

**QAA**

**QAA  
Scotland**

**Personal development planning:  
guidance for institutional policy and practice  
in higher education**

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## **Contents**

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>2</b>
What is personal development planning (PDP)?	2
Developing a policy infrastructure to support HE practitioners	2
PDP and quality assurance	2
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
Background	3
Why have the guidelines been updated?	4
<b>Guidance</b>	<b>5</b>
What is PDP?	5
The benefits of PDP	6
Realising the benefits of PDP	8
<b>Key actions for the effective implementation of personal development planning</b>	<b>10</b>
Supporting institutional policy and practice	12
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>13</b>
Appendix 1: Important sources of information and practical advice to support PDP	14
Appendix 2: Members of the PDP Guidelines Advisory Group	15

## **Executive summary**

1 This document is designed to help higher education (HE) providers develop and enhance personal development planning (PDP) policies and processes for students. The PDP concept and this guidance have been developed through extensive discussion and consultation with HE practitioners and interest groups. This document draws upon existing practice and the experience collected in HE since publication of the first edition of the *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* (2001).

### **What is personal development planning (PDP)?**

2 PDP is a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process, open to all learners, in all HE provision settings, and at all levels.

3 Effective PDP improves the capacity of individuals to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning and to understand what and how they learn. PDP helps learners articulate their learning and the achievements and outcomes of HE more explicitly, and supports the concept that learning is a lifelong and life-wide activity.

### **Developing a policy infrastructure to support HE practitioners**

4 PDP features in the full range of provision leading to an HE award. Institutional policies for PDP apply to all types of delivery and learning contexts. Institutional policy infrastructures support practice within the following parameters:

- HE institutions (HEIs) provide opportunities for PDP both within and outside the curriculum and guidance to support the process
- the nature, scope and extent of opportunities, guidance and support for PDP are determined by each institution (influenced by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, where appropriate)
- the ultimate responsibility for deriving benefit from PDP rests with each learner.

5 Universities UK (UUK), Universities Scotland, GuildHE, the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA), the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) are working with others to help HE providers and academics develop PDP policies and practices.

### **PDP and quality assurance**

6 This document will be of interest to practitioners and those concerned with quality assurance and enhancement, and teaching and learning policy. It needs to be considered within the context of an HE provider's own mission and priorities, and existing policies and strategies for quality assurance and quality enhancement.

7 This document is complementary to, but not a constituent part of, the Academic Infrastructure. The Academic Infrastructure is designed to give all institutions a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality of their courses and the standards of their degrees and other HE awards, and is maintained by QAA on behalf of the sector. QAA will, through its development and enhancement activities, support the introduction and development of institutional policies for PDP, and through its external audit and review activities encourage and promote the development of PDP processes by reporting on, but not judging, the practice seen.

## Introduction

### Background

8 The introduction of PDP was the first attempt in UK HE to implement, by sector-wide agreement, a particular framework for enhancing and capturing student learning. As such, it represented a world first and has influenced developments in HE policy and practice elsewhere in the world.

9 The idea of PDP first emerged from the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education (Dearing and Garrick Reports), as part of its recommendation on Progress Files. The authors recommended:

...that institutions of higher education, over the medium term, develop a Progress File. The file should consist of two elements: a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies; a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their **personal development** (National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education, 1997).

10 In May 2000, following consultation with the sector, UUK (then CVCP), GuildHE (then SCoP), Universities Scotland (then CoSHEP) and QAA published a *Policy statement on a progress file for Higher Education*<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, UUK, SCoP, Universities Scotland, the Learning and Teaching Subject Network (LTSN) and QAA published *Guidelines for HE Progress Files*<sup>2</sup>, designed to help HE providers develop and introduce Progress Files.

11 Progress Files were intended to contain:

- a transcript, a record of an individual's learning and achievement, provided by the institution
- an individual's personal records of learning and achievements, progress reviews and plans that are used to clarify personal goals and can provide a resource from which material is selected to produce personal statements and CVs for employers, admissions tutors and others.

These would be supplemented by structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of learners to reflect upon their own learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal, educational and career development. The term personal development planning was used to denote this process.

12 Since publication of the original policy statement and associated guidelines, the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement group (the Burgess Group) has developed proposals for a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) for all students<sup>3</sup>. The proposals incorporate the original data set for the HE transcript from *Guidelines for HE Progress Files*, and the requirements of the Diploma Supplement<sup>4</sup>, and propose the recognition of a broader, verifiable, range of learner achievement by HE providers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Policy statement on a progress file for Higher Education* can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/policystatement/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/archive/policystatement/default.asp)

<sup>2</sup> *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp)

<sup>3</sup> A copy of the Burgess Group report *Beyond the honours degree classification* can be accessed at: [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> Details of the Diploma Supplement can be accessed at: [www.europeunit.ac.uk/eu\\_policy\\_\\_\\_education/diploma\\_supplement.cfm](http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/eu_policy___education/diploma_supplement.cfm)

13 The focus of this document is therefore on the structured and supported processes of PDP as originally articulated in the *Guidelines for HE Progress Files*.

### **Why have the guidelines been updated?**

14 This document supports the further enhancement of institutional practice in PDP. It has been developed using information on the effective implementation of the original *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* drawn from extensive feedback from HE practitioners and surveys conducted in the sector. It builds upon the original document while recognising developments in the UK HE sector since 2001 and the changing context within which PDP practice operates today. The following factors, in particular, guided its development<sup>5</sup>:

- nearly 10 years' experience of implementing PDP in a range of subjects at all levels and across a broad spectrum of HE providers
- increased flexibility in when and where learning is taking place, including increased work-based learning
- the Roberts' Review, SET for Success (2001), and developments in postgraduate education, including the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, which sets out the expectation that learners will take 'responsibility for their own personal and professional development'
- the increased reference to PDP approaches in subject benchmark statements
- developments in the use of e-portfolios to structure and support learning
- changing practice in the pre-university curriculum in schools and colleges including a greater emphasis on personalised learning
- the needs of mature learners and those returning to study
- the increased use of PDP-style processes in continuing professional development in the professions, commerce and industry
- the developing research evidence which supports the effectiveness of PDP approaches.

15 Taken together, these developments provide a rich base of experience and evidence and a revised policy context. Furthermore, with the increased awareness of PDP and its effective use across the sector, the opportunity has been taken to simplify and refocus the guidance.

16 PDP has an important role to play in making the outcomes or results of learning in HE more explicit. When learners are clear about what is expected of them and what they, in turn, might expect of HE, the quality of learning improves. PDP reflects this outcomes approach to learning because it involves the setting of personal learning goals/outcomes, an awareness of the process and activities which enable the personal goals/outcomes to be achieved, and an awareness of the learning that has occurred as a result of this process.

17 PDP supports the idea that learning is a lifelong and life-wide activity. The process of PDP can strengthen the capacity of learners to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own personal, educational and career development. This is a core learning process, required throughout the education system and in many employment and continuing professional development contexts.

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<sup>5</sup> Further information is available from the sources listed in Appendix 1.

## Guidance

### What is PDP?

18 PDP has the following definition<sup>6</sup>.

A structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.

19 PDP is:

- a structured process that is integral to learning at all levels
- concerned with learning in a holistic sense (in academic, personal and professional contexts)
- an inclusive process, open to all learners
- something that an individual does with guidance and support which decrease as personal capability is developed so that it becomes self-sustaining
- a process that involves self-reflection, the creation of personal records, and planning and monitoring progress towards the achievement of personal objectives
- intended to improve the capacity of individuals to communicate their learning to others (for example, academic staff and employers).

20 The primary objectives of PDP are to enhance the capacity of learners to reflect, plan and take responsibility for their own learning and to understand what and how they learn. PDP is based on the skills of reflection and planning which are integral to knowing how to learn in different contexts and to transfer that learning throughout life.

21 HE employs a variety of strategies to encourage learners to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning experiences and plan for their own development. A variety of terms are used to describe a process of reviewing and recording learning and achievement and action planning which reflects the objectives of PDP. These include personal profiling, personal and academic records, development plans, progress files, learning portfolios, e-portfolios, learning logs, and diaries. Many of these terms emphasise that formal and informal records can help structure and support the process of learning, and are a means of evidencing attainment.

22 The processes underpinning PDP are often linked to work on learning theory<sup>7</sup>, which views effective learning as occurring in a four-stage cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This is the basis for figure 1. However, the definition of PDP also emphasises the importance of guidance and support for this process, which may be provided through or alongside the curriculum and which involves tutors, peers or 'significant others' (for example, workplace or placement supervisors or careers advisers).

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<sup>6</sup> *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* (2001), paragraph 28.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Kolb, D (1984) *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall

However supported, PDP is likely to involve an individual - at the centre of the process - in a cycle of activity:

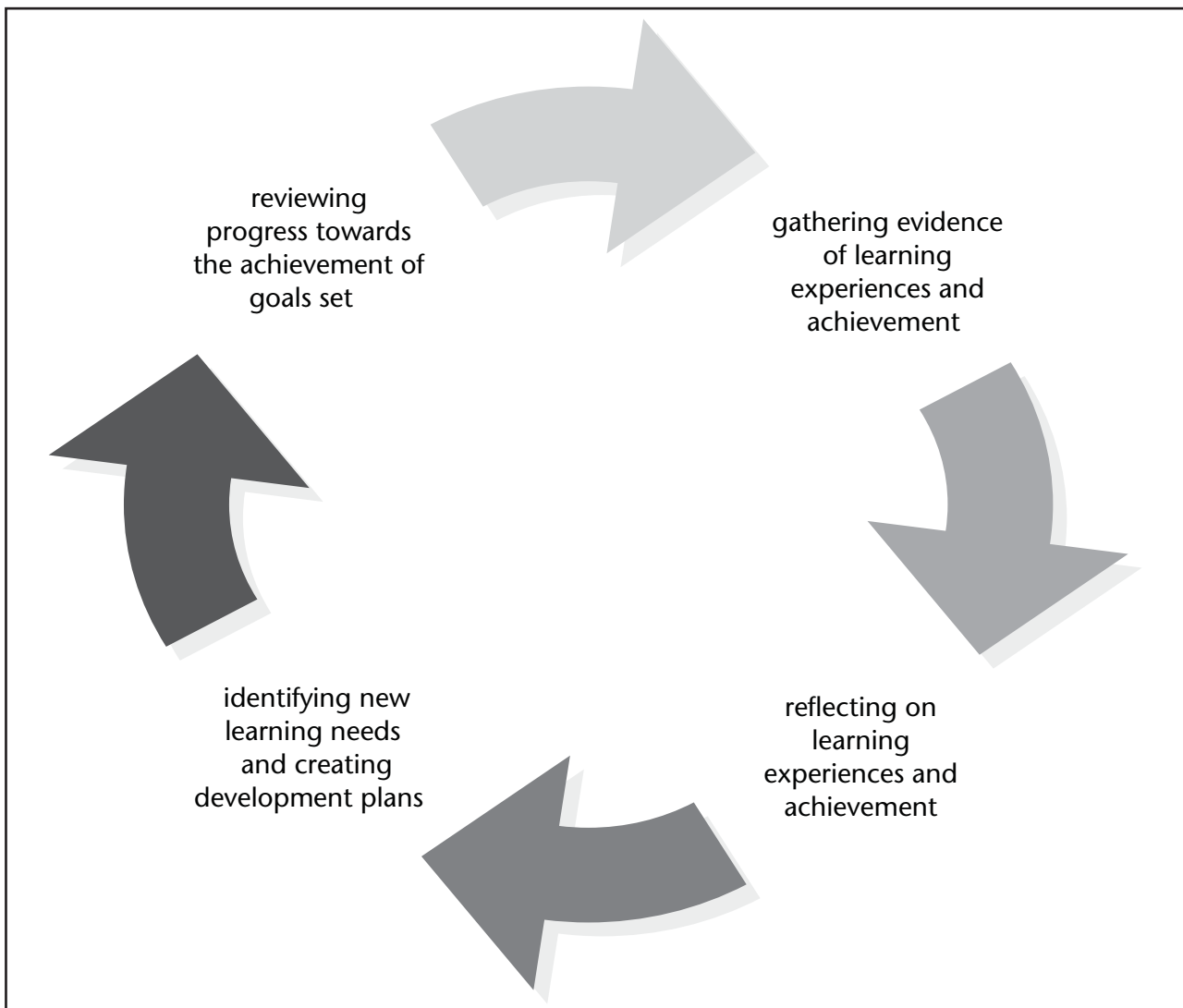


Figure 1: the four-stage cycle of effective learning (based on Kolb, 1984)

### **The benefits of PDP**

23 PDP results in enhanced self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses and directions for change. The process helps learners understand the value added through learning that is above and beyond attainment in the subjects they have studied. Crucially, it relates to their development as a whole person, but also has benefits for others with whom the learner interacts.

24 PDP helps **learners**:

- plan, integrate and take responsibility for their personal, career and academic development, identifying learning opportunities within their own academic programmes and extra-curricular activities
- recognise, value and evidence their learning and development both inside and outside the curriculum
- be more aware of how they are learning and what different teaching and learning strategies are trying to achieve



- be more effective in monitoring and reviewing their own progress and using their own records and evidence of learning to demonstrate to others what they know and can do
- evaluate and recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and identify ways in which perceived weaknesses might be improved and strengths enhanced
- develop their identity in relation to their academic, professional and personal progression
- develop a vocabulary to communicate their development and achievement
- be better prepared for seeking, continuing or changing employment or self-employment and be more able to articulate the skills and knowledge they have gained to others
- be better prepared for the demands of continuing progression and career development in professional and academic careers.

25 PDP helps **academic staff**:

- by helping students to be more independent/autonomous learners
- by providing a framework for discussion about individual learner progress
- by providing a mechanism, where appropriate, for relating the curriculum to the world beyond HE
- by improving the quality of interaction for tutors and learners, where it is linked to personal tutoring systems
- by making more effective use of off-campus opportunities for learning, such as work placements or study abroad
- by creating a mechanism through which career-related skills and capabilities can be recorded and, where appropriate, assessed
- by improving their understanding of the development of individual learners and their ability to provide more meaningful employment references on their behalf.

26 PDP helps **institutions, departments and support service staff**:

- facilitate more effective monitoring of learner progress
- have more effective academic support and guidance systems for all learners
- enhance their capacity to demonstrate the quality of support they are giving to learners in external review processes
- support initiatives to enhance student retention and attainment
- by providing an opportunity for cross-institutional communication and discussion.

27 PDP helps **employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies**:

- by providing a framework for the development of appropriate professional and work-based skills and competencies, including the ability of prospective employees to identify their unique abilities
- by enabling prospective employees to articulate and evidence their competencies and demonstrate verifiable proficiency
- by developing the ability of their graduate employees to continually reflect, review, and plan specific actions in relation to required learning and development.

## Realising the benefits of PDP

28 It is recognised that an important factor in the successful introduction of policy on PDP is the implementation of institution-wide strategies led by senior managers.

29 There are a number of different models of PDP implementation which have been adopted across the sector to support the needs of particular groups of learners<sup>8</sup>:

**Discrete** - where PDP is conceived as additional to, and separate from, the curriculum. Here, learners tend to be encouraged to engage in PDP, with perhaps some support from tutors or others, but whether, when and how they do so is left largely to the learners themselves. Because learner motivation is crucial, this approach is generally seen to be more appropriate for higher-level study.

**Linked** - where PDP is viewed as being parallel to, but also having explicit links to, the curriculum. These may include personal logs and diaries, or compulsory sessions as part of personal tutoring or skills weeks.

**Embedded** - where PDP is embedded in specific elements of a programme, which provide the main support for PDP. They may also serve to link with material covered elsewhere in the programme.

**Integrated** - a whole-curriculum approach where all or most parts of a programme involve activities which are aligned with PDP processes, including those in the workplace. In this model, every programme tutor has a responsibility for supporting PDP.

**Extended** - where PDP processes are included in the curriculum but also serve explicitly to integrate learning activities (such as volunteering or peer mentoring) outside the curriculum. These may include integrated or voluntary work placements or other extra-curricular activities.

30 There are many ways of supporting the implementation of PDP. However, the experience of implementing PDP shows that it is likely to be most effective when it is:

- a mainstream academic activity, explicitly supported by senior managers
- linked to the learning objectives/outcomes of programmes
- undertaken regularly
- valued by the learner
- supported and valued by staff and hence seen as important by learners
- supported by institutional structures, resources and expertise
- formally recorded and linked to assessment processes
- seen to be valued by society and other external stakeholders (such as employers and professional bodies).

31 Features of policies and practice that are known to be successful in implementing PDP in HE are identified below.

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Ward, R, et al (revised edition 2009) *Personal development planning and employability*, Learning and Employability Series 2, York: The Higher Education Academy

### **For learners**

- Processes for PDP and documents that describe such processes reflect the curriculum and organisational patterns of the programme.
- Where practical, learners are involved in the design and development of such documents and processes.
- The primary responsibility for developing, updating and maintaining their personal learning records rests with the individual learner, with staff support and guidance.
- Learners are introduced to PDP, its purposes, obligations and anticipated benefits as part of a sustainable commitment to lifelong learning, at an early point in their HE experience.

### **For staff and institutions**

- Processes for PDP, and documents that describe such processes, are designed within departments, to ensure local ownership.
- Guidance and development opportunities are provided for all staff involved in supporting PDP, including personal tutors, careers advisers and workplace mentors, so that the support they provide is informed and effective.
- Learners have appropriate and regular access to a named individual who will support (and challenge) the learner through the PDP process.
- Learners are supported in developing their understanding of the contribution that reflective review and action planning may make to their learning and personal development.
- The relationship of PDP processes to curriculum design and assessment practices and requirements are shared with learners.
- PDP is integrated into the opportunities that are provided for careers advice and planning.
- Feedback is sought from learners on the effectiveness of their PDP practices and learners are involved in any formal review of policy.

## **Key actions for the effective implementation of personal development planning**

The nature and scope of opportunities for PDP and the recording and support strategies adopted are determined by individual institutions. However, the experience of implementing PDP across the UK HE sector has identified a number of key actions for effective practice in support of PDP at institutional, programme and individual learner levels.

### **1 Institutional strategy and policy**

Institutions have a strategy and policy framework for the implementation, monitoring and quality enhancement of PDP provision. Such a framework establishes and develops:

- the nature of institutional opportunities for PDP for all learners at all levels in all types of provision
- any appropriate institutional recording and support systems
- the scope for customised practice across programme provision
- the flexibility of policy requirements when extended to students in partner institutions
- appropriate staff development opportunities to support PDP implementation
- how the views of stakeholders (such as students, staff and employers) will inform the continuous enhancement of PDP practice
- the locus for senior management commitment and support for PDP
- how PDP provision will be resourced.

### **2 Presence within programmes**

PDP has a clear presence and is valued at programme level. This can be achieved when:

- programmes have an agreed rationale and framework for PDP, made clear in approved documentation and communicated to staff and students through course materials
- PDP is clearly related to the curriculum and is highly visible, whether delivered as a discrete strand or embedded within subject provision and practice
- PDP practice is customised and adapted to establish local ownership of the ways in which learner engagement in PDP is supported and valued within a programme.

### **3 Engaging with learners**

Learner engagement in PDP is valued and supported throughout the student lifecycle so that learners are encouraged to take ownership of their own PDP practice, processes and records. To this end, learners are provided with:

- advance information on support for PDP in their programme
- a rationale for engagement with PDP throughout their programme
- an introduction to approaches used to support PDP at the different stages of their programme
- accessible institutional or programme tools and aids supporting engagement in PDP processes and an introduction to, and ongoing support with, their implementation and use

- opportunities to engage in PDP activities at each stage of the programme and across a range of learning contexts
- opportunities to integrate extra-curricula experiences into their self-development and to reflect on their own identity, and their personal, lifelong and life-wide learning
- opportunities to create their own learning records containing information on qualities and skills they can evidence, which can be drawn upon when applying for a job or further study
- opportunities to give feedback on their experience of PDP provision
- clear guidance on the eligibility for accreditation of their own evidence of learning through PDP (for example, through accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), work experience, or reflective practice) and its recording on an institutionally verified record
- recognition and development of the learner's engagement in PDP-style processes prior to entry to HE, including associated records.

## Supporting institutional policy and practice

32 In the UK the quality assurance of HE is facilitated by the Academic Infrastructure (AI)<sup>9</sup>. The AI is designed to give all HE providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality of their HE provision, and the standards of their degrees and other HE awards. The AI has four components: three are mainly concerned with setting standards (the frameworks for HE qualifications, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications), while the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* is concerned with the management of quality. The AI is maintained by QAA on behalf of the sector.

33 The AI provides both general and specific tools for designing and assuring the quality of programmes. What is going to be offered and expected of students is agreed and approved by the HEI awarding the qualifications, with external advice. What is delivered and what is achieved by the students is also examined, internally by the university with help of external advisers and examiners, and externally through an independent audit or review carried out by QAA on a regular basis. QAA auditors and reviewers use the components of the AI as reference points when looking at how a HE provider sets the standards of its awards and manages the quality of its provision.

34 The guidance contained in this document is complementary to, but not a constituent part of, the AI. Nevertheless, the contribution that PDP can make to the quality of learning opportunities offered to learners is evident in many of the components of the AI. As such, QAA will, through its development and enhancement activities, support the introduction and development of institutional policies for PDP, and through its external audit and review activities encourage and promote the development of PDP by reporting on, but not judging, the practice seen. Auditors and reviewers may, for example, discuss with HEIs the effectiveness of the institutional policy for PDP.

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<sup>9</sup> Further information on the Academic Infrastructure can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

# **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1: Important sources of information and practical advice to support PDP**

This appendix provides references and sources of further information for the various developments that provide the context for this revision. Given the rapidity of change in UK HE, this list is likely to require amendments and additions in the future. Information on developing trends can also be obtained from the following sources.

### **Centre for Recording Achievement**

[www.recordingachievement.org](http://www.recordingachievement.org)

### **Effective Learning Framework**

[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF/](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF/)

### **Enhancing Institutional PDP Strategies**

[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF/imp\\_pdp.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/ELF/imp_pdp.asp)

### **Higher Education Academy**

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

### **National Union of Students**

[www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)

### **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

[www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

### **The Roberts' Review - SET for success (2001)**

[www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/5462.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/5462.htm)

### **Vitae**

[www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk)

### **Higher Education Funding Council for England**

[www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)

### **Higher Education Funding Council for Wales**

[www.hefcw.ac.uk](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk)

### **Scottish Funding Council**

[www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk)



## **Appendix 2: Members of the PDP Guidelines Advisory Group**

Mark Atlay  
Director of Teaching and Learning, University of Bedfordshire

Harriet Barnes  
Development Officer, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Helen Bowles  
Policy Adviser, GuildHE

Patricia Clift  
Teaching and Learning Manager, University of Manchester

Heather Gibson  
Development Officer, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Scotland

Paul Jackson  
Director, Student Support and Development Service, University of Leicester

Mark Leach  
Higher Education Policy Officer, National Union of Students

Jayne Mitchell  
Director, Development and Enhancement, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Steve Outram  
Senior Adviser, Higher Education Academy

Sue Palmer  
Director, Centre for Investigative, Security and Police Sciences, City University

John Peters  
Deputy Head of Academic Development and Practice, University of Worcester

Greg Wade  
Policy Adviser, Universities UK

Rob Ward  
Director, Centre for Recording Achievement

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education  
Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000  
Fax 01452 557070  
Email [comms@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:comms@qaa.ac.uk)  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

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