PADSHE

MA Case Study

The MA in Literature and Cultural History at LJMU is a part-time evening programme, over two years. Students take a Core Module (Identity-Text-Event) throughout Year One and a compulsory Research Methods Module. Over the two years they also take a number of thematic modules and in Year Two have to present an extended piece of work: either a 'thesis' of 20,000 words or a 'dissertation' of 15,000.

The intake is diverse: some students have recently completed the undergraduate programme at LJMU with high 2.1s and, unable to gain funding to continue full-time study, are working to support themselves while studying for an MA. Others have recently completed BAs at other institutions in the area. For a few, some years have elapsed since completing their first degree and, in one or two instances, their first degree was not in Literature or History. Some students take the degree for career advancement (e.g. those working in teaching) whereas others recognise its value in terms of their own personal development and interests.

We selected this particular group of students for the PADSHE Case Study because of their diversity and the particular challenges for Personal Tutoring, Student Support and Careers Guidance which results from this. We were also aware of increasing pressure to identify key skills at postgraduate level. The PADR scheme was firmly embedded within the undergraduate programme, and all Literature and Cultural History students from all three years were now participating. At undergraduate level the system appeared to be working successfully. The MA programme therefore presented a new area of challenge.

In planning the form of support to be offered we had to recognise that time was the greatest problem for MA students, most of whom were in full-time employment of some kind, and that we could not expect meetings to take place three times a year as in the undergraduate programme. Secondly, we were aware that after the Core Module in Year One students follow a wider range of module combinations and work independently on their theses: it is therefore increasingly difficult to see them as a group. Thirdly, we believed that students at postgraduate level should have acquired some skills in independent learning, organisation of work, and personal direction; we did not therefore want to offer a package that implied a lack of these capabilities.

We therefore decided to offer:
- a Personal and Academic Development record in a pared-down version, with less directive questions
- an initial survey (by form) of perceived needs and expectations of the MA and an assessment of their abilities - a form which was modified and extended after the first year of the project
- a scheduled meeting towards the end of semester 1 with either the Core Module Leader or MA Route Leader. In the first year of running the scheme this took place after teaching; in the second year it was decided to set aside a timetabled slot during the research Methods module, thereby giving the session a more formal status
- a second meeting in Year Two with their Thesis Supervisor as the person with whom they are in most regular contact and who should have greatest knowledge of their academic progress.

We are now in the second year of the pilot scheme and have had one evaluation of the process carried out by group discussion with the Internal Evaluator, Margaret Edwards. We have also had informal discussions with the second year's intake.

- In the 1997-8 session tutors met with 10 students, two of whom has since intercalated and another is not in good standing for non-payment of fees. Each session lasted approx. 10 minutes and covered: progress over the semester; any concerns over work; plans for future module choices and for dissertation topic; any matters which may have affected performance.
- After these meetings it was decided to combine the initial survey form and the agenda for meetings, as this gave wider scope for discussion of previous experience, present responses to the degree programme, and aims for the future.
- In the 1998-9 session tutors met with 9 students in Year One, one of whom has since withdrawn through pressure of work. Again sessions last for around 10 minutes, but were wider ranging because of changes made to the form. They allowed more scope for discussion of students personal circumstances and ways in which the MA might fit into their present and future development.
- For students in Year Two there has been disappointingly little take-up of opportunities to review progress with their dissertation supervisor, although staff were reminded by memo and verbally of their obligations in this area. The main reason for this appears to be lack of time and also the absence of a formal schedule for meetings: this varies very much from individual to individual. Attention will therefore have to be given to ways of improving this. The most obvious solution would be for the Route Leader to meet each student on one evening during the year, but as students attend on different evenings, especially once they have completed thematic modules, this might prove quite difficult to organise. The Route Leader may not have taught any of the students in their second year.

From the initial survey of student responses the following points emerged:
- students generally welcomed the opportunity to review their progress with a member of staff and to discuss the context in which they were taking the MA. They did not, however, perceive the PADR folders as being of particular relevance to them. (Some had children at school and 'recognised' ROA. Younger students had been through ROA but not the LJMU PADR system. In future intakes we should have some LJMU students who have had experience of PADR at undergraduate level; their responses will therefore be interesting. Some students in employment (and in some instances with training in NVQ assessment) recognised but did not particularly welcome PADR, finding that in their workplace experience these were not used constructively.)
- students also expressed the opinion that as contact with staff in Year One (through the Research Methods and Core Modules) was so regular and intimate, because of the group size, they did not feel the need to meet formally in order to discuss problems with work or personal anxieties. Staff were viewed as approachable and accessible and the contrast with undergraduate programmes was made clear. They also stated that although a 'mental' review of their progress was taking place, they did not want too become over-involved in 'mechanistic' processes of reflection.
- students would however welcome more opportunities to discuss careers with the Careers Service and felt that as part-time evening students they were disadvantaged in access to facilities enjoyed by undergraduates. It was therefore decided that students would be given a brief careers talk at in the second semester. This, however, has not happened because of the absence through illness of the PADSHE Careers liaison representative and pressure on careers service facilities.

Staff responses were also mixed:

- both staff involved felt that the initial meeting with the students provided a useful opportunity to gain some sense of what their previous educational experiences had been, what their personal circumstances were and how this might affect time management etc. It also facilitated discussion of their progress over the first semester and allowed issues - such as contribution to seminar discussion - to be reviewed. The discussion of possible dissertation topics also proved useful in allowing students to ask questions and express any doubts in a less formal context, and gave the member of staff the chance to offer general advice and some suggestions for planning for the following year.
- staff however also recognised that in Year One contact with students is generally good with or without PADR and that the teaching context differs very greatly from that of undergraduate programmes.
- staff also felt that the system had proved of little assistance in tackling the real problems of keeping track of students in Year Two when some may only be writing their thesis and are not, therefore, in regular contact.

Conclusions:
The final staff and student evaluation from the Case Study has still to take place but at this point some general conclusions might be drawn from work in progress. The PADR system has improved student and staff discussions on personal and academic development in the first year of the postgraduate programme. It has allowed for particular skills needs to be identified, personal circumstances to be discussed, academic progress to be reviewed, and career plans to be considered. It has also indicated the need for further careers support at this level. It has not, however, succeeded in maintain that contact and support in Year Two. The system has not therefore improved the ongoing problem for staff of the part-time evening MA, namely keeping track of student's progress. Further evaluation will have to be taken as to whether students feel that this is a disadvantage or are not concerned about this as an issue. A further problem arising would appear to be a conflict between the need for even more formal structures with which to implement a PADR scheme and the general reluctance at postgraduate level to become 'mechanistic' in their approach to learning.

The following points were raised at discussed at Route Meetings for the MA Programme. At the most recent it was decided to continue integration of PAR sessions into the Research Methods module, and that we should aim to organise a Careers Evening as soon as possible in the next semester. It was also noted that there is no new intake for the MA programme in 1999.

A presentation was also given at the regional seminar held in Liverpool 19 March 1999. Glenda Norquay outlined the structure of the MA PAR, the ways in which it had been modified from the undergraduate model, and raised some of the concerns experienced about meeting the particular needs of MA students, and the problems experienced in their second year of study. Subsequent discussion was helpful both in sharing problems and in producing solutions. It was suggested that in addition to emphasising the need for reflection on the process of learning as being part of both the academic and the developmental aspects of postgraduate work, the course team might consider ways of introducing group support and peer group reflection.