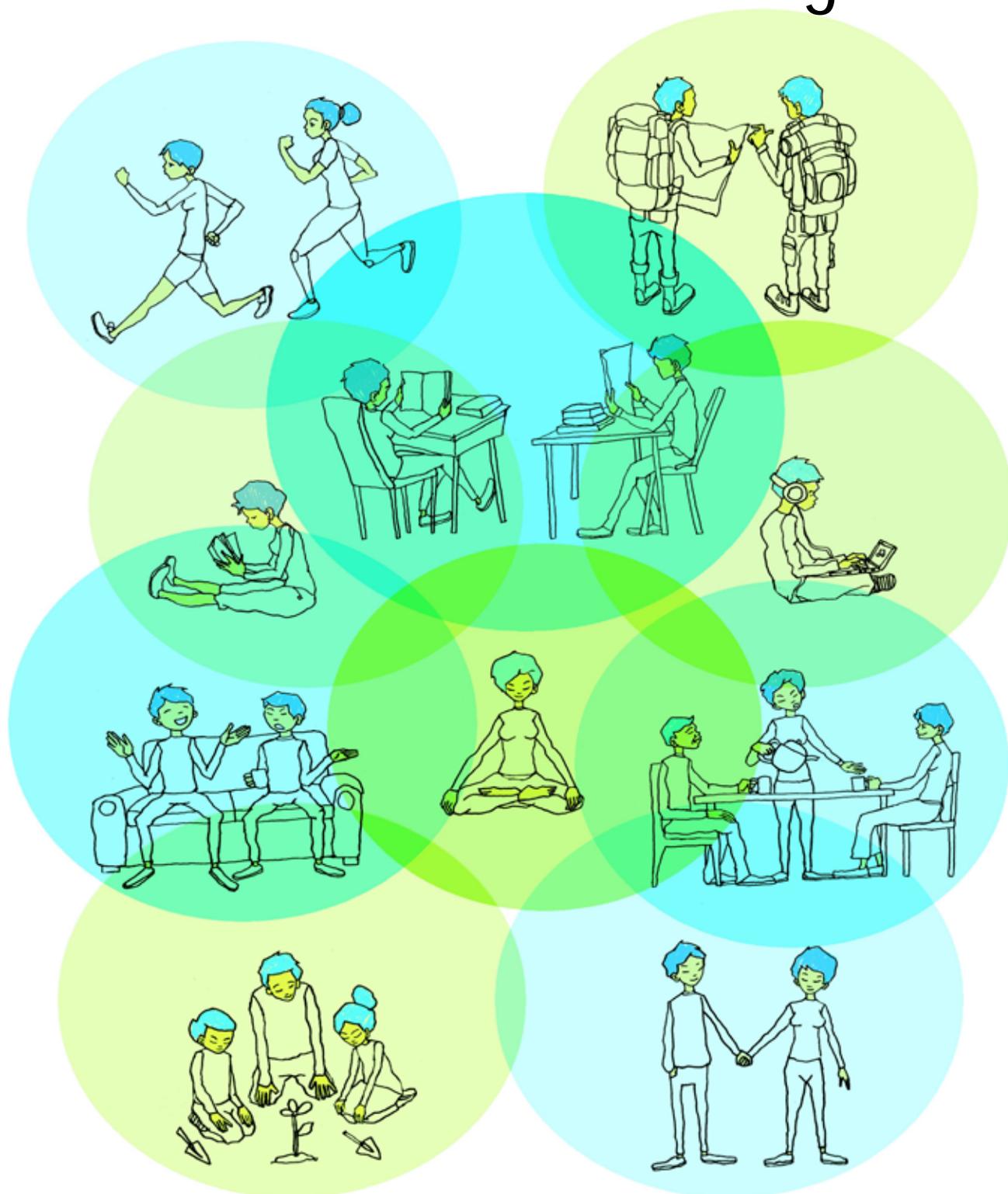


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CHAPTER D1

Look both Ways: Exploration into the Impact of Student Feedback on the Development of the Birmingham Personal Skills Award

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SUMMARY

The University of Birmingham's Personal Skills Award is celebrating its 10th anniversary this academic year, seeing the Award grow from 12 students in its 2004 pilot to 1,600+ today. From a limited number of module-based experiences the Award now embraces over 160 activities. This chapter traces the development of the Award as a result of student engagement and feedback. In particular feedback has caused a change in the way we view students from seeing them as consumers to viewing them as partners and co-producers (Bovaird, 2007; McCulloch, 2009) and embraces the principles of lifewide learning (Jackson, 2011a). Evaluation demonstrates that student participation in the Award has led to higher engagement levels and significant outcomes for programme development, and the student experience. An unintended outcome of this approach is the impact it has had on the author's experience of managing and delivering the Award: shifting from seeing the Personal Skills Award as a 'product' to be managed, to it being a shared learning experience for staff and students alike.

BIOGRAPHY



Sarah Jeffries-Watts manages the University of Birmingham's Personal Skills Award (PSA), and is a member of the AGCAS Skills Award Task Group. In her own time Sarah has recently completed a part-time MSc in Public Management and is now undertaking a PG Diploma in Social Research Methods. Sarah's research interests lie in identifying what influences students' perceptions of particular job sectors. Sarah is also a member of Lifewide Education's team of volunteers.

BACKGROUND: THE PERSONAL SKILLS AWARD MODEL

The Personal Skills Award (PSA) emerged out of Personal Development Planning (PDP). The Dearing Inquiry into Higher Education (1997), and the resulting CVCP, CoSHEP, SCOP and QAA policy statement (2000) and Guidelines for Progress Files (2001). This important development in higher education led to the University of Birmingham instigating a Working Group to produce and implement PDP within the institution. The Working Group developed an online PDP resource 'Progress' (Cartledge, 2013) designed to facilitate education and reflection on skills and attributes, allowing students the opportunity to identify their weaknesses and strengths. The Working Group sought to establish how they would provide formal opportunities for students to develop their skills in areas of identified weakness. As a result, a Working Party was set up to develop a skills programme to allow students a formal opportunity to develop their skill set in addition to the plethora of extra-curricular activities on and off-campus. This led to the introduction of the Personal Skills Award in 2003/04.

PSA (Modular)

The first iteration of the Personal Skills Award (PSA) was an optional 30 credit level 1/C Award taken across a minimum of two academic years, comprising a portfolio of 10 credit modules that were skills focused in content:

- Civil Leadership
- Enterprise and Idea Generation
- International Communication and Cultural Awareness
- Leadership and Teamwork
- Learning from Work/ Voluntary Experience
- Media Masterclass and Press Release Writing
- Modern Languages
- Planning Your Career
- Presenting Yourself with Impact
- Project Management

The modules were open to all undergraduates within the institution, and typically ran across one semester on a Wednesday afternoon. The modules provided a formal opportunity for students to progress their capability in a particular area, and reflect on their development as a result of their engagement. All of the modules developed were classroom based: a combination of lectures, small group work, and practical exercises to further develop their experiential learning. The one exception to this was the compulsory module: 'Understanding One's Self', which was an online module, designed to cultivate self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) in the learner, and underpinned with activities to facilitate reflection.

All of the PSA modules had an assessed element: they ranged from an examination, to reflective essays, to assessed group work and presentations. The Award appeared on the students' academic transcript, but did not contribute to the students' main programme of study. The modules were subject to the same academic regulations as any other module at



the institution (e.g. mitigations, appeals, second marking, student feedback timeliness, etc.) and thus the Award had its own Board of Studies, External Examiner and Exam Board, which it continues to do so today. This iteration of the PSA ran from 2003/4 - 2008/09. The demands for places frequently exceeded the number of places available on each module: typically 30 places per module.

The success of the PSA brought with it feedback from the remaining student population that the current structure was not meeting its needs. The PSA (Modular), as it is now known, was designed for students that were seeking, primarily, classroom-based learning opportunities to develop their skills. But the university was also conscious that there was a significant proportion of learners engaging in experiential learning and skill development through extra-curricular activities both within and outside of the institution. In addition, the modules were constrained by timetabling: they were held on a Wednesday afternoon which meant that students engaged in extra-curricular activities (sports, volunteering, student group activity etc.) were excluded. The need for change didn't solely emerge from students: there was a demand from the providers of activities on campus who recognised that students who were participating in their activities were missing out on the opportunity to articulate the skills they were developing and have them formally recognised.

In 2007/08, as a result of the success of the PSA (Modular) the University of Birmingham sought a proposal for the expansion of the Award. As a result of the feedback received from the student body, the compulsory module on the PSA was changed from 'Understanding One's Self' to 'Employability and Professional Development Skills'. The module has kept the approach of developing self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943), but was explicitly framed on facilitating students to utilise their learning to navigate the graduate recruitment process. The teaching style, as a result of student feedback, had also evolved to a classroom-based interactive approach (moving away from the online delivery of the former module).

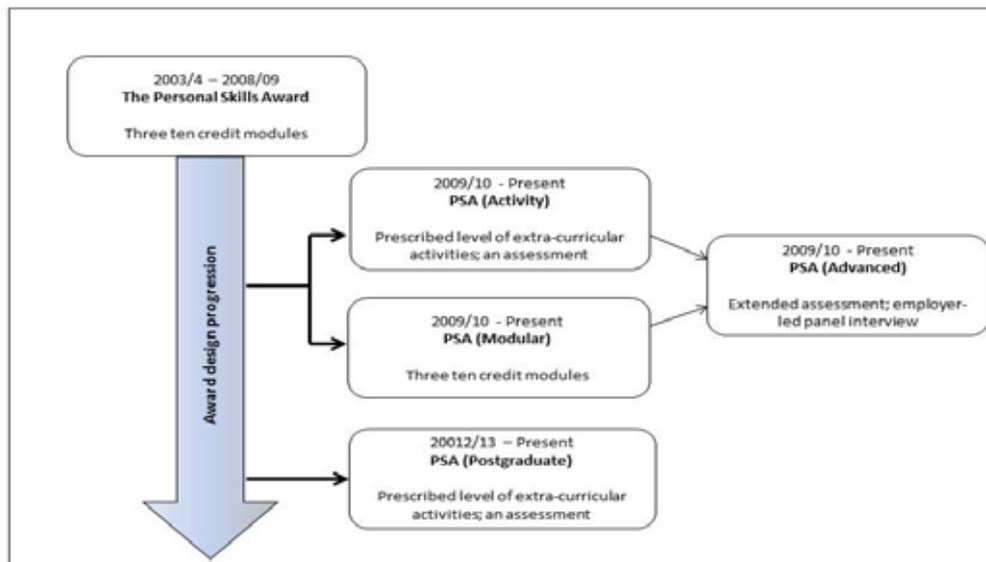
The most significant development the consultation with the student body brought was that two further pathways were added to the framework of the Award: the PSA (Activity) and the PSA (Advanced). The structure of the Award is shown in Figure1.

PSA (Activity)

The PSA (Activity) was designed to recognise students' experiential learning. It promotes the *development of skills* and knowledge, facilitates the *recognition of the skills* developed during the extra-curricular activities, and teaches the learners how to *articulate those skills* in the most powerful way to future employers. The model uses a matrix to allocate 'points' to extra-curricular activities, initially recognising 120 activities following a campus-wide audit of activities during 2008, and presently it recognises 160+ activities. The students are required to engage in a prescribed level of activities, attend compulsory workshops designed to facilitate the process of development to articulation of skills, and undertake an assessment.



Figure 1 Structure of the Birmingham Personal Skills Award



PSA (Advanced)

The PSA (Advanced) was additionally developed from student consultation on the framework for the PSA (Activity). There was a proportion of students who felt they would go 'above and beyond' the prescribed criteria for the PSA (Activity) and asked whether further recognition could be sought. In addition, to meet the needs of employers, we sought the feedback of our employer supporters. The new framework would offer bespoke employer skill sessions for students, but there was a desire to formalise the employer activity in the form of students undertaking competency-based interviews. The new framework had to be sustainable, and allow for significant expansion without the need for significant additional resource, and therefore the decision was made for the PSA (Advanced) pathway to be formalised featuring an employer-led panel interview as part of the assessment. This was in addition to compulsory evidence of employer or voluntary engagement, and a higher level of prescribed activity.

The pilot year was a success, with 700 students registered to the programme. The student feedback indicated that the new framework, which now embraced more fully the different spaces in learners' lives (Jackson, 2011), was viewed as a welcome development:

I think I registered for it as I saw it as an opportunity for me to have all these crazy amounts of things I actually do recorded into one sort of achievement qualification certificate. I just thought that was fantastic, that someone was going to say wow Kate, you've done so much stuff at University, let's reward you for it". (Final year, female, PSA (Advanced) completer)

The feedback from students was that they sought the recognition of the University in the activities they were embracing. The benefit they received, was that in recognising their activities, they were being taught how to utilise those activities to help frame both their career decisions, and also how to best represent themselves for success in their chosen field:

I mean it's so easy to be so blasé if you're like, oh yeah, I play football, I'm a team player, I can use a computer, I have great IT skills, but unless you really think about how these things are important and understand how you want to use it, it's the PSA that brings it to your consciousness, how the two things link together and put you at a very advantageous position. (Final year, male, PSA (Advanced) student)

PSA (Postgraduate Taught)

The Personal Skills Award has developed further since the introduction of the latter two Awards in 2009/10, again, as a result of student demand. The current model of the PSA is accredited to Level 1/C and this prevented the registration of postgraduate students to the model. Each year, the Award received enquiries, particularly from Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students, wishing to enrol. In 2011/12 a formal request was received from the University's Student Representation Board, which collates all the Staff-Student Committee feedback in each of the University's Colleges. It asked for an investigation into the viability of a postgraduate Award, as a result of cross-College feedback from PGT Student Reps. As a result a cross-campus Working Party was established and consultations with PGT students were undertaken and in 2012/13 a pilot of the PGT PSA was launched.

The PSA (PGT) is based on the framework of the PSA (Activity) with the assessment, and level of activity, adapted to the needs of PGT students, both in terms of demands on their time, and in terms of the demands made from them by employers. The initial evaluation from students has revealed the PSA (PGT) is having a positive impact with 100% of students reporting they had identified further skills from their extra-curricular activities as a direct result of engaging in the award.

PSA has helped me understand, develop, and work on different skills which I thought I did not possess. I also feel that I am more confident when doing job applications and the use of models to answer competency type questions is indeed really helpful. (Anonymous)

Participation in the PSA programme has helped me to be forward-thinking. It helped me to multi-task, discover new abilities and improve on the already-recognised ones; useful to function excellently in my career. (Anonymous)

LOOKING BEYOND STRUCTURES

The developments of the Personal Skills Award have moved well beyond concerns for structure, and it is for this reason that the Award has become sustainable within the University. This is why I believe we have received external recognition for the Award from the Association of Graduate Recruiters: winning the 'Best Graduate Development Preparation in Higher Education' Award in 2010.

There have been two factors that have heavily influenced the development of the Personal Skills Award over the past four years: a paper by McCulloch (2009) 'The student as the co-producer: learning from public administration about the student-university relationship', and the complementary principles and exposition of lifewide learning (Jackson, 2011).



McCulloch (*ibid*) critiqued the widespread adoption of the student as a consumer metaphor (p. 171): there is a distance between the student and the University, and the student experience has become a one-way process with student waiting for the educational “product” (p. 173) to be given to them (p.174). In his view the relationship between the university and its students should be collaborative with students and the staff responsible for its services as co-producers. McCulloch cites Bovaird (2007) to define co-production:

the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalised services providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial contributions. (Bovaird, 2007)

In the absence of co-production, the development of lifewide learning would be prohibited. Co-production encourages collaboration between the University, and in this case the Personal Skills Award, and the student, and other service users (activity providers, employers, Careers Network staff). It facilitates an open dialogue and co-design of services and curriculum, which is how the PSA has moved over the last four years. Lifewide learning is student-led (Cowan, 2011) it is:

...both a partnership between learners and the providers of formal opportunities, and a self-motivated and self-determined project. (Jackson 2011:14)

The lesson is clear, in order to successfully produce outcomes with students that they value and benefit from, the organisers of the Award had to listen to students. The impact of learner feedback has been essential in not only creating the framework of the Personal Skills Award, but it now frames everything that we do in developing the Award. This is the only way we can be sure that we are meeting the needs of our students and providing the opportunities they need in order to fulfil their potential.

Knowledge exchange: removing the barriers

The PSA has increasingly sought to be student-led (Cowan, 2011) and collaborative (McCulloch, 2011) for the effective co-production of their experience. It is important that students fully comprehend what is expected of them before they enter into the learning process of the PSA. Whilst the PSA does offer a comprehensive student handbook, and accompanying online resource detailing the PSA programme and all the information they should require to participate, we have moved beyond this prescriptive top-down method. Our regulatory requirements, as a result of being an accredited programme within the institution, dictate the fulfilment of specific criteria from students, and additionally provided by us. That said, we have moved to the student voice to communicate this to students.

In 2011, we received feedback from students requesting an in-person opportunity to receive information on how the PSA programme was constructed and the opportunity to ask questions. This has now taken the form of a ‘PSA Induction Session’, which is now compulsory to the programme. This ensures that the student is fully prepared for the learning experience offered by the PSA, before they make the commitment to registering for the programme. The key component to these sessions is that they are delivered by current PSA



students: 'PSA Ambassadors'. The students use their own experiences during the drop-in sessions to communicate the principles of the PSA, and its associated framework. The potential learners are receiving feedback from existing students, and are able to get a student's perspective on the process from the session, and any resulting questions. 'PSA Ambassadors' benefit from the opportunity it provides to develop their communication and presentation skills within this context. In addition to the formal PSA Induction Sessions, the 'PSA Ambassadors' also help market the Award to their peers informing the peers of their own experience on the Award to reduce the distance between the PSA and the student body. All these approaches emphasise the importance of the student-to-student- voice in promoting the award and communicating its value.

Reducing the gap

The 'distance' (McCulloch, 2009) between the PSA and the student body has also been actively reduced as a result of learner feedback. Students told us that they wished they had found out about the Award earlier during their university experience. This led us to reflect on how we marketed the Award to students. We had previously employed tactics that inevitably created 'distance', like posters and postcards, website, people stood behind tables at Welcome Week (Fresher's) Fairs, and lecture shouts on students' programme of study. Whilst these methods were successful to meet the needs of recruiting 350 students, we knew that we had to consider new methods to meet our increasing targets as a result of the new model.

As the programme evolved to incorporate extra-curricular activities, the decision was made to actively go to the student, to ensure that they heard about us at the right time. As the activities had been integrated into the programme by close consultation with the providers, we were able to attend inductions and training sessions hosted by activity providers to ensure students were aware of the benefits of the Personal Skills Award. This has helped reduce the distance between the Award and the students, and has ensured the students are able to find out what they need to know about the Award in the context of the particular activities they are engaged in.

It has not been possible to use this approach for every activity on the Award, however, a key objective of the Award team is to continue to immerse ourselves in the student-space, to ensure there is no undue distance. This isn't confined to marketing activity: our 'drop-in' sessions for existing students are also held across campus to facilitate access and reach out to students. This has seen an increase in our student support feedback to 96% of students rating the support on the Award as positive.

Collecting feedback

Obtaining feedback from students has been key to the on-going development of the Award but the way that we have collected feedback has changed. The original method of feedback focussed on student satisfaction with the learning that they had received, and how they had received it. This approach is consistent with the view of student as a consumer referenced in McCulloch (2009), as it implies the PSA is a product and not a process. In line with the development of evaluation within the Careers Network (the department within which the PSA



is situated within the University) the PSA now assesses the learning and development of the student through questions like - Has their knowledge, confidence and competence developed as a result of the Award? Have the students been facilitated to step outside of their comfort zone? Have they been inspired to undertake further personal development opportunities as a result of the Award? The answer to these questions has been 'yes'.

As a direct result of engaging in the PSA, 55% of students undertook one or more additional personal development activities than they would have previously considered. The PSA is clearly opening up opportunities to students for exploration in developing their lifewide learning. This allows students the opportunities to develop further experiences, create new networks, and internally assess and improve on their skill set in the action of career planning.

The collaborative process of student engagement and their constructive feedback on the Award has led to the expansion of activities that we now recognise on the PSA. We began with 120 activities, as identified through a collaborative campus-wide exercise which resulted in the new PSA pathways. This has now grown to over 160 activities, the majority of which have been led by students. As we have sought feedback from students, we have opened up a two-way dialogue. We provide the framework of activities that the student can consider, and they, or the activity provider, are able to approach the PSA with activities they would like recognised. This allows the framework of the PSA to develop in accordance with students' needs.

The collaborative process of student feedback is reciprocated when students receive feedback on the way they have engaged with the Award.

The feedback, which is so important at the end of the day. You know what you can say, but what is it that's making the difference between that last few percentage of people who maybe have got the same skills, what are you doing above them? I think that's the great thing about the PSA, the honesty of the feedback, the critical aspect has been great for me. (Final year, male PSA (Activity) student)

I mean my little experience that I have when applying for vacation schemes is it's the same type of process with filling out the interview forms and going to interviews and assessment centres, and everyone always says "I can't believe my first interview was horrendous" and everyone always jokes about how bad they were at the start, because they started off from a complete fresh, and they spend two, three years like self-teaching from feedback from understanding what works and what don't and to be able to get to a point to hand in a good application, and obviously that process is going to take time, but at the same time something like the PSA means you can shorten it down to almost nothing because that really does give you the idea of what's wanting and what I love is just how practical it was, and when you are having interview sessions, that's how an interview is! (Final year, male, PSA (Advanced) student)

This is the most integral and vital element of the Personal Skills Award. Each student receives detailed, written feedback on their assessments (on each pathway). It is the



opportunity for the student to see how they can improve their ability to articulate their skills in preparation for the graduate recruitment process, and beyond. This is also the most resource intensive element of the Award, as a team of assessors are used to ensure that each student gets relevant, useful, personalised feedback. In addition to the students recognising this as a valuable part of the programme, this was also recognised by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) in their feedback to the university on why we were awarded the 'Best Graduate Development Preparation in Higher Education' Award: they cited the robust assessment and feedback as influencing their decision.

Informal learning

The PSA is subject to the university's rigorous quality assurance procedures, and assessment regulations as it is an accredited programme, however over recent years there has been a move to a more formative approach to co-exist alongside the formal elements of the programme. For example, the introduction of non-assessed skill sessions ('PSA Plus') are developed by our employer supporters, or the PSA team. The topics of the sessions are chosen in response to feedback from our students. They began in 2011 as a result of a discussion in a PSA (Modular) session. A student commented that they were too nervous to attend a networking session being hosted by employers. When questioned, the student and their peers within the session, commented that they didn't want to practise their networking skills in the presence of an employer, as the employers are recruiters, and they didn't want to create a negative impression. As a result the PSA hosted a 'Preparing to Network' session introducing students to this skill within a safe space. This has since been joined by a portfolio of other skill sessions designed to introduce students to the skill before practising it. The value of these sessions is reflected in the fact that 100% of students surveyed indicated that they would recommend the sessions to others.

A new feature which is indicative of the co-production model is students co-facilitating in the 'PSA Plus sessions'. These students use their experiences to deliver elements of the session in how they have developed their skill and knowledge in the relevant area, and work in advance with the PSA Tutor, to also deliver a competency-based answer to the learners. The benefit to the student presenter is they get one-on-one tuition from the PSA Tutor to refine their competency-based answer, whilst also practising both their presentation skills, as well as undertaking small pieces of supported teaching activity. The benefit for the learners is working with a peer to develop their own ability to articulate a skill, and learning from their experience. The benefit for the PSA is that we get an insight into how the student is processing and applying learning from the Award. This is true collaboration and co-production and something which the Award will be expanding on in the near future.

The change in the PSA from a transactional process to a collaborative process has transformed the programme. Student feedback has been absolutely essential to the programme's development and has ensured that the Award has never stood still; it evolves according to the needs and interests of our students. The students collaborate with us to produce learning and programme outcomes, and we in turn enable them to achieve more of their potential and equip them with the tools to apply the knowledge to their own personal lifewide curriculum.



Personal Impact

An unintended outcome of developing a programme that was co-produced was the impact that it would have upon myself as the Programme Manager. I began on the Personal Skills Award as a Project Officer in 2005, and was set the target of increasing student recruitment from 12 to 100 in my first year. I took the approach that McCulloch attributes to the student as a consumer model, as my focus was on developing an Award (a product) that would meet students' satisfaction. I was utilising my project management skills to make a success of the Award: to ensure the University's quality assurance and regulations were adhered to; to ensure the student experience was positive; and ensure the programme was meeting the needs of employers. All of this was process-based, perhaps derived from my project management background. On reflection, this wasn't necessarily negative, as it laid the foundations for a robust programme. What I didn't do was actively listen to the students' stories. I viewed the narratives of the students' reflection as 'learning outcome achieved'.

The 'critical incident' that took place was during the student consultation period for the development of the PSA (Activity) and PSA (Advanced) pathways. In the first focus group (of several) I began to recognise the impact that engaging in new experiences was having on the students. It impacted who their friends (and future networks) were; how they were shaping their experience at University; and most importantly how they were using these experiences to mould and shape their career plans. This critical incident transformed my view of the PSA, from us prescribing their curriculum through the provision of the PSA (Modular) pathway, to a curriculum that allowed the students to shape their own development:

that [gave] learners the freedom and empowers them to make choices so that they can find deeply satisfying and personally challenging situations that inspire, engage and enable them to develop themselves. (Jackson 2011:114 - first principle for a lifewide curriculum)

Assessment of learning and development, whilst imposing a framework of competency-based questions, allowed the students to choose their own skills and experiences to discuss, reflect on and evaluate. The process enables them to recognise more fully their own achievements and appreciate their lifewide learning and development.

These changes in thinking enabled me to develop my own skills and knowledge; I moved away from viewing the PSA as a product to be managed, to the view that it is a shared learning experience between myself (and the team members on the PSA) and the students. This has helped to transform the PSA, and myself, and make it a key part of the student and staff experience. That said, we are still not settling: students are not a homogenised group; they all have their own individual learning ecologies (Jackson, 2011a) and it is essential that the PSA framework and curriculum continually adapt to ensure that we are able to facilitate a student reaching their potential, and embedding that process ready to be continued in their professional lives. The desire to co-produce with students, additionally allows us the opportunity to continually develop and innovate as practitioners. The best way to articulate

the approach that myself, and the PSA team, subscribe to in continuing to develop our future on the Personal Skills Award, is best illustrated through a quote from one of our students:

I love to really try and squeeze the most out of everything - I really like to get to the core of what is going on. (Final year, male, PSA (Advanced) student)

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