Are Students Pursuing Higher Education Aware of Personal Development Planning and Its Importance? A Pilot Study at Taylor's University

Christian Kahl and Gerald Raj Sundram

Abstract The need for constant adaptability and change to meet and be ahead of current developments whether discipline specific or in terms of additional skills is important for the success of a student in university life and beyond. Personal Development Planning (PDP) is seen as an integral tool in placing the responsibility to analyze, track, and continuously develop academic skills as well as soft skills directly in the hands of the students at Taylor's University. Students have the chance to fully utilize the PDP resources available through workshops, a walk-in resource center, and even one to one consultations where they get support with exposure to available tools and guidance on PDP. The focus of this paper is on the questions of how much students are aware of the importance and significance of PDP and how much they want to know more about PDP, in turn becoming intentional and independent learners to ensure their success in university life and beyond.

Keywords PDP • Student awareness • Usage extent • Continuous development

1 Introduction

Student support throughout their study becomes a central part of higher education. Nearly every university or colleges offer student support. Taylor's University created a program, which is called Personal Development Planning (PDP), to support students learning and future planning (Aberystwyth University 2010). PDP programs are designed to teach reflective learning, self-awareness, and future career planning (Clegg and Bradley 2006). A common program is designing a portfolio/e-portfolio to collect all learning outcomes and get them ready to present in job interviews to future employers (Cardona et al. 2008).

C. Kahl (✉) • G.R. Sundram
Senior Learning Adviser, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia
e-mail: christian.kahl@taylors.edu.my

This exploratory study is looking into the students' awareness of PDP programs in Taylor's University. Since the program was newly implemented, just last year, the researcher wanted to understand how the PDP responses are from the students' side, are they taking these offered courses, and do they think these courses are needed. The research takes special interest in the point of awareness based on the students' study year and courses offered, as well as which courses are favorite courses and should be continued and which courses need more intensive introduction or should be taken off the list.

The research objectives of this research are:

- The awareness of PDP
- The influence of study intake
- The influence of school belonging
- The importance of PDP by today's student

The research questions of this research are:

1. Are student aware of PDP?
2. Does the study year have an influence on the use of PDP?
3. Does the school have an influence on the use of PDP?
4. Is PDP important in today's higher education picture?

2   Literature Review

In today's world of higher education, every institution implemented their own Personal Development Program (PDP) to support their students (Aberystwyth University 2010; Brooks and McKima 2011; Burkinshaw 2005; Centre for Educational Development 2009; Queen University Belfast 2012; Revell 2007; Smith et al. n.d.; Thow 2004; University of Bath 2003a, b, c; University of Salford 2007). However, what is PDP? Each institution has its own definition, but the message is always the same. PDP shall support students throughout their learning process as well as prepare them for their further life in a working environment (Aberystwyth University 2010). Programs in PDP could be learning styles, language professionalism, learning counseling, portfolio or e-portfolio, résumé writing, or job application support (Thow 2004). Each university is focusing on their own students' needs. Overall, it can be said that PDP is the way of learning in a Higher Education Institution.

Furthermore, PDP enhances reflective learning in higher education, where students can extend their knowledge of study progression (The Keynote Project 2002; Thow 2004). With specially designed courses, such as reflective listening, students gain skills which will help them to learn and reflect on their subjects. This means that PDP is designed as a tool to support students' learning on a daily basis (The Higher Education Academy 2009).

However, universities are not offering courses passé; courses are designed based on the need of the students. Universities are constantly reflecting on their offered

PDP courses and with students' feedback (Strivens 2007) updating their courses or implementing new courses. A good example is the program to design your own portfolio. In the last few years, technology became so advanced that industry and students did not need paper portfolio anymore and institutions started to update their portfolio course to e-portfolio, where students can show their achievements in an e-form.

With the portfolio, the second target of the PDP is discussed, the employability of students (Richmond College 2013). Students need to be prepared for their work life after studying. Besides the portfolio designing and supervising training, PDP also supports students on their skills of writing résumé or helps to prepare them for job interviews (Revell 2007). These training courses are starting to be aligned with the industry needs and students' learning.
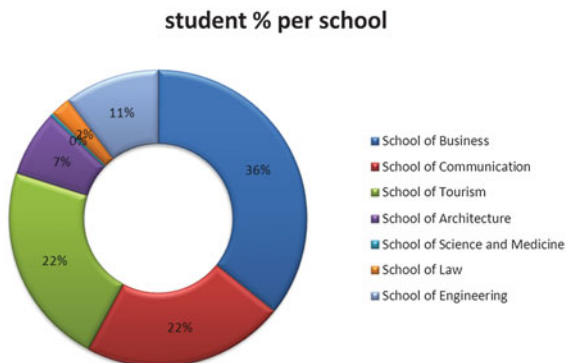
Overall, the PDP is going through a circle of doing => review => reflecting => planning (Centre for Educational Development 2009). However, if the circle is completed, it does not mean the work is done. To support PDP and sustain high-quality courses, the circle of designing and offering PDP courses needs to be continuously running (Centre for Educational Development 2009).

Which also shows feedback from students, who believed that PDP courses are useful to support their learning throughout their study time and supported them to prepare for life after Higher Education. Students also mentioned that PDP courses built their skills up from the lower level to higher needed level (Smith et al. n.d.; Thow 2004). Furthermore, students laid the weekly structure of their PDP training, so they can improve and professionalize their skill in a continuous way in combination with their study time and their study challenges.

Overall, the proposed outcome of PDPs is largely to support the learning process of students (Clegg and Bradley 2006), to make sure that all students have the same opportunity to walking through their study life. As well the reflection on career development to be prepared and have their documentation prepared (Revell 2007). Furthermore, the process of self-awareness has to mention an outcome of the PDP programs in higher education. Students have to learn and reflect about them to understand their strengths and needs for their study (Queen University Belfast 2012).

3 Methods

To understand how much students know about PDP, Learning Advising Center (LAS) decided to design a survey to get an overview of how much students are involved in personal development. The survey itself is structured in four parts, which covers personal information, semester, the knowledge of PDP, and the personal statement of their need of PDP. The main focus of this survey is to understand how deep PDP is involved in students' academic and how they implement their knowledge of PDP in their study. For the third part of the survey, students have been asked about their awareness of PDP and which PDP courses they took. Since PDP should be offered in a parallel structure to students in all different academic years, the third part will play a future role of how and where PDP has to be implemented.

Fig. 1 Student demographics

student % per school

- School of Business
- School of Communication
- School of Tourism
- School of Architecture
- School of Science and Medicine
- School of Law
- School of Engineering

The survey was pretested in the department, where different people with various backgrounds tested the survey and gave feedback, what has to be changed and clarified. In this way, we verified the survey question and insure that all questions are understandable and not misinterpreted by students through the survey sessions.

The survey has a mix of multiple-choice question and open question. In general, multiple-choice question has been used to get a short and direct feedback from students to assess their knowledge. The open-ended question is looking more in the student's deep understanding of PDP and whether students use PDP in their daily academic life.

Overall, 1,534 students filled out the PDP survey. To insure a verified selection of students, the survey was handled out to students at all different schools. Additionally, students' cluster numbers also were chosen by the size of each school and by the study years. After collecting the surveys, the allocation was 35 % first semester, 22 % second semester, 22 % second year, and 21 % third year students. A special focus was given on the first year students, because PDP courses are mostly offered in their first year in university. Second and third year students are joining PDP programs for their study progress and for work life preparation (Fig. 1).

The student selection was done in a random choice of participants. Since all different schools are located at different places, surveys have been given out in front of these schools to insure that students of each school were involved in the questioning. Furthermore, several lecturers from different schools were asked to handle over the survey to their students to enlarge the participation of students on campus.

4 Findings

Since PDP is a newly implemented program, it is not a surprise that 91 % of the questioned students responded on the question of the knowledge of PDP negative. Another reason why students answered negative is that PDP is implemented in students' daily curriculum. Students see it as a normal course, which they have to take, and not as an extra offered course for improving their study skills. This shows students answer at the second question, where they had to name different PDP courses.

Students who know PDP and who do not know PDP named a wide collection of PDP courses, which are offered in the university. Furthermore, since the majority of the questioned students are in their first semester, students just started to take PDP courses and probably do not have the knowledge to answer the question: "Do you know what PDP is?" Only the School of Medicine rates against the university-wide trend. Forty percent of the medical students knew what PDP is. The reason might be that the School of Medicine was a newly founded school and that only few students joined the school at this time. Furthermore, shortly before the PDP survey, medical students had few PDP courses and could remember more clearly about PDP.

At the school of architecture, generally higher semester students know about PDP. This shows that only higher semester students are receiving PDP courses which are connected with their e-portfolio. Another picture shows the School of Engineering, where first year students (50 % of second semester students) replied that they knew PDP, which shows that study skill courses are recognized by engineering students.

A different picture shows the School of Hospitality, where PDP is known throughout all semester. Because of the intensive link of PDP and course syllabus, students are joining PDP courses during their entire study. Freshman students are joining study skill courses and courses which support their study progress. Students in the second year are deeply involved with the e-portfolio project which runs with PDP together. Final year students are joining career planning courses to be prepared for their work life after their studies (Figs. 2, 3, 4, and 5).

The open question, where students have to list PDP courses, showed an opposite picture of the first question. Students listed several courses, also if they answered
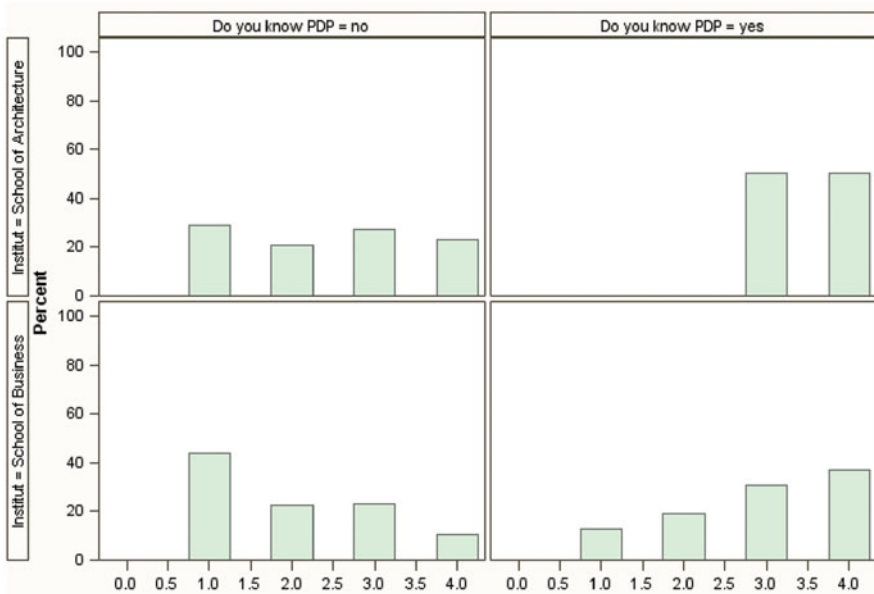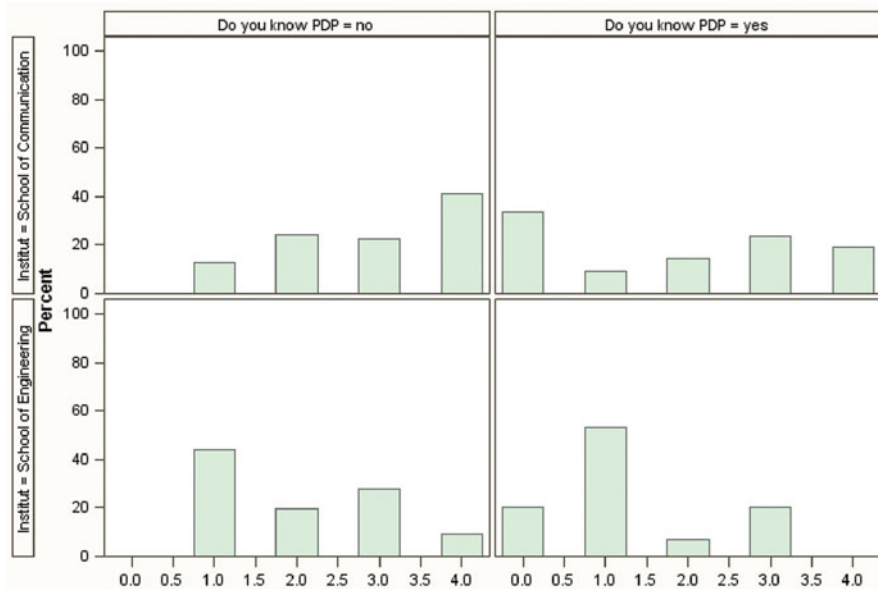

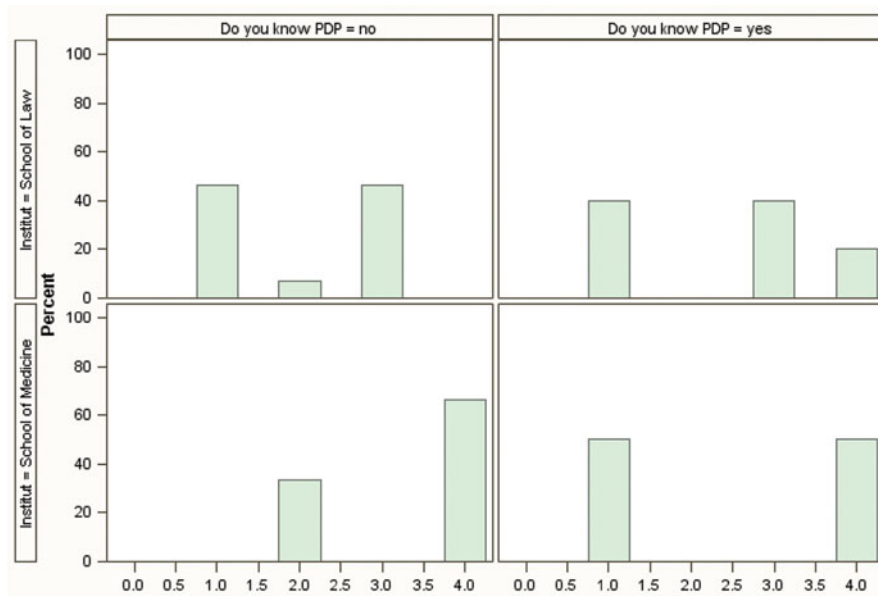**Fig. 2** Awareness of PDP

Fig. 3 Awareness of PDP
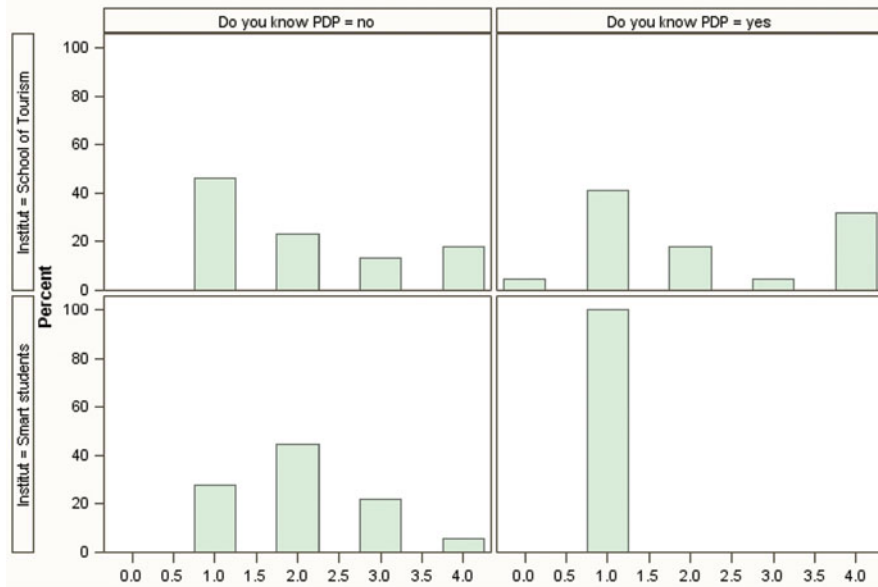

Fig. 4 Awareness of PDP

Fig. 5 Awareness of PDP

"No" at the first question. The most common answers were time management, stress management, project management, future career building, and study skills. This shows that students recognize PDP topics in their schools and can use them in their daily study life. Especially topics like study skills and time management are welcomed, and students appreciate these courses throughout their study time. Another trend is the awareness of career building. Students are starting their career planning at their study time. This can be a benefit for students, because they can gain more professional knowledge throughout their studies, which they can use at their work place later. Not so often but regularly mentioned are presentation skills, critical thinking, and plagiarism. PDP courses which have a deeper focus on study skills are not so commonly remembered by students. This can have two explanations: Firstly, the PDP program is a new integrated program and until now not fully integrated. And secondly, students do not see a use of deeper focuses on study skills and are satisfied with the current introduction programs which they see are more supportive for their study. Overall, it can be said that students named a variety of PDP courses at this open-ended question and it showed that students took the opportunity to enter into PDP courses and used the gained information for their study and their preparation for their working life.

Question number three, which was control questions of students who know what PDP is, was split into four different answers. Thirty-three percent of all questioned students answered that PDP is supporting their study abilities, their plan for developing knowledge for their study subjects, and their future planning after university.

If the categories are split, students are generally seeing PDP as a tool for their study abilities and skills. This shows that students understand the importance of PDP as a study tool and recognize and appreciate it as support courses. Especially the School of Law is seeing PDP as a tool for study abilities and skills. Twelve out of 19 are saying that PDP is a tool for their study support. Again it shows that schools, which are offering PDP intensive to their students, get an active feedback and students remember what they learned and use it throughout their study. Another trend is that 18 % of all questioned students are seeing PDP as a future planning tool. Students are looking for planning support for work after they study. Especially portfolio or e-portfolio is one of the wanted future planning tools which students request and prefer to join. Only 16 % of the questioned students answered that they are not sure about what PDP is and answered with "Not Sure."

Question number four asked students if they had joined PDP courses in their school, and the analysis shows that 79 % of all questioned students did not join a PDP course since they joined the university. Only 21 % already have PDP experience. One reason why only a quarter of all students took PDP courses is that PDP is a new initiative and is not implemented in all schools. Only in schools which have PDP courses did students answer positive at the question of joined PDP courses in their school. In addition, students from the second and third study year are not so strongly represented as the first year students. This implements that these students votes are % smaller compared to first year students.

The fifth question asked students about their opinion on the importance of PDP for today's university students. Not surprisingly, majority of students said that PDP is very important (32 %) and important (55 %). Only 2 % of the questioned students are seeing PDP as not useful for their study success and for their preparation after university. This shows again that today's students are interested in PDP courses at their study time in higher education and they are appreciating the university's offers on PDP courses.

5   Conclusion

Surprisingly, students at Taylor's University are not aware of the PDP program itself; therefore, student argued that PDP is not as important as expected. Reasons why this result is negative could be that the program itself was just implemented and the awareness of it was not established. For example, TCHT students are aware of the PDP, because it is part of their coursework. Another explanation of the negative result could be that PDP was planned to be part of standard courses in all schools and not separately offered courses. In this way, students are not aware of PDP itself, but practicing it.

The point of awareness changed based on the study year; first year students are mostly not aware of the offer of PDP. Where final year students already using PDP for their needs and are positively impressed on the programs offered (Clegg and Bradley 2006). As well final year students take the chance to extend their knowledge

of learning and study skills for their future preparation (Smith et al. n.d.). Student feedback is that PDP is useful and helpful to understand needs of the work live and help them to develop skills and documentations for their future career (Thow 2004). A good example is the portfolio-designing course, which most of the surveyed students mentioned as a PDP course.

As well student mentioned that study skills are PDP courses and should be continuously offered to all students.

A limitation of the research was that not all students could be part of the survey to get an understanding of the entire population. Furthermore, PDP was newly implemented, which means that students were confused about the program and could not answer the survey question to the best of their knowledge.

For further studies, a cohort study should be implemented to see the change of opinion of students throughout their study time in Taylor's University. As well in-depth surveys and focus group interviews should be done, to understand students' needs to develop and professionalize PDP for future generations.

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