

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO DEVELOPING HIGHER GRADUATE SKILLS IN DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT (250 WORDS MAX)

This paper highlights some of the current discussions surrounding the appropriate development of design education in the UK. In particular it draws attention to the increasing calls from both industry speakers and UK Government Departments for graduates to possess a broad range of transferable skills which go beyond their traditional subject boundaries. Such discussions are further fuelling the blurring of career paths for design graduates in a market place where commercial awareness, business ‘savvy’ and flexibility are increasingly demanded from graduate employers. In alignment with these national debates, the paper will consider the approach taken by Liverpool John Moores University in addressing calls for higher graduate skills via the introduction of its World or Work (WoW) skills initiative and how the initiative may be meaningfully delivered at a programme level.

Keywords: design education, PDP, world of work, higher graduate skills

1 INTRODUCTION

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) has attempted to uniquely address many of the national issues highlighted for improving students learning experience, via the introduction of WoW (World of Work) skills initiative across the whole University. The WoW programme aims to provide every student the opportunity to develop higher level skills while studying at LJMU. It is the intention to ensure the journey through Higher Education is as relevant, useful and aspirational as possible. Focusing on the requirement of meaningful engagement with students own learning, addressing employer engagement issues and placing value on the transferability of graduate skills sets via a holistic approach – bringing all these elements of student learning together within the WoW programme of skills development.

Whilst the WoW skills initiative clearly aims to address highly relevant needs, the practical interpretation of broad strategic visions such as WoW given by University policy makers may not always readily covert into activities and processes that align with a programme’s curriculum. In this paper, methods for the implementation of WoW skills at programme level will focus on the Product Design & Digital Modelling programme at LJMU as a case study. Taking this major University initiative as a starting point, the programme has explored potential alignments between established PDP delivery mechanisms and the meaningful delivery of WoW skills within the programme’s academic timetable. A key aim of this integration was to further enhance the benefits and perceived value of WoW skills, as these increasingly emphasized transferable skills are still viewed by many students as having limited value and secondary to their core subject studies.

2 UK NATIONAL CONTEXT

The importance and value of students’ engagement in personal development to enhance both their learning experience and future employment opportunities is well established amongst academic staff with design education. Despite this, many university departments within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are still struggling in successfully implementing the area of Personal Development Planning within their curriculum activities. The explicit recommendations for the introduction of Progress Files as long ago as May 2000 by Universities UK and numerous other reports, white papers and academic studies have failed to comprehensively address the integration of personal development planning as a valued element of the students learning experience.

Aligning to the introduction of PDP as a national student centred learning initiative is the ongoing discourse surrounding the appropriate development and direction of UK design education. This being most significantly captured in the publication of two government sponsored reports. These reports followed a two year consultation process with both the design industry and design education. The Design Skills Advisory Panel's 'High-level skills for higher value' report (2007) outlines a national plan for skills development, and the following report 'Design Blueprint' (2008) details the practical steps required to implement the plan. These reports set out a series of recommendations, describing the steps needed to support the development of a highly skilled and more prosperous UK design sector. The objective of the Design Blueprint is to engage with partners in government, education and industry to secure the resources needed to implement and realize a design industry skills development plan. [1]

Significantly for design education, as well as identifying challenges and opportunities for the sector, the reports identify significant gaps between the skills required by employers in the design industry and those being taught and learnt in schools, colleges and universities. [2] The continued expansion of design's influence and input within a diverse range of industry sectors fuels the blurring of career paths for design graduates and further increases the discussion around the demand for designers to possess complementary skills that can be applied beyond traditional design boundaries [3].

3 IMPLEMENTATION OF PDP WITHIN A PRACTICE BASED CURRICULUM

According to Jackson, PDP can be seen as a proxy for a number of constructs that connect with notions of reflection, and draw benefits from recording and action planning and should involve: planning, recording, reviewing and evaluating, using the personal knowledge and sense derived from PDP to plan future actions, change thinking, beliefs, behaviours or communicate learning and achievement to others. [4] Despite this, PDP has often been labelled or seen as a further burden to workloads by both students and staff who are already suffering from agenda fatigue. Simon Larter raised the issue of student mistrust of PDP in his Guardian Newspaper article of November 2005.

“The real issue in all of this is how universities are going to help students improve their ability to study. Wanting to do that is laudable, because basic skills are seriously lacking. Students are acutely aware of it. What they want is practical help, not 50 pages of twaddle about learning styles and endless nagging about time-planning and being responsible...PDP places an even greater burden on young people long before they are ready, able or willing to deal with it.” [5]

With these concerns in mind, work done by Peter Knight around the idea of a creative curriculum, and also his insights into a variety of models for implementation of PDP helped confirm ideas about the usefulness of a more integrative approach and also that this is not something that can be done quickly or easily. [6] Knight outlines four main approaches as:

- a) Additive: Separate guidance, skill building and portfolio-making modules available to students. Level 1 provision likely to be compulsory but optional thereafter
- b) Integrative: Making the implicit explicit to create “knowing students” Guidance, skill building and portfolio-making modules or other sequences are designed into a programme of study. Level one provision likely to be compulsory less likely at Levels two and three.
- c) Integrative: As above but reinforced through the curriculum. There is a scheduled pattern of PDP activity timetabled throughout the programme and, if it is not compulsory, it is certainly treated as very important. The PDP framework is tailored to reflect the learning outcomes valued in particular programmes.
- d) A Personal Curriculum: Rather than PDP centring on a coherent programme, this proposes that students use the PDP process to make sense of and integrate the learning choices they have made. [7]

We see our approach at present as somewhere between b) and c) above but would seek to be firmly in c) as we develop new programmes or amend existing modules within the School. According to Knight's integrative approach, the programme team orchestrates an all-through programme involving careers and guidance colleagues in its design and delivery. “This is probably the ideal,

difficult to design, although easier when new programmes are being devised than when it is a case of re-working established programmes. Harder with highly modularized, high choice programmes” [8]

Advantages of adopting a partially-devolved approach are listed below:

- The PDP can be embedded within existing systems
- Existing PDP practice can continue, avoiding duplication
- PDP can fulfil subject specific or professional requirements
- It is probable that students and staff are more likely to engage with processes of PDP that are embedded within subject and school culture

4 THE WOW SKILLS INITIATIVE

Liverpool John Moores University has attempted to uniquely address many of the national issues highlighted in improving students learning experience, making their journey through Higher Education as relevant, useful and aspirational as possible. Focusing on the requirement of meaningful engagement with students own learning, addressing employer engagement issues and placing value on the transferability of graduate skills sets via a holistic approach – bringing all these elements of student learning together under the banner of WoW (World of Work skills).

This is a period of intense change and scrutiny for UK higher education institutions, with enquiries ongoing on the future sustainability of the sector and the outcomes expected by Government in return for its public investment in universities. We are expecting a downturn in the number of 18-year-olds going into higher education from 2011, further changing the sector’s focus from its traditional market of school leavers to training or re-training the existing workforce, as highlighted by the Leitch Report on skills. This, coupled with further changes to the variable fees system, has led to uncertainty about the role of universities within the UK higher education system. Building upon its impressive record of working with industry (as cited in the Lambert Report 2003), LJMU carried out extensive research and consultation to identify exactly what is required from a university and its graduates in the 21st century. The message was clear and blunt: a conventional academic degree alone is no longer sufficient; graduates need both challenging educational development and high-level skills. LJMU listened and took action, developing degrees with added WoW™ factor. This involved re-modelling all of the University’s 230+ undergraduate degree programmes to make work related learning and the development of eight graduate skills explicit to every programme. Uniquely, students are also being encouraged to develop higher level ‘World of Work’ or WoW skills in parallel with their degree studies. With the backing of business leaders and the Government, LJMU launched its ‘degrees with added WoW factor’ in September 2007. [9] The University believes this globally unique model of higher education can meet employers’ demands because it places work-related learning and skills’ development at the heart of the university experience without compromising on the academic quality of our degrees. It will also enable LJMU to achieve its ambition of becoming the UK University whose graduates are most valued by employers. [10] The WoW student experience consists of the following key elements:

- Graduate Skills’ development and Personal Development Planning (PDP)
- Work-related learning
- World of Work or ‘WoW’ skills
- Ready for Work programme

The LJMU WoW skills are the skills, attributes and competences that employers regularly identify as what they actively seek in graduates. They can be briefly identified in 3 key areas detailed below.

Self Awareness

To be knowledgeable about your own strengths and weaknesses, your values, your ability to work with others and the factors which motivate you to achieve.

Organisational Awareness

To be knowledgeable about different organisations: how they operate and who their ‘customers’ are. Also: to show an understanding of the link between your personal values and those of the organisation.

Making Things Happen

To be able to demonstrate potential in key managerial abilities: strategic action and thought; adapting and managing change; and persuading and influencing others.

It is in these 3 key areas of WoW that clear alignments with the existing notions of PDP can be found. As the progression through self awareness develops into broader contextual awareness and understanding of working environments and career aspirations formulate, the final stage of synergy and engagement in professional practice linked to critical reflection of ourselves and others.

5 ART AND DESIGN AT LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

The School of Art and Design delivers undergraduate and post-graduate level programmes to over 1200 students. Situated in The Merseyside area the School has an ongoing commitment to actively promoting widening participation and engagement in its local community via a range of projects and initiatives. Product Design & Digital Modelling is an established programme within the School. With cohorts of approximately 30+ students each year it is considered a medium sized programme within the School. The curriculum is heavily practice based, and as such requires students to produce practical design solutions that answer the requirements of project briefs. The programme develops students design abilities through a variety of project themes, covering basic design communication skills, manufacturing issues, research methodologies, user centred design approaches and professional practice. This very experiential process anticipates that a student's learning develops by 'doing' as they progress through their programme of study. Further, it anticipates that through progression they develop self direction, motivation to learn and an understanding of their own learning process. These desired outcomes are in essence closely aligned with the expectations of a recognised PDP process, but are often only partially communicated through the student's project work, lacking the explicit evidence of 'how' an individual has developed. Have they applied any level of reflective practice, identified shortcomings and acted to enable improvement. Or, have they just lurched from one point to another with no clear path of development. In short, have they understood 'how' they learned as well as 'what' they learned? With this in mind, staff endeavoured to develop a PDP approach which would be seen as an integral and dynamic part of the student experience – a process rather than a product where opportunities for different kinds of learning would be made explicit and crucially that a level of value be applied to its ownership and delivery.

In recent years prior to the formal introduction of the WoW skills initiative PDP had been seen as potential offering an important contribution to the delivery of learning within the School's programmes. In 2007 a significant research project was undertaken by staff from the Product Design programme, also engaging other relevant staff from across the School and University. The project compared emerging transferable design skills with the proposed WoW skills agenda of self awareness, organizational awareness and making things happen. The study revealed close alignments between the two and highlighted the possibility of using the WoW skills as a supportive structure with which to deliver the emerging design skills within the curriculum. Emerging transferrable design skills were identified as:

- Transferable creativity and design skills (core and pure)
- Enhancing partnership networks
- Multidisciplinary experience
- Understanding career pathways
- Evidencing and communicating experience

Each skill was intended to be a broad heading for strategic change with the Product Design programme, aiming to develop teaching and learning approaches that fostered transferable design practice. Significantly, the results of this study supported the notion that the delivery of PDP objectives and the integration of the WoW skills initiative had the potential to offer relevant alignments along emerging core subject developments.

6 CAPTURING WOW SKILLS

The WoW journey is now firmly established across the University, with the 3 key stages of self awareness, organizational awareness and making things happen recognized as 'mile stones' within the

process. Students have the opportunity of working towards their WoW certificate through these milestones alongside of their undergraduate programme of study. Each of the 3 stages; bronze, silver and gold are evidenced via a supporting statement which communicates the students learning progression. While the potential value of WoW skills and the benefits of undertaking the WoW certificate is clear, the programme is still in its infancy and suffers from many negative perceptions amongst both staff and students – no students within Art & Design have as yet completed the certificate. Perhaps similarly to tick box approaches to PDP, activities that are seen as bolt-on extras sitting outside of core curriculum or subject delivery the WoW journey to some appears too disconnected.

The Product Design programme was keen to address this apparent disconnect felt by many students. The programme has a strong belief in student centred learning and wished to clearly identify ‘how’ at a programme level these issues of higher learning engagement could be further developed. As the alignments between PDP and WoW were clearly shown to be robust from previous studies, the concept of linking our students PDP tutorial framework with the milestone (bronze, silver and gold) stages of WoW skills progression appears to be a logical one. Figure 1 visualises these relationships and alignment across the programme of study. The potential benefits this integration offers are detailed below as being;

- Not a bolt on additional activity removed from the programme, but captured within programme timetable planning and delivery throughout the academic year. Clearly establishing the activity as integrated into programme delivery.
- The in-house production of personal development statements aligned to the WoW progression of bronze, silver and gold. Students’ engagement with personal tutors as part of this process provides continuity throughout the students’ progression.
- The integration of paperwork for PDP tutorials and WoW statements. This speeds up the process, making it more fluid and accessible.
- An increased value perception for both staff and students due to the more explicit link with programme of study and personal tutor relationship.
- Better engaged students who may be much more encouraged to participate in broader university support mechanisms and development opportunities – of which there are many, but under utilised by a great number of students.

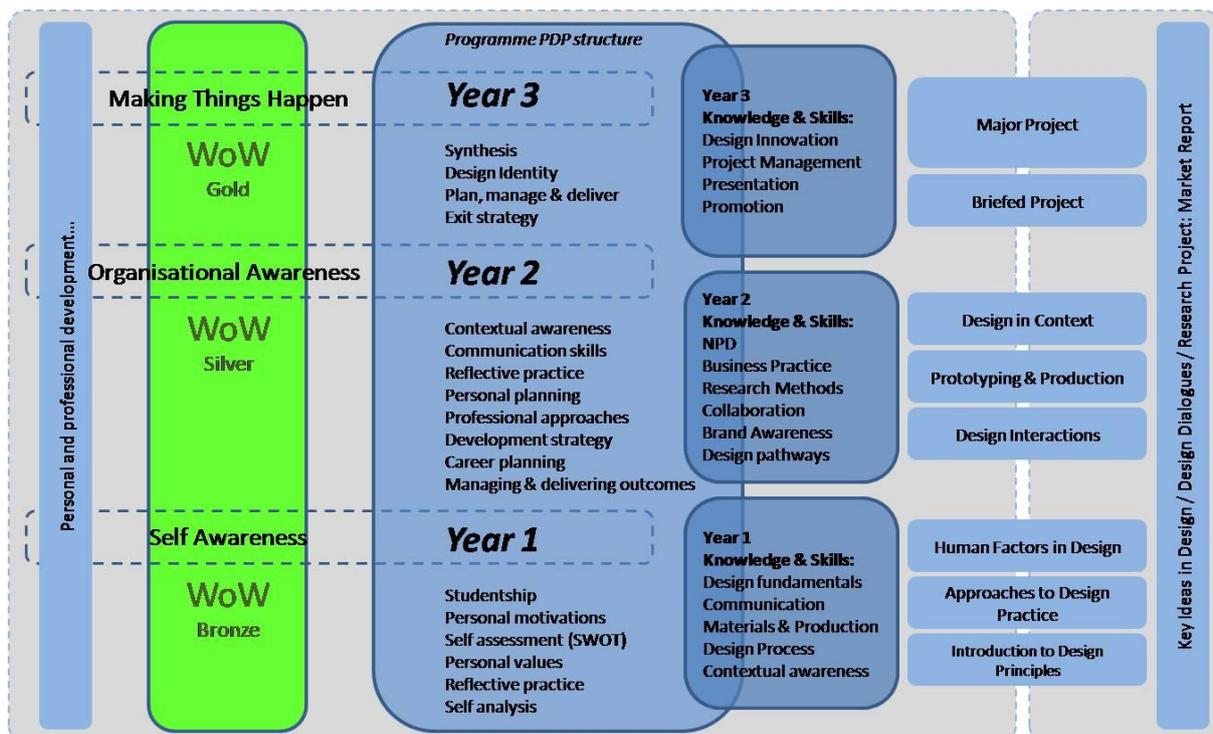


Figure 1. Integrated PDP, WoW and core skills alignment

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In demonstrating the implementation of WoW from a University strategy through to integration within programme level delivery, we have highlighted some of the issues that this process raises. Both practical and philosophical questions have been identified, and will continue to be discussed within the institution. The pilot project developed by the product design programme of aligning student PDP tutorials with the WoW skills initiative will be reviewed following its introduction this academic year, we hope to provide the School with useful insights and feedback as to its immediate 'success' in engaging students meaningfully in these areas of learning. It is anticipated that the project will inform a school wide strategy being developed as part of each programme's revalidation process within the School during 2010/11.

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