

HEAR: a personal perspective with a historical view. *Rob Ward, Centre for Recording Achievement*



Rob Ward has been involved in championing and supporting better student-focused recording of learning and achievement since the early 1990's. He is the Director of the Centre for Recording Achievement, a national network, registered educational charity and only Associate Partner of the Higher Education Academy. The mission of the Centre is 'to promote awareness and understanding of the processes associated with Personal Development Planning (review, reflection, planning) as an important element in improving learning and progression throughout the world of education, training and employment.' He served on the first national committee led by Bob Burgess which has led to proposals for developing and implementing the Higher Education Achievement Report, and is currently centrally involved in supporting the trial process. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Background

For those old enough to remember it, Recommendation 20 of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report 1997¹) for a Higher Education Progress File. This gave a national focus to, and, subsequently, led to the systematic introduction to a new educational process in higher education called Personal Development Planning (PDP). This policy-driven process was intended to encourage student development through reflection on experiences, review of performance and target setting: an educational practice that had been growing steadily in higher education through the 1990's (Ward and Jackson (eds.) 2001), and which had been encouraged through the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative and the development of Career Management education (Hustler et al, 1998).

More than a decade and two versions of sectoral Guidance later (QAA, 2001, 2009), PDP is now an established if still variable and developing process within the HE sector, increasingly supported by e-portfolios and other technological aids. As an example of policy mandated by the sector itself, it remains a unique endeavour and a 'world first'. PDP was however, one element of the overall Dearing recommendation:

We recommend that institutions of higher education, over the medium term, develop a Progress File. The File should consist of two elements:

- *a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies;*
- *a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development.*

Interestingly, the recommendation did not specify how – if at all - these elements were to be related one to another. Survey accounts (see e.g. Brennan and Shah, 2003) suggested that they developed relatively independently, the former becoming the concern of Registry, the latter of those focussing upon teaching and

¹ At <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

learning, student support, and employability. Most recently however development work to implement the Higher Education Achievement Report (Burgess, 2007) suggests that this has the potential to change.

The Higher Education Achievement Report : what is it?

HEAR is a report is a formal validated record of students learning and achievement produced by an institution. It is intended to provide a more detailed and rounded view of a student's experience and achievements. The key building blocks or sections of HEAR are:

1. Information identifying the holder of the qualification
2. Information identifying the qualification
3. Information on the level of qualification
4. Information on the contents and results gained
5. Information on the function of the qualification
6. Additional information
7. Certification
8. Information on the national HE System

In the context of co-curricular and extra-curricular awards Section 6.1 is particularly relevant because it is intended to provide a 'richer picture' of student achievement, verified additional achievements recorded – currently -under one of three headings:

- University, Professional and Departmental Prizes;
- Measured or assessed performance in non-academic contexts accredited by, or with external accreditation recognised by the University, e.g. awards concerned with employability;
- Additional recognised activities undertaken by students which demonstrate achievement but for which no recognition is provided in terms of academic credit, e.g. Course Representatives or Students' Union Officers.

HEAR is explicitly intended to meet the requirements of the Diploma Supplement, thereby enabling institutions to satisfy an additional function.

Piloting HEAR

Work on 'the HEAR' is now being piloted formally across 30 institutions in the UK, and – in all probability – being developed more informally in a number of others. Early thinking was centred upon the desire to see higher education abandon the Honours Degree Classification system because of the perceived limitations of a single summative grade in the context of lifelong learning and employer interest in 'soft skills' and 'wicked competencies'. In the 2007 Final Report of the Steering Group², the emphasis was upon the production of a summary document which would be issued on completion of the award of the final qualification³. This policy agenda was itself however complex and open to challenge; student voices were amongst the strongest raised in terms of keeping the degree classification, and previous experience suggested that employers had not made much if any use of more detailed academic transcripts.

Emergent uses

While these concerns remain, the processes of the HEAR trial have served to generate another set of more integrative and interesting possibilities, with a clear emphasis on the view that the HEAR is first and

² At http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf

³ See e.g. Burgess, R: 'We need first class information on degrees' Guardian, Tuesday 21 October 2008, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/21/degree-marks-upgrade-comment>

foremost a resource for students. The journey of development has taken some – though not all – HEIs within the trial group beyond the stage of simply producing a richer final document to providing a context for engagement with broader institutional issues. In different pilot institutions, these have included:

- engagement with renewed interest in more holistic and integrative approaches to the student experience and outcomes, evidenced in an emergent (re)focussing upon graduate attributes and curriculum reform; see the links being made at the University of Manchester to the Manchester Matrix⁴, for example and more recently in HEAR terms, to proposals for curriculum reform at the University of Aberdeen⁵;
- discussions with students and student union officers about the nature of life-wide learning and achievement, and how the outcomes of co-curricular opportunities (including student-union led training and learning opportunities) and extra-curricular activities determined by students, might be documented within the HEAR, discussions which cast students in the role of ‘co-creators’ as opposed to ‘consumers’ (see for example, collaborative work with the Students Union at the University of Gloucestershire⁶ and work at the University of Keele⁷;
- renewed consideration of the relationship between institutionally-managed and learner managed information, the latter as held in e-portfolio systems for example. This has been a particular feature of trial work in areas where portfolios may contain assessed or presentational work, in areas of graphic design, for example;
- the potential of the ‘evolving HEAR’ – evolving through the student life cycle – to provide a context for reviewing and planning processes which are central to the PDP endeavour⁸, for example in the HEARing Student Voices Project⁹. While the report of the Burgess Steering Group indicated that this should be a ‘complementary’ one; for some charged with implementation it might better be described as ‘integrative’ in relationship. It is in seeking to create tools that give greater prominence to learning gained across a students’ life and greater significance to processes of personal development planning that HEAR is likely to engage higher education teachers.

The future

In a world that needs to conserve its resources and make wise decisions about how and where human effort is directed, the ultimate question for HEAR is *what value does it add and to whom*. The risk is that the HEAR might just become another document that is never used once it is produced; another requirement on HE and

⁴ At <http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/themanchestermatrix/>

⁵ See http://www.abdn.ac.uk/curriculum-reform/documents/Curriculum_Report.pdf

⁶ ‘Students complete a brief personal statement in order to claim achievement as suitable for verification. Achievement could be from volunteering, work experience, or other activities. The intention is to be as inclusive as possible in terms of types of achievement in order to provide equitable opportunities for the full, diverse range of students. It is hoped to involve the Students’ Union in the verification process and to train student verifiers for occasions where no credit is desired by the claiming students. ...As part of the HEAR Pilot, the pilot team has worked with the Students’ Union to set up a ‘shell’ experiential learning module which will allow for the verification and accreditation of additional achievement. This module would automatically appear on the HEAR and could contribute to the Gloucestershire Award which is being developed to cover a range of additional opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate employability skills.’

⁷ As described by Howells and Gill in issue 18 of the PDP-UK newsletter at: <http://www.recordingachievement.org/news-and-events/publications/pdpuk.html>

⁸ This is of course also of interest to many employers who recruit for internships, summer placements or before summative institutional documents are issued.

⁹ Exploring how ‘feedback from assessment, advising and formative HEARs (Higher Education Achievement Reports) impact on student choices in the taught and wider curricula’. (My emphasis). See <http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/hearingstudentvoices/>.

another function of the Registry, and it may not be used within students' learning processes as a living document to aid reflection and planning for students beyond the grading information they already have.

The challenge is to avoid this situation. Clearly there are a number of stakeholders with interests in this question and their interests may conflict; we therefore need to place a premium first and foremost on ensuring that value will be added to the students' experience or their learning, and if possible to employer recruitment processes too. Put another way, making sure we have good answers to the 'what's in it for me' question. As with many scenarios higher education needs to take ownership and shape its use so that it does add value where it matters.

In many institutions this is exactly what is happening through the trial process. With institutional commitment and the help of appropriate pedagogy and technology - we may be approaching what Dearing was perhaps seeking all along – an evolving richer institutional record of learning and achievement available to students and graduates who are, thanks to effective PDP practice, able to develop, articulate and substantiate their claims to learning, capability and achievement to a range of audiences, and to plan ahead accordingly. In this vision, the 1997 Dearing report has as much relevance today as it did over a decade ago.

9.45 *A number of commentators urged that the honours system should be supplemented by a profiling and transcript system, which would offer employers and others detailed information about the capabilities acquired by students.*

9.52.1 *We expect that employers will always want some form of brief indication about the achievement of students, especially when they are overwhelmed with applications. We do not, therefore, recommend the early withdrawal of the degree classification system. However, we do hope that as the Progress File approach is adopted nationally – including the development of transcripts – and its utility is confirmed, the present classification system may become increasingly redundant.*

Additional References

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