PDP: meeting psychological needs to create a 'virtuous circle' of personal development

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This paper draws on research which investigated how MSc students perceive the balance between postgraduate learning as a functional career enhancement mechanism, and a more personal process of identity building. An initial investigation explored student motivations for enrolling on their course of study, and subsequently their notions of the role of personal development planning (PDP) while on those courses. The research thus had two distinct components, each of which drew a set of discrete conclusions; the first of these informed the research for the second. The research used a mix of in-depth interviews, workshops with students and focus groups to generate data.

In the first component, the data was analysed to draw conclusions about the range of student motivations to study at MSc level, along a continuum from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. The research posited that a policy and institutional discourse emphasising career development as the paramount role for PDP (notwithstanding the original intentions of earlier PDP policymakers) is coercive, and could interfere with students' capacity for using their courses as an opportunity to strengthen self-concept and a sense of authenticity. The conclusions were that those students who lack an intrinsically configured sense of career and personal development may be less likely to challenge the discourse, and thus less likely to use their programme of study as a mechanism for determining a genuinely personal developmental track.

The second component provided insights into students' perceptions of the role of personal development planning in their taught MSc courses. Those perceptions relate to the first component, in that a student's motivation to study (for functional career development and other extrinsic purposes, for example, or conversely for intrinsic drivers such as a deep-seated or intellectual interest in a particular subject area), may be expected to influence his or her conception of the purpose of PDP.

The conclusions from this aspect of the research were that while students themselves may lend great weight to the importance of skills and the employability agenda as represented in the PDP discourse, many of them see it as serving an equally important, but complementary, agenda of increasing self-awareness and self-esteem. This student view was considered in the light of literature which identifies the importance of satisfying the psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy, for the attainment of increased well-being. In that context, the task of attempting to define generic 'good practice' in PDP was seen to give way to the need for each individual to determine his or her own developmental priorities. The students deemed it important that their institutions should support the necessary flexibility and diversity of approach to PDP as a result. Overall, there is a case for recasting the role of PDP more widely than as a mechanism for skills development. It should rather be framed as a means of meeting psychological needs, to create a virtuous circle of development from which other benefits (including individual capacity building) will flow.

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Introduction

Two consecutive pieces of research, linked thematically around personal development planning (PDP) for taught postgraduate students, were carried out in an English postgraduate institution. The first (Neame, 2006) explored PDP and motivation; informed by this, and using PDP as a case study, the second investigated models for the development and dissemination of innovative academic practice (Neame, 2009). Useful insights relating to role and perceptions of PDP emerged as a by-product of this study, and are reported here.

The research drew on literature from the fields of motivational psychology and PDP, and analysed data from a range of interactive events. In the first study, 11 students were interviewed, once early in the academic year, and again towards the end of the year. In the second study, an action research (AR) group identified, discussed, and planned innovative academic practice involving aspects of PDP. In the early stages of this phase three members of this group, including the author, arranged two consecutive workshops with 15 full-time, taught postgraduate students, to explore their perspectives on PDP. These workshops took place relatively early in the academic year. The author later organised two focus groups involving 8 of these students, to revisit their perspectives with the benefit of reflection over the entire year.

This paper outlines aspects of the literature from the fields previously mentioned, before presenting an overview of the data generated from these student-centred events, in the light of the theory represented in that literature.

PDP

There is an active discourse around higher education (HE) and whether its primary purpose is for career planning, employability and the development of skills, or for knowledge creation in the service of the knowledge economy; or is its fundamental purpose for students' personal development? According to Barnett (2007):

> "*It has long been understood that a genuine higher education is a process of personal development, but what might be meant by 'personal' development is ambiguous.*"

These purposes are not necessarily incompatible: developing one's career chances does not conflict with developing 'as a person'. But defining personal development primarily in terms of competences for employability is clearly narrow. Jackson (2001) indicates that PDP should be broader, presenting it as offering:

> "*strategies to encourage students to reflect upon and evaluate their learning experiences and help them improve their academic work and performance and other aspects of their development*".

Indeed, many definitions seek to avoid preconceptions about something as obviously personal as PDP. Croot and Gedye (2006), for instance, call it:

> *"a set of processes to help [the student] reflect on... learning, performance and ambitions (whatever these may be)"*.

It seems to be from the policy interpretations of development in HE that narrow conceptions emerge, where the focus appears fixed on employability (Yorke, 2006) and "*skills to benefit the economy*" (Leitch, 2006). This policy discourse lends PDP a decidedly instrumentalist flavour, which ignores the ontological aspect of PDP; this relates to the development of a sense of self and personal identity, and is important for achieving what Giddens (1991) called "*ontological security*". This presents the clearest link to theories of motivational psychology and insights into the relationship between students' personal development, academic performance, and well-being.

Despite this, Gough *et al* (2003) found that most of the literature on PDP until then tended to focus on the development of skills, rather than as a motivational device. Where development of these skills is seen as embedded in the curriculum or 'practicum' (after Schön, 1987), design and discussion of an explicit PDP 'programme' may be seen as superfluous. In these cases there is a danger that the motivational implications of personal development are inadequately addressed. If personal development becomes a 'single loop' learning exercise, instead of 'double loop' (Argyris & Schön, 1978), students will not be challenged to consider both what they have learned and why they have learned it. 'Double loop' PDP can help students 'think themselves into the future' (see below) by considering why learning has *personal* significance.

Blackmore (2007) introduces the concept of well-being into PDP by defining it as:

> *"... all of the provision and processes that are designed to enrich the practice, and thus enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and well-being of individuals, activities and the organisation."*

Well-being is defined in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2003) as:

> *"a context- and situation-dependent state, comprising basic material for a good life, freedom and choice, health, good social relations, and security"*.

This embraces benefits that go well beyond the economic benefits of effective career development, and thus introduces the question of motivation.

Motivation

Ryan & Deci (2000) summarise how self-determination theory (SDT) explains the relationship between intrinsic motivation and the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy.

Competence is a straightforward concept, reflecting explicit capabilities which result from learning.

Relatedness, defined as "*the need to feel belongingess and connectedness with others*" (ibid), affects motivation (and thus performance) through its implications for a student's sense of security; having a network of others (friends, family, peers) who are supportive of one's endeavours promotes motivation.

Autonomy should not be confused with independent learning. Chirkov *et al* (2003), differentiate it from individualism and independence. Instead, it may be formulated as a characteristic of a person whose "*behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and… [who]… fully endorses the actions in which he or she is engaged and/or the values expressed by them*" (ibid). The need for autonomy may be satisfied when a student's learning environment engenders, or is developed in, a spirit of cooperation and mutual achievement.

Intrinsic motivation is characterised by someone's inherent interest and enjoyment in something; when their perceived locus of causality for a behaviour is internal, and not regulated by external factors. This represents

> "*the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn",* and it "*will flourish if circumstances permit*" (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT proposes that these 'circumstances', and thus the promotion of intrinsic motivation, require satisfaction of the three psychological needs. More completely, SDT suggests that well-being arises from satisfaction of the needs, and that intrinsic motivation is encouraged by well-being.

Scheyvens *et al* (2003) showed a link between students' personal well-being and academic success, so we may posit that if the 'circumstances' of students' learning improve well-being by satisfying their psychological needs, their academic success may be partly attributed to those circumstances. Student-centred learning, it may be argued, should focus primarily on a student's well-being, with a view that this will be maximised by encouraging intrinsic motivation. This, in turn, will lead to the greatest chance of the student fulfilling his or her academic potential, and policy aims of maximised workforce capability will follow. As John Stuart Mill (1867) said:

> "[The object of universities]... *is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings… Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians…; and if you make them capable and sensible men they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers and physicians.*"

Extrinsically motivated students may be studying because of family pressure, or a technical-rational decision to achieve a qualification that will maximise opportunities for career progression. Intrinsically motivated students may well recognise similar drivers, but the primary driver for them is an essential interest in and curiosity about the subject. For them, career will allow them to pursue the subject, not vice versa.

Student perceptions

Rowland (2002) says that:

> *"A concern of academic development… should be to raise the debate about the purpose of higher education. This debate… should not only be conducted in places removed from students, however, but also should be contested and negotiated with them... Neither teachers, nor their students, should acquiesce in the assumption that education is merely instrumental."*

Engaging the students in this research involved them in the debate about the purpose of HE. The workshops identified issues which shaped the subsequent focus groups, which in turn produced key themes for PDP; these can be related to the psychological needs previously discussed (see Table 1).

After each workshop the three academic facilitators drew up notes and reflected on the lessons learned. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded by theme. The issues and themes identified are summarised in Table 1, from the fuller report provided elsewhere (Neame, 2009).

Some students used the word "*destiny*" which seemed to be related to the idea of agency, and PDP is associated with the degree of control students have over that destiny. The purpose of PDP, in part, is "*to interfere with destiny*". In subsequent discussion the idea of students "thinking-themselves-into-the future" emerged, to convey this more active role: interfering in destiny involves going beyond self-awareness to engage in 'self-structure'. This concept of PDP has important implications for the purpose of HE: it goes beyond skills and knowledge development to address the explicit development of the self.

Table 1 summarises the issues which emerged from the workshops (column 1), and the themes (distilled from the focus groups), to which they most closely relate (column 2). In Column 1 section 'A' represents the issues highlighted directly by the students. Section 'B' represents the issues identified by facilitating staff from their analysis of the workshop outputs.

Table 1: Issues and related themes emerging from student engagement activities (workshops and focus groups)

A – Issues students perceive as important	Control	Agency & engagement	Agency & Destiny	Implementation	Personality attributes	Improvement	Development	Evolution	Skills	Reflection	Self-awareness	Guidance & scheduling	Self-assessment	Situatedness
Ability to make decisions about priorities	✓		✓											
Role of self-discipline				✓	✓									
Potential to "*improve as a person*" (but how to define "*improvement*"?)						✓	✓	✓						
Becoming better organised									✓					
Developing a reflective approach										✓	✓			
B – Issues staff perceived as important:														
Levels of student interest in PDP issue		✓												
Notion of self-assessment										✓	✓			
Concept of reflection and its role in increasing self-awareness										✓	✓			
Development of self-discipline				✓	✓				✓			✓		
Awareness of benefits from learning; strategies for realising them.		✓								✓				
Role of student initiative	✓	✓	✓											
Need for students to identify their own needs and articulate them	✓		✓											
Reflection and critical thinking skills as core issues.										✓	✓	✓		

Distinction between self-awareness and competence development agendas								✓	✓	✓			
Student difficulty identifying strengths and weaknesses.									✓	✓		✓	
Lack of awareness amongst students of the role of critical incidents in personal development.		✓							✓				
Some students' lack of capacity to understand why they feel uncomfortable with certain aspects of their experience.									✓	✓			
Development of an effective language for talking about learning with students				✓									✓
Students as researchers: encouraging critical thinking.		✓					✓						
Keeping the centrality of the student's perception of their development at the heart of PDP process.		✓							✓	✓			

These themes may be related explicitly to the psychological needs identified above. Control, agency, and engagement, for example, could all be said to help determine autonomy. Skills, improvement, development and evolution relate to competence, and personality attributes, reflection, self-awareness and situatedness may all be connected with relatedness. However, one might also find connections between a particular theme and two or even all three of these needs.

The student engagement activities thus produced valuable insights into student perspectives of PDP and how it should be embedded in their university experience.

Conclusions: The virtuous circle

Several insights emerged from the theory of PDP and motivation, coupled with an exploration of students' own perceptions of learning and personal development. First, to be effective and meaningful, PDP must be something that is defined locally, with the active engagement and agency of students themselves. Second, its effectiveness is linked to a student's own motivation, whether deriving from an intrinsic or extrinsic 'locus'. Third, unless a student's psychological needs, which influence well-being, are adequately met, then motivation, learning and ultimately personal development will not be enhanced.

Thus, when those needs *are* met, these outcomes will be achieved more satisfactorily. Needs satisfaction enhances well-being (and academic success), which promotes intrinsic motivation (and self-determination, or active engagement with personal development). Intrinsically motivated students are better placed to satisfy of their psychological needs, and thus a virtuous cycle may be established, as summarised in Figure 1.

In conclusion, PDP should be seen neither as a 'bolt-on' device for enhancing learning outcomes, nor even as an integrated by-product of a well-designed programme of study. In essence, it embraces the entire complex of learning and the learning environment, which indicates the importance with which it should be considered.
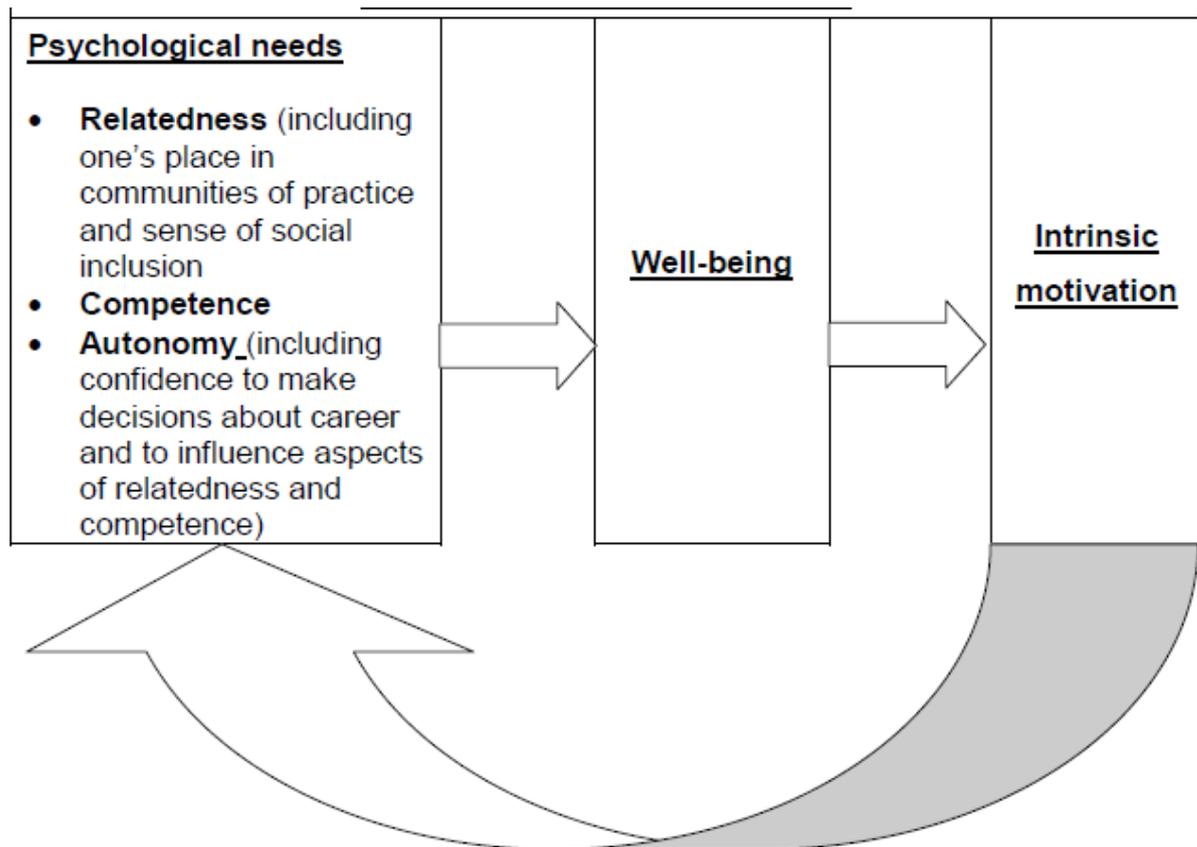
Figure 2: A virtuous cycle of wellbeing, motivation and personal development (adapted from Neame, 2009)

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