Initial Professional Development: A case study in embedding employability in an undergraduate psychology degree programme.

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Abstract.

This paper evaluates an initiative to improve the effectiveness of student employability support by embedding skills development and work experience into the curriculum of a BSc (Hons.) in Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Building on the idea that university is the start of a student's career, we have developed Initial Professional Development (IPD); a multi-faceted process of personal and professional development that draws together employability skills and attributes with work experience, critical thinking and reflection to form a solid basis from which students can continue to develop personally and professionally for the rest of their lives.

New modules and structured group tutorials help students make the transition into higher education and the world of work. A new core module at level four enables students to develop critical thinking skills, reflect on their learning and plan for their future. At levels five and six, option modules give all students the opportunity to gain work experience in an applied psychology context.

Initial feedback from students has been positive, with a high uptake of work placement opportunities. IPD has the potential to provide a structure and rationale for employability development with a clear place and value within the curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, Employability, Initial Professional Development, Psychology, Reflective Practice, Work Placements.

Introduction and Context.

The number of students studying undergraduate psychology has more than doubled since 1999 (Trapp et al, 2011) with 18,110 students accepted onto undergraduate programmes in 2013 (UCAS, 2013), the third most popular subject behind Nursing and Law. However, approximately 80% of psychology students do not become professional, academic or experimental psychologists (QAA, 2010).

Despite this, the undergraduate curriculum, as accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS), is designed primarily with postgraduate training in mind, and traditionally there has not been much consideration given to the majority of students who will not pursue a career in psychology (Trapp et al, 2011). Add to this the fact that most students start their degree intending to pursue a career in psychology and there is a definite need for equipping our students with an understanding of the range of careers that are available to them. It is also important that they understand the skills required for different careers and the skills developed through studying undergraduate psychology, so that they recognise the range of graduate opportunities available to them, and are able to articulate their skills to employers.

The Department of Applied Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University recognised this need to develop the undergraduate psychology curriculum to include skills development career planning and employability attributes. One option was to develop the Personal Development Planning (PDP) initiative already in place. PDP has been a major driver in recent years and has been used as the basis of employability development for students, linking labour market opportunities with personal development and aspirations, and informing students about the possibilities that exist for them (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012). However, research shows that there are significant numbers of students and teaching staff who dismiss it as having no real value in an academic curriculum and that students find the process difficult and time consuming in an already full curriculum (Gaitan, 2012). Some academic staff may have concerns about their ability to deliver material which may be very different in nature from their area of expertise. (Clegg & Bradley, 2006). Other factors that promote negativity in staff attitudes towards PDP include the perception that more time will need to be given to supporting the process; the perception that the initiative is an external imposition; and, perhaps most importantly, the feeling amongst

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tutors that there is little point in supporting the PDP process if the students are not engaging in it. Therefore, the greatest impediment to successful implementation of PDP is the difficulty of getting both staff and students to engage with it (Peters, as cited in Allen, 2002).

We felt therefore that we wanted a new approach, embedded in the curriculum and valued by both staff and students. The department's response to these challenges was to develop a new initiative that we call Initial Professional Development (IPD). IPD is not just about skills but also attitude; a self-aware and realistic view of the world which will enable the student to achieve their goals.

Developing Initial Professional Development.

The starting point for developing IPD was to expand the group tutorial system already embedded at level four, adding individual tutorials at level 5. The group tutorials focus on academic skills and pastoral support, and after a review of literature, including the QAA benchmark statements for psychology and the British Psychological Society's standards for accreditation, we identified areas which needed further development. We focused on a few generic skills development needs, such as effective communication, problem solving critical thinking and reflection, as highlighted in the QAA benchmark statements for Psychology (QAA, 2010) and in Programme Standard 5 in the BPS standards (BPS, 2010).

We highlighted critical thinking and reflection as an important part of the learning process, as skills that students needed to develop on entering higher education and as important workplace skills, whichever vocational area they choose. Engaging students in not only thinking critically about the subject but also about how they engage with the subject and develop as a learner was a shift in emphasis from content-based, subject-led approaches to context-based, student-led approaches.

Reflection is not always valued as an academic approach to learning, yet, it is based on high level cognitive skills. Indeed the nurturing of critical thinking skills and a deep approach to learning involve the student in a constructivist approach in which they

construct their own meaning of subject matter and how it impacts on their learning and their personal and academic development. If we extend this to experiential learning in which important events and incidents in work experience, students' own work and volunteering are reviewed, then we are guiding students to the highest level of critical thinking, applying subject theory to the context, and to examine its impact on their epistemological beliefs and their capacity for adapting the knowledge and skills acquired (Buswell, 2009).

IPD is based on the concept of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2014) define CPD as "a combination of approaches, ideas and techniques that help manage learning and growth. The focus of CPD is on the benefits that professional development can bring in the real world". We see IPD as the precursor to CPD; that an undergraduate degree is the start of a student's career; that every decision they make impacts on their future choices and opportunities; that they need to understand their future goals in order to make the right choices. IPD should provide the skills that lead the student seamlessly from university to workplace.

After considering a number of approaches to embedding these new ideas into the programme, it was decided to start with the creation of a new 20 credit module at level four (the first year of undergraduate study), which would lay the foundations of IPD.

Initial Professional Development at Level Four.

Alongside the tutorial system at level four, we created a new module which would develop students' skills. It was important that students recognise the links between this skills focused module and their psychology studies, so we have chosen to call it *Psychological Literacy*. Psychological Literacy is defined by Halpern (2010) as the necessary skills and values including being able to work cooperatively, think critically, communicate effectively, understand various types of diversity, lead effectively, act ethically, and develop creative solutions to existing problems as well as those that will emerge in the coming decades.

The module focuses on critical thinking, reading and reflective skills, preparing students for the demands of the academic work they will encounter and supporting them through

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a process of planning, review and reflection. This helps them to recognise the importance of independent learning skills and to take responsibility for their own learning.

We considered critical thinking to be an important skill to develop. Brookfield (1987) states that critical thinking, although very important for academic development, also plays an important part in the workplace, citizenship and personal relationships, as well as developing the critical skills which lead on to reflective practice.

Career planning is also an important part of the module, with students researching chosen careers and evaluating their own motivation, ability and personality against the needs of the chosen role. Gibbs (2006) claims that students are strategic and focus their time and attention on what will be assessed and gaining good grades. This seems to be true of our students, and proved a challenge when designing the assessment strategy for *Psychological Literacy*.

With its emphasis on assessment for learning, as well as the assessment of learning, it was originally envisaged that there would be many formative assessment tasks, leading up to larger summative assessments. However, with a realistic view of students' attitudes to assessment, we developed an assessment strategy which would encourage personal and professional development, but where each task would be formally assessed, to ensure engagement. *Psychological Literacy* has a complex continuous assessment strategy (see Table 1), based on patchwork text assessment, as patchwork text assessment allows for the continuous learning and critical self-reflection required by this module, whilst continuously assessing progress. Mainly, tutor assessed, the module also includes peer and self-assessment to encourage the students to take greater responsibility for their own learning (Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012).

Table 1.   Psychological Literacy Assessment Strategy mapped to skills.

Assessment Type	Assessment tasks	Skills development
Reflective Learning Journal (40%)	five reflective entries	Critical reflection Planning and organising Written Communication skills Learning
Portfolio (60%)	Psychology keyword network/mind map	Handling data and information Technical skills Analysis and problem solving
	Group Presentation	Team working skills Analysis and problem solving Technical skills Oral communication skills
	Individual Presentation	Analysis and problem solving Technical skills Interpersonal skills Oral Communication skills Learning
	Critical Review Essay	Analysis and problem solving Attending to detail Written communication skills
	CV and Job Application	Written communication skills Technical Skills Learning Influencing

Note. Skills in column three are from Lantz (2011).

It was important that the assessment strategy addressed the variety of different ways in which individual students learn by giving the opportunity to present their learning in different ways, via different assessment tasks, both verbally and through different styles of writing.

In the Reflective Learning Journal (RLJ), students reflect on their future goals, the skills and attributes needed by their chosen career, and how their own skills and attributes relate to them; their own and others' presentations and how they perceive their progress through their first year. Although a summative assessment, it does have a formative

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aspect. Earlier entries have less weighting than later ones and by providing feedback on the depth of reflection, and making suggestions for improvement, students are able to improve their reflective skills and gain both a better understanding of reflective practice and a better grade. Students are assessed on their progress through the reflection learning cycle and on their development of self-awareness and self-reflection relating to learning through the year. It is hoped that the emphasis on developing reflective skills will encourage higher level thinking in the students.

Most students have little or no prior experience of reflective learning at the start of the module, and so early assessment highlights students who may be struggling with the nature of reflection allowing the team to provide additional support, allowing students to develop their reflective skills in a safe and supportive environment.

In order to create a learning environment that encourages participation and personal development, we have moved away from large lectures and teach small groups of 10-14 students. The workshops are very interactive with many small group activities, as students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats (Davis, 1993). Another advantage of small group work is that it promotes maximum participation from all students. In a small group situation, ideally, all students are involved in both thinking and doing. Feedback from the group activity also allows for informal presentation of the results, helping with confidence for formal presentations later in the module.

Promoting psychological literacy entails reorienting what and how we teach students in a way that emphasizes psychology's relevance (Dunn, Cautin & Gurung, 2011). The level four module provides students with the skills they need to succeed at level five where providing work experience opportunities can encourage them to develop their psychological literacy in a socially responsible way (Trapp & Akhurst, 2011).

Initial Professional Development at Level Five.

Having embedded the level 4 module, it was important to build on the skills the students had developed by offering them the opportunity to do a work placement and so in 2013 we offered two new option modules, *Work, Volunteering and Applied Psychology* (WVAP) at level 5 (second year of undergraduate study) and *Work Volunteering and Applied Psychology 2* (WVAP2) at level 6 (final year of undergraduate study), for the first time.

Traditionally, work placements have been used in vocational subject areas, but in recent years the importance of work experience has meant that work placements have started to appear in more theoretical undergraduate programmes (Reddy & Moores, 2006). WVAP provides students with the opportunity to develop both their employability skills and their understanding of the different contexts within which a psychology graduate may work. The workplace environment gives students the opportunity to use concepts and theory as a lens through which to make sense of an organisation (Rowley, 2003). The placements offer students the opportunity to experience psychology in a work and community focus, and the assessment encourages them to focus on their own experiential learning and its relationship to psychology theory.

The academic delivery initially focuses on the recruitment process, professionalism and expectations of the placement module. Students then separate into their different vocational pathways to learn more about the vocational context within which they will be volunteering. Finally, in the spring term, students attend a minimum of three individual tutorials to focus on their experience and select a suitable incident for their assignment.

The placement process starts with advertising available placements, and students undergo a formal recruitment process. Hugh-Jones and Sunderland (2007) found that employers thought that psychology students had good skills, but were disappointed in students' lack of professionalism, their poor English skills and their inability to make an impact during recruitment. The recruitment process, although a lot of work for staff, students and placement providers, is a very useful learning experience for the students and it ensures that placement providers choose the students they feel are most appropriate for their organisation.

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There is much research on the academic and employability benefits of a placement year (Reddy & Moores, 2006; Patel, Brinkman & Coughlan, 2012; Wilton, 2012), but with a busy curriculum and many students unable to afford a year-long unpaid placement we choose to place our emphasis on reaching as many students as possible and so we offer a 30 hour work placement, which is flexible in its focus and execution. We believe it will be long enough for the students to gain useful experience. There is a wide range of placements available, with mainly third sector organisations, and students can also independently source a placement, or use their part-time work as their placement, as research shows that rather than being detrimental to learning, part-time work can support a longer-term career goals and that using work as a vehicle for learning can have a positive impact on students' motivation and understanding of the organisation they work for (Ogilvie & Homan, 2012).

Students can choose to be assessed against five applied psychology pathways: clinical; educational; forensic; health and occupational. The assessment is split between the placement provider and the academic team. The placement providers assess students against ten employability skills, and the academic assignment is a critical incident report, which builds on the reflective skills that the students develop at level four.

The Critical Incident Report takes the student through the experiential learning cycle, focusing on learning as a continuous experience grounded in experience (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's cycle starts with a concrete experience: something which the individual chooses as suitable for further learning through reflection. The second stage, reflective observation involves taking time to step back from the incident and reviewing what has been done and experienced.   Abstract Conceptualisation is the process of making sense of what has happened and involves interpreting the events. The learner makes comparisons between what they have done and draws upon related theory to help frame and explain the event. The final stage of the learning cycle, Active Experimentation encourages the learner to consider how they are going to put what they have learned into practice.

The pedagogical benefits of work-based experiences depend largely on the extent to which students reflect on them and the extent to which they take understandings derived from an academic context and relate these to work (Smith, Clegg, Lawrence &

Todd, 2007). The focus on reflection in this assignment is key, as it forms the link between the theory they have studied and their professional practice. It helps them to contextualise their experience and to identify their strengths and weaknesses, highlighting gaps in their experience that need further development. The focus on one particular incident allows for deeper reflection about the student's own behaviour and how they may act differently in the future. A Critical Incident provides a deeper and more profound level of reflection because it goes beyond a detailed description of an event that attracted attention, to analysis of, and reflection on, the meaning of the event (Griffin, 2003).

Studying theory can also help students to realise that what they thought were signs of personal failings can actually be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of certain economic, social, and political processes. This helps to stop students falling victim to the belief that they are responsible for everything that happens (Brookfield, 1998).

Initial Professional Development at Level Six.

Work, Volunteering and Applied Psychology 2 (WVAP2) is available to those students who have successfully completed WVAP at level five. It was piloted in 2013/14 in educational psychology only. It will be offered across all pathways in 2014/15 and offers students another 30 hour placement, but with more responsibility and/or greater challenge. The module is taught by individual supervision, which provides an individualised focus on the student's particular context.

The assessment at level six needs to show progression from the work done at level five. 30% of the grade still comes from the placement provider and in the pilot year, for their academic assessment, students completed a process report on one of the young people they were mentoring. This assignment worked well in the educational psychology context, but won't work across all the pathways and placements, so from 2014 the students will complete a reflective learning portfolio.   The reflective learning portfolio will follow the process of radical reflection and aims to challenge students' thought processes to promote self-reflection.

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Radical reflection (Zubizarreta, 2009) is a move away from the more conventional understanding of reflection as an act of thinking calmly and quietly about an event, and instead it becomes and active, collaborative process of re-evaluation of initial thoughts and assumptions.

The reflective learning portfolio will consist of three elements: reflection, evidence of learning and collaborative supervision. Firstly, students will keep a reflective learning journal during their placement. The reflective learning journal is a regular description on what has happened on placement, and the student's initial thoughts and connections that arise from the experience and how it relates to wider learning and reading. It will be the basis of the individual tutorials with their academic supervisor and is a collaborative work, though private to tutor and student, with the supervisor actively participating in the reflection with questions, suggestions and comments which help to further deepen the reflection.

Through the process of reflection in the learning journal, the student will choose a theme for further study in a reflective essay. The essay provides the student with the opportunity to focus on one theme that has arisen from their placement, relate it to wider reading and consider their personal, intellectual and professional growth. We hope that as critically reflective practitioners, students will question their own assumptions by seeing practice through complementary lenses: the lens of their own autobiographies as learners of reflective practice, the lens of colleagues' perceptions, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical, and research literature. Reviewing practice through these lenses can make students more aware of the unacknowledged power dynamics that infuse all practice settings and detect assumptions that they think are in their best interests but that actually work against them in the long term (Brookfield 1998).

Finally, we will ask the student to provide some concrete evidence of acting on their learning. The evidence can consist of different elements, depending on the nature of the placement. It could be a plan for an event, or a report on a meeting, a plan for a mentoring session, or resources that the student has developed.

Initial Feedback: The Student Voice.

It has taken more than two years to develop the three modules discussed and student feedback has been integral to the development and module changes have been made based on staff and student evaluations. Following the process on reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991) that we encourage in our students, it has been two years of development and improvement.

At level four, student feedback in reflective learning journals highlighted the different nature of reflective writing and although initially difficult, by the end of the year, they recognised how the module had helped in their personal development. For example, in their final reflective learning journals, students wrote:

> *Reflective writing has I believe taught me more about myself. Having thoughts and feelings down on paper can often make you think some more and evaluate what you are doing and how you can do it differently.*

> *Another aspect I liked about the module is talking to other people about their experiences with reflection. It is interesting to start debates or converse the differences in learning styles with my peers and I have found that this has helped me understand myself to a greater degree.*

> *For the first time in my life I've sat down and actually thought about where I want to be in 10 or 20 years' time and doing what. I feel as though I have some sort of idea of where I am heading in life and what I'm aiming for, whereas when I first got to university I would simply answer the question, "what do you want to do with your degree?" with, "I don't know."*

In its first year, *Work, Volunteering and Applied Psychology* has given more than half the cohort the opportunity to gain relevant work experience. Initial feedback from students has been very positive:

> *The more I put into the placement the more I get out. A two day mental health first aid course has already been heavily used due to the amount of contact I get with patients. I'm finding the placement very valuable and it is helping solidify what I want to do when I graduate.*

> *It gave me an insight as to what it would be like to work in a school environment, challenging yet worth-while and has made my decision to be a primary school teacher even stronger.*

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It gave me the opportunity to do something I thought I'd never get the chance to, especially as a student.   Having the opportunity to see the inside of the prison and have an insight into what work is done fascinated me. There's so much more to prison work than I ever thought. It increased my confidence in my chosen career and my motivation to get where I want to be.

Reflections on Implementation.

The level 4 module has been the hardest to connect with the students, with some students not recognising the importance of the module at this early stage of their learning. Interestingly, most of last year's cohort recognised its importance by the end of the year, but others have not until they entered level five and started a work placement. Attendance has been a problem with some students and this has raised questions about how well we need to know students before we allow them on to a work placement. For 2014/15, we are making the progression between the modules more explicit, recognising the importance of engaging with professionalism and reflective practice in order to prove their worth before being offered the opportunity to do a work placement. To this end we have added a minimum attendance of 70% for *Psychological Literacy* if students wish to do work placements.

WVAP has been very successful in its first year. The students have proved themselves to be mature and reliable and have been very positive about the opportunities afforded them. Feedback from the placement providers has also been very positive, describing working with the students as a pleasure.

We chose to deliver the module primarily through individual supervision in order to ensure that students received the individual support that they needed, but some students have engaged with the process more than others. Next year we will have a more formal timetable for supervision to ensure that students receive the best support possible.

Work, Volunteering and Applied Psychology 2 (WVAP2) was piloted this year at level six, with eight students mentoring Looked After Children and working with an educational psychologist and the county youth mentoring team. This has worked well

and the students have benefited enormously form the opportunity to meet with a range of professionals. As a result we will expand the level six placements across the other pathways next year, where we can source suitably challenging roles.

We do not expect a high uptake of placements at level six due to the high volume of work in the final year, so we have been working with our placement providers to offer work-based dissertations. Initially, the placement providers have been asked to provide the research question, but in future years, students and placement providers could work on the question collaboratively. We will have one work based dissertation for 2014/15, with the student working with the organisation and the participants drawn from its service users. If this model is successful, we will expand the offer for future years.

To support the focus on placements and help students to make informed choices, we held our first Careers and Placement Conference in March 2014. With keynote speakers starting and finishing the day, the conference was a chance for students to learn about the work-based-learning opportunities available to them in the following year, with level six students having a selection of talks about careers and post graduate study opportunities. Over lunch we held a volunteering fair where students could speak informally with placement providers. Our external examiners also attended and the day provided them with the opportunity to speak to students about their experience.

Attendance was very good and feedback on the day was positive, so this will now become an annual event. The process of embedding work focused modules into the degree has not been easy; the modules all focus on the individualisation of learning and this causes timetabling and staffing complexities. The development of work placements has involved far more work and time than initially anticipated, but the positive response from both students and placement providers has made it worthwhile.

Conclusions.

It is too soon to claim success for IPD as the first students still have another year to go before graduation, but overall, the implementation of IPD into the curriculum appears to been a positive one.

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The level four module continues to have to prove itself before students understand its benefits, but with 58% of level five undertaking a placement this year, and over 80% anticipated for next, WVAP is a strong favourite with the students. Approximately half of the students eligible for WVAP2 have chosen it as an option, which is more than we anticipated.

Further research needs to be done to fully evaluate IPD, but it certainly seems to have the potential to provide us with a structure and rationale for employability development, with a clear place and value within the curriculum.

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