

Summer 1997

Newsletter

Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education

'PADSHE' stands for Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education. The University of Nottingham PADSHE Project is piloting programmes for developing and recording students' achievement in five UK universities. The work is financed by the HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning over three years, 1996-99.

Enquiries from interested individuals/groups in other universities, or other sectors of education, training and employment are warmly welcomed (see back page for details). Plans are in hand for national and regional workshops to provide a forum for discussion and exchange of good practice. If you would like to receive an invitation, or simply to join the mailing list, please contact us.



PADSHE Vice-Chancellors support national conference on developing student skills



Professor Sir Colin Campbell
Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nottingham



Professor Peter Toyne
Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool John Moores University

There was a strong PADSHE presence in the opening session of 'Mission Impossible?', the London conference organised in May by the Recording Achievement and Higher Education Project in association with the DFEE and HEQC. The Vice-Chancellors of two of the five PADSHE universities addressed eighty delegates from institutions across the HE sector on the strategic case for developing and recording student skills.

Introduced by Professor Peter Toyne of Liverpool John Moores University, Professor

Sir Colin Campbell gave the keynote speech. He suggested that universities should anticipate a future which will be even more demanding in terms of standards and quality, and will require a radical modernisation of teaching and learning. To achieve one of their major commitments -- to develop students -- academics will need to move away from a narrow focus on content and take a more holistic approach if they are to give their students maximum access to the skills they will need for life. Sir Colin described the enormous challenges which

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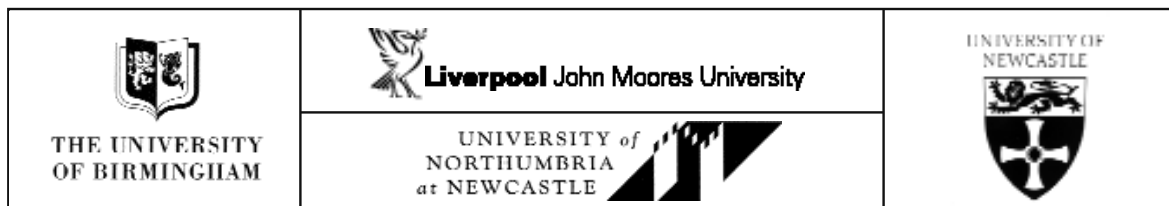
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continual innovation in information technology is bringing to the world of work. The graduates of the future will need to be specialist lifetime learners to thrive in it.

Processes to develop reflective practice in students, such as the PADSHE Project focuses upon, were thus not only desirable in themselves, but positively helpful to the sector in meeting its own objectives into the next century.



Going electronic with personal and academic records systems

Mac Daly, Lecturer in Modern English Literature at Nottingham, writes...

Since the beginning of this academic year I have been co-ordinating the development and piloting of an electronic version of my department's paper-based Personal and Academic Records system. In general, I tend to believe that many administrative routines can be done more efficiently using computers. But I am also learning that computerised systems can throw up as many difficulties as they solve. The words of caution which follow are not meant to dissuade others from pursuing IT solutions in this area, but they will hopefully undermine the assumption that there is a computerised panacea.

There are some undeniable absolute gains for any computerised record system. The archiving and search potential offered by digital storage renders paper unwieldy in the extreme. My department has difficulties accommodating more than three years of paper-based records on its students. When our electronic version is fully in place, storage will be virtually unlimited, and access by keyword incomparably fast. The information will be safer too: students will not be able to leave their record on the bus; passwords will protect their record from unauthorised eyes; automated backups will provide a safeguard against system failure or data loss. Data can also be used to generate statistical information which might help us understand departmental strengths and weaknesses better than we currently do. But some of the other apparent benefits, examined in the round, have a significant downside. Take, for example, the possibility of remote access. We have used a simple World Wide Web browser as the interface between the user and the database. Our reason for doing so was to permit data entry from virtually anywhere. If a student has access to the Internet from home, she can amend her record during the Easter recess; if another spends a semester studying at a university abroad, he can still keep his record up-to-date.

Although this maximises convenience, it potentially threatens the close relationship between personal tutor and tutee which is instrumental, we believe, to the success of our current system. At the moment, personal tutors meet their tutees for a one-to-one discussion at least three times per year. The spectre of these discussions taking place over a keyboard currently haunts me: what at present is an informal chat could in future feel much more like reserving an airline ticket. At the moment tutors and tutees each write on their own copies of the student's record, and exchange signatures. But which of them will take charge of the keyboard? And how do they each "sign" a computer screen? Such details may appear trivial, but I would argue that they strongly influence students' perceptions of their control and ownership of their record.



How will IT affect the quality of personal tutorials?

I have encountered many other difficulties -- too many to list comprehensively. One that might be mentioned is the recurrent need to train both students and staff to use an electronic database, and to support them as they use it. Another will be keeping up with software and hardware developments and accommodating the consequent periodic revision of standards by one's own institution.

It is far too easy to underestimate the time, skill and money required to surmount such problems. My own belief is that a computerised Personal and Academic Records system can only succeed if it is properly resourced, its difficulties creatively faced, and its future strategically planned. Any such venture established on a basis of mere enthusiasm, using a timescale which looks no more than a year or two ahead, and reliant on a budget unsustainable beyond a bit of startup cash will, I predict, end in failure and disappointment.

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PADSHE projects in the partner universities

- At Nottingham, take-up of Personal and Academic records is going well, with course teams in half the departments in the university at various stages of involvement at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. Recent recruits who are making good progress include Politics and Psychology. American and Canadian Studies are developing a 'semester abroad' version (see feature opposite) and a pilot IT scheme in English Studies is well under way (see above). Plans for the immediate future include further work on recording skills for students involved in the Students' Union Community Action programme, the launch of a code of good practice to guide departments joining PADSHE and exploration of employer links.

Contact: Dr Angela Smallwood

- The University of Birmingham School of English has been running a pilot scheme highlighting CV writing for students, and, for staff, the streamlining of academic administration. This will extend to the whole school in the autumn and further work will be done to enhance careers liaison.

Contact: Professor Kelsey Thornton

- Liverpool John Moores University set up three linked trial projects for the first semester of 1996-7: a new tutorial module, Personal and Academic Records and a pilot in GNVQ key skills for the whole cohort of first-year students in English. The first two proved more successful than the third and staff have noticed a significant fall in student drop-out rate. Plans for next session include strengthening links with the Careers Service, piloting the concept of peer group support for PARs and expanding coverage of the PAR pilot.

Contact: Dr Glenda Norquay

- University of Newcastle - see Focus feature on page 4.

Contact: Dr Tom Cain

- The University of Northumbria's pilot materials have an emphasis on high quality design and a distinctive identity, and student participation in the personal tutor system has doubled. The new session will see full implementation of a revised system, including integration of career development work, and dissemination to Art History and the MA in Cultural History

Contact: Professor Allan Ingram

PADSHE meets the Wild West: a student perspective

As part of PADSHE developments at Nottingham, students in the Department of American and Canadian studies will have the opportunity in future to gain greater formal recognition of an important but unassessed part of their degree. They will use e-mail to log their experiences and record module choices during the semester spent in an American or Canadian university during their second year.

The department is currently developing a SAPAR (Study Abroad Personal and Academic Record) with the help of some of the second years who spent a semester in North America earlier this year. These students have been consulted on what they would see as the key elements in such a process and were asked to consider which aspects of the experience they would have wanted to record.

Zoe Williams writes:

When the American Studies Department told me I would spend my semester in the USA at the University of Wyoming, I cried. All those wide empty plains, cattle and cowboys — what would a city girl like me do there? In fact, my experiences during that semester were the most educative moments of my American and English Studies degree. Everything Nottingham courses had taught — history, literature, culture — were put into context, while the classes I attended at Wyoming continued this process: a film course on John Ford's Westerns examined the historical background to the culture and the mentality was myself experiencing in the

contemporary Wild West, the attitude of isolation and the sense of a close community within a wild landscape.

The most frustrating experience during my stay gave me a sharp insight into the issue of terrorism and public responses to it. Writing for the student newspaper, *The Branding Iron*, I was to cover a Muslim-Awareness week at the university. I interviewed the president of the Muslim



Tutor and student discuss the prospects for the semester in the States

Society, who wanted to redress prejudiced perceptions of Muslims as terrorists. I went to great lengths to make the story as neutral and objective as possible, but I needn't have bothered. The changes the editor made before printing her story with my name on it were the most blatant example of the American fear of the terrorist danger. My interviewee's words had been twisted into a near confession on the part of Muslims to the New York World Trade Centre bombing. He was quoted as saying that the small number of Muslims who may or may not plant bombs cannot be held to represent the whole faith.

This incident, and many others, heightened my awareness of the American culture. It also brought home to me the importance of objectivity, in study as well as in journalism. My time in America and the developments I believe I made there are some of the most valuable aspects of my university career. I would definitely have appreciated being required to sit down and reflect on things like this.

The other second year students agreed that recording their experiences at several points during their time abroad would be useful in itself to help them get the most out of their time away. They could also see the benefits of systematically logging details of personal skills and interests which could later help them to compile a CV or be used by staff in writing references.

Gill Murray, Evaluator

PADSHE brings careers services and academic departments together

In each of the five universities taking part in the PADSHE Project, the project team includes a careers adviser. At a recent PADSHE Careers Advisers' Forum they came together to pool experience and ideas.

PADSHE is already providing a catalyst for progress in the working relationships between the English departments and the careers services involved. The collaborative nature of PADSHE both promotes CAS objectives and furthers curriculum development within academic departments. The common ground in which both are working, increasingly, is the fostering of reflective practice in students and the development of skills awareness. Frequently, however, it is the careers service which can most readily provide the lead in relation to skills development, because academic departments are only gradually reorienting themselves towards the explicit recognition of the skills content and potential of their modules. A more equal correspondence already exists, however, between tutorial support for module choice and course planning, and careers service support for career planning. Both are enhanced by a culture in which students reflect on their recent progress and address their future needs. In terms of the personal

process involved, module choice is a microcosm of career choice.

Alongside their enthusiasm for the project, the PADSHE careers advisers are aware of one or two areas of common concern in this formative stage of the work. Some are experiencing low levels of attendance at events put on within the PADSHE scheme. The phenomenon of poor attendance by students at non-compulsory sessions is hardly new, but in the PADSHE context is clearly exacerbated by current students' often negative perceptions of school Records of Achievement. It is becoming clear, however, that explicit academic support for careers events plays a major part in motivating students to attend. The underlying ethos of partnership in the PADSHE Project will enable further progress to be made.

A second area of concern is the role of IT. Where does it fit into the PADSHE Project

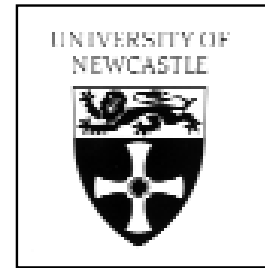
and is there a danger that by transferring the documentation of personal and academic development from paper to IT, the developmental process may be overshadowed by the glamour of the electronic record? It is clear that there is considerable potential for IT within the project and Jan Perrett and Peter Kay of Nottingham CAS are already taking this aspect forward. Care will be taken in the design of Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) packages to preserve the developmental emphasis of the project. The results of current IT pilots across the PADSHE Project are informing this work.

Careers services are making a significant contribution to the progress of the PADSHE Project and the advisers from the partner institutions look forward to meeting again as the project moves to the next stage.

Pauline Armstrong

The PADSHE careers advisers are:

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Newcastle University is committed to the continued provision of pastoral support and the development of transferable skills for each of its students. We see the PADSHE Project as an excellent vehicle for delivering these objectives.

Professor Tim Frazer, Chairman, Teaching Committee, University of Newcastle

Dr Tom Cain reflects on PADSHE Project work at Newcastle

To understand the importance of the PADSHE Project for university departments like the Newcastle English Department, one has to recognise the scale of the changes that have taken place during the 1990s. For a very long time before that, the image of the student of humanities was that of someone who spent much of their time alone with a book, and who then discussed the results of their reading at a weekly meeting with a tutor, in a tutorial group of two or three. The result was that generations of students were in close personal contact with, usually, three or four academics in the course of their three years at university. They also had a personal tutor, whose role was normally more peripheral because they saw their tutees much less often than did the academic tutors.

In one very important respect that has all changed. More and more students have been taken on to undergraduate courses without a concomitant increase in staff to teach them. Newcastle English Department is probably very typical in this respect: to go back only 14 years, in 1983 a total of 262 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) students were taught by 23 staff. In 1996-7, just over 400 FTEs were taught by 22 staff. Clearly, the old, personal relationship between student and academic tutor has come under strain.

Other factors have also worked against it. A quite proper emphasis on research activity is one; an institutionalised system of "quality control" is another. Perhaps most important is modularisation. Students now take a number of discrete units, each taught by a specialist module leader. Instead of weekly meetings with a tutor in a small group, they have several meetings with several module leaders in larger groups. In some ways this represents an improvement: the teaching comes from greater enthusiasm and greater specialisation, and the student gets more hours of contact. But, inevitably, this can only be achieved by teaching in larger groups, so that the relationship (and thus the teaching strategy) based on the academic tutor's close knowledge of the student's work and personality is lost.



The concept of a close tutor-student relationship remains an important desideratum, however, and so personal tutors have become vastly more important than they used to be. The personal tutor is now the only person likely to be able to get to know the undergraduate student well, and to oversee his or her development. Historically, however, there is no very strong cultural or institutional pressure supporting this relationship. We now badly need a system which gives the personal tutor a central role whose importance is recognised by the students, and supported by the institution. This cannot simply be done by fiat: current pressures present serious obstacles to any further increase in the load that can be placed on academic staff, and, for any system to work, students as well as staff must believe in its usefulness for them.

Experience of the PADSHE Project so far has been extremely positive. Certainly it offers a framework within which these problems can be explored and at least partially solved. The system relies on the student's responsibility to develop a reflec-

tive personal record of their academic progress, and an increasingly sophisticated CV, over the three years. Because this is so patently beneficial, if only in terms of career prospects, the students' engagement should be ensured. The bigger problem is that of reconciling decreasing staff time with a new pedagogic emphasis on the tutorial system. From the Newcastle angle, there seem to be two answers to this: one is to say that PADSHE offers a personal tutorial system which will be more efficient, in terms of time and of results, than the rather desultory and shapeless meetings held under the old system. For most students, three short meetings a year, each with a clear agenda, seem to be enough. Since more serious problems should be picked up earlier under this system, there should be less rather than more time spent in helping students who do need more attention. Hours spent in contact with tutees do not increase greatly, if at all, but they are far more rewarding for both parties than under the old system.

The other answer to the problem of limited staff time, and the most exciting development of the Newcastle PADSHE Project, has been the use of IT greatly to enhance communication between tutor and tutee. The English Department has been able to work closely with the Faculty of Medicine's project on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to develop a system which already allows tutors to communicate easily and quickly with individual tutees, or with tutees grouped by year, by degree, etc. The next steps are to get the PAR (Personal Academic Record) itself on the Web, with varying levels of protection, and eventually to integrate it with the current Student Handbook, which would thus become a much more personalised source of information and record. IT may not actually enable us to square the circle of reduced time, more students and better personal communication, and it is not intended to replace face to face contact, but it should enhance the quality of students' undergraduate lives, and make the tutor's life easier and more rewarding.

Dr Tom Cain
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Visit our website at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezpadsh/>

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