

# Case Study

## Personal Development Planning and International Students

*Christina Meredith*

Business School, Oxford Brookes University, UK

*This case concerns the use of PebblePad in developing reflective thinking and writing skills with international students to enhance their Personal Development Planning.*

### The background context

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A pilot study was undertaken with a small group of students from a cohort of 173 students studying a range of Masters programmes in the Business School, Oxford Brookes University. The

cohort consisted of predominately international students and the 39 students who participated in the case study discussed in this report included 37 international students and two UK nationals.

The aim was to investigate whether PebblePad would enhance the learning experience of international postgraduate students and also help to develop their reflective skills for use in their Personal Development Planning.

The international students were a diverse group with a range of educational and professional experiences and varying abilities and fluency in English language skills. The students' IT skills also varied as some students in the e-learning Masters were very competent and inventive

when using PebblePad, whilst other students were not at all confident. Without school based technical support the less able students relied on the more able students to help them. Relevant to the background information is that PebblePad is not used consistently across the University and the technical support was provided

by the module leader for this group of students.

The author is currently an Associate Lecturer in the Business School, Oxford Brookes University and has been teaching Personal Development Planning (PDP) using PebblePad since September 2008.

## The current practice

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Before introducing PebblePad the postgraduate assignment for the module was paper based, a written document using appendices instead of assets. Using PebblePad was a new method of teaching and assessing PDP and it was also considered to be a more interesting and efficient method for the students to record their achievements. The module traditionally achieves a low average pass mark and therefore the aim was to improve student grades.

There does appear to be stereotypical views about how individuals from certain cultures have difficulty in developing reflective skills and these preconceived ideas about the students'



abilities may have been reflected in previous low grades.

## The challenge

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*The aim was primarily to encourage students to engage with PDP specifically in developing their reflective thinking and writing skills. How would PDP using PebblePad compare for example with writing a reflective diary either in Word or a generic PDP 'tool'?*

It is sometimes challenging working with a culturally diverse group with different learning styles and a range of educational backgrounds, technical skills and, as stated above, a range of English language skills. Therefore communication must be very clear otherwise there is the potential for misunderstanding.

Another challenging aspect was to use one introductory session to familiarise the students and also the staff with using PebblePad. We all met together with the module leader in one of the computer suites and I learned alongside with the students how to log on and navigate through PebblePad.

If PebblePad can be shown to be an effective tool then more staff may be encouraged to use

Reflective writing skills in the past have proved difficult for some students to implement and understand. Throughout the university there are different methods of integrating PDP in modules or, as in this case, a specific module for PDP. Students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are often unaware of the transferable skills they develop whilst at University. PebblePad allowed the students in the pilot study to record and update skills they gained or developed during their journey on the Masters programme.

it. At the moment random groups across the University use PebblePad and part of the rationale for the case study is to see whether PebblePad has the flexibility to allow the diversity that staff require in terms of teaching and assessment.

## The approach

*PDP together with the use of PebblePad were taught in a series of workshops; 6 weeks at the beginning of the first semester and four weeks at the end of the second semester. The initial task the students were asked to complete during the first two weeks was to write a reflective “thought” in PebblePad about one of the activities they had participated in during the workshops.*

They were shown at the end of the workshop how to send the ‘thought’ to me. This served two purposes; first, to ensure they could log on and send the PebblePad ‘thought’, and second, to see whether they described or reflected on the activity. Examples of activities that students had the opportunity to reflect upon included Belbin’s (2004) Team Inventory, an employability day, workshops on networking, career management, and presentation skills, as well as extra-curricular activities relevant to their development such as English language classes. Personal skills included their personal effectiveness, flexibility, self-discipline and communication skills.

There were students who for various reasons were not able to log on and the module leader was informed. Examples of why students were unable to log on included the fact that the enrolment process had not been completed or they



had deleted the email which included the PebblePad username and password.

The first assignment involved the students producing an Action Plan. All of the assets the students generated were stored in PebblePad for use in the second assignment webfolio. The students were instructed to submit their assignments through the Gateway, which tutors could then mark on line giving feedback.

## The issues

A political issue is that as PebblePad is not being rolled out across the university there will not be technical support. This means there is no sharing of good practice and no discussion of adapting PebblePad for different needs or groups. The lack of shared information means that as a small group using PebblePad we lack the knowledge to progress and develop different techniques.

Because of the lack of technical support, problems that occurred beyond the knowledge of the module leader could not be addressed. An example of this was that we did not know that PebblePad was able to upload videos, tables or webpages.



## The result

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*It is planned that PebblePad will be introduced throughout the business school but not the university. Currently it would appear that there will be no technical support; each module leader will run PebblePad themselves.*

Many of the international students found PebblePad easy to use and the computer literate students were confident to experiment with the different functions of PebblePad. The 'steps' help them develop their action plan or webfolio and writing down their 'thoughts' about various activities, and receiving feedback appeared to be helpful in developing their reflective thinking and writing skills.

Online feedback was collected at the end of the module but disappointingly the number of students who participated was quite low. The feedback from the students who did complete the

questions was mixed but generally positive.

An example of feedback included the following comment:

“ I think writing some activities on PebblePad is very interesting, it's like an electronic diary to remember everything, although sometimes I was too lazy to do it. ”

## The learning

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1. While the module grades have improved there are still students who do not engage with PDP, however, the better students showed creativity and imagination producing excellent webfolios. Reflective skills MUST be taught - it is not enough to tell students, and in particular international students, to reflect on what they have learnt (this does happen in some undergraduate modules – there is no instruction on what reflection means). The students are encouraged to record their thoughts in PebblePad after each session and to revisit those thoughts and add further reflection.
2. There must be a strong relationship between the subjects being taught and the reflection. It appeared to be more successful engaging students with PDP if they could relate the activity being undertaken to their core academic subjects. This is important because it highlights the transferable skills the students are developing and enhances employability.
3. The staff must have training or development on how to teach reflective skills and how to give constructive feedback to students

so that they can then improve and develop their reflective writing. Currently there is not a system in place to teach staff how to use PebblePad. It is a cascade method - if someone knows how to use it they will then show another member of staff.

4. Feedback is essential in developing reflective skills and PebblePad allows the students to share their thoughts and receive feedback quite quickly electronically. Students can record the feedback they have received in PebblePad and add their own thoughts about whether they agree or not with the feedback given by tutors or fellow group members.
5. A more rigorous evaluation of PebblePad is needed to convince doubting staff that it is an effective and useful tool. Perhaps in the case of PDP a comparison between using a reflective diary and PebblePad and whether the students find reflective skills useful. From my own perspective having used both methods I found the structures in PebblePad, for example the Action Plan, provided the students with a structure that was



easy to follow particularly for those students for whom English is not their first language. It would be interesting and valuable to investigate different systems in order to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of such systems.



## In brief

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- Making reflective activity relevant to students is important for engagement.
- Lack of technical support can be a significant barrier to progress.
- Don't assume students have IT skills or are able to reflect - these skills will need to be developed.

## Acknowledgements

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Case study by Christina Meredith  
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