree subject that they want you to have. This means that you are selling the skills you have to offer in comparison with graduates from a whole range of academic disciplines.

Below is a list of what employers call 'competencies'—these are what they use to assess your potential value to their company:

- Flexibility and capacity to cope with change
- Self-motivation
- Analytical ability and decision-making
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Team working and, potentially, leadership ability
- Organisation, planning and prioritisation
- Good client service skills
- Ability to innovate
- Mental and physical stamina

These competencies will be measured during the application process in a number of ways: interview (solo or panel), group exercise, presentation, psychometric and numerical testing, the application form or CV & covering letter. Always start by looking at the 'person specification' that the company will offer to you with information about the job. See what experience you have that matches what the company wants and come up with some examples of when you have put those desired skills into practice. One way to do this is to use the STAR structure - this means describing the Situation, Task, Action and Result for each example that you give.

Using STAR can also help you to answer tricky application form and interview questions. The examples below are all genuine, even if they seem difficult or just plain odd! Without adequate reflection on your skills and experience, as well as evidence of your performance to draw on from your portfolio, you will not give satisfactory or interesting answers to these questions. Try answering one or two of them to get some practice—what examples of your experience will you use? how can you best communicate your skills and abilities?

- Describe a specific experience working in a team situation where there was conflict. Describe how you approached the conflict, what worked well and what didn't. What was the outcome?

- Tell me about a complex problem you had to solve and walk me through your thinking as you solved it.
- Looking at your life as a whole, indicate three experiences that you consider to have been instrumental in shaping who you are.
- Pick your favourite song lyric and identify what it says about you as a person.

The more time you spend reflecting on your skills and performance, the easier answering these kinds of questions becomes.

Goal Setting For Success

To help you get from where you are now to where you want to be, setting clear goals and establishing the actions you need to take can really help you get results. Research shows that setting goals and reflecting regularly on your progress gives you a much higher chance of succeeding in what you set out to do. Goals keep us moving towards something, moving forward all the time.

‘A goal is a dream with legs. What does this mean? Goals are what drive us forward. They are what we want. Why do we even get out of bed in the morning? Because we want something. It may be trivial, like breakfast; it may be great, like improving someone’s life through worthwhile work [...]. The opposite of goal-setting is problem-thinking. This focuses on what is wrong.’⁶ Focus instead on what you want and how you intend to achieve it.

The Seven Golden Rules of Goals

1. **Goals are expressed in the positive.** They should be about what you want, and not about what you want to avoid. If you set out to stop smoking for example, all you will think about is your urge to smoke. Think about what you do want, which is better health in this case.
2. **Make the goal specific.** It’s hard to pin down the future, so the closer the goal is to you the easier it will be to identify its specific characteristics. Saying, ‘I want to go to the gym more often’ is vague and unhelpful. ‘I go to the gym three times a week for forty-five minutes each time, so that I will lose two kilos’ is much better. Note also the use of the present tense to make the goal more immediate—no deferring it until tomorrow!
3. **Decide on the evidence you need to see for progression.** What milestones will you set so that you know you are making progress? Cutting down to two cigarettes a day by the end of two weeks? Being able to run consistently for twenty minutes?
4. **Marshall your resources.** Do you need books, agreements with friends, family or your tutor, time, role models, skills to help you to achieve your goal?
5. **Be proactive.** Keep doing something; keep taking action. This is especially important when you don’t get the result you had in mind. Review your goals and actions and keep moving forward!
6. **Pay attention to the wider consequences.** All your actions will have consequences; like dropping a pebble into a pond, they will create ripples. What effect will your actions have on other people? Don’t be so single-minded about achieving your goals that your actions have adverse effects on friends and family.
7. **Make an action plan.** When you define the steps to your goal, you are putting legs on your dream. Breaking down your goal into smaller steps can make achieving it a much more manageable and realistic process.⁷

Once you’ve established your goals and the actions you need to take, make sure that you build in some rewards to keep yourself going—small ones for the interim tasks, and a big one for when you achieve your main goal. These could include, for smaller goals, an evening out at the cinema, a new book or cd, or, for the bigger goals, a weekend away or a new working wardrobe if you’ve succeeded in getting your dream job!

Where Can You Get Training and Help?

The Faculty webpage, www.bris.ac.uk/arts/skills, includes a range of guidance and links to other information, as well as templates for reflection, self-evaluation skills quizzes and on-line exercises to help you develop key skills.

The University's Student Skills webpage, www.bris.ac.uk/studentskills, offers a searchable Directory of skills courses and resources, with on-line booking. The Union's Student Development Unit put on a huge range of free training courses and workshops: see www.ubu.org.uk/main/activities/StudentDevelopment. Careers skills workshops are organised by the Careers Advisory Service: www.bris.ac.uk/cas.

Suggested Reading

- Buzan, Tony, *How to Mind Map* (London: HarperCollins, 2002)
- Cottrell, Stella, *The Study Skills Handbook* (London: Palgrave, 2003)
- Covey, Stephen, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1999)
- Fortgang, Laura Berman, *Take Yourself to the Top* (London: HarperCollins, 1999)
- Heppell, Michael, *How to Be Brilliant!* (London: Pearson, 2004)
- Jay, Ros, *The Successful Candidate: How to be the person they want to hire* (London: Pearson, 2004)
- O'Connor, Joseph & Lages, Andrea, *Coaching with NLP* (London: Element, 2004)

Text by Tracy Johnson (University of Bristol) & Zara Johnson (University of Bath); edited and adapted by Neville Morley (University of Bristol)

¹ List taken from Cottrell (2003), 171.

² Taken from Cottrell (2003), 171

³ Cottrell, pp. 171-173.

⁴ Cottrell, p.181

⁵ Cottrell, p.183

⁶ O'Connor & Lages (2004), pp.26-7

⁷ Adapted from O'Connor & Lages (2004), pp.27-33