

The RAPID Progress File: a Tool to Facilitate Work Placements in Built Environment Disciplines

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Abstract

This case study offers a tool and a process to address the issue of how the experiences gained by students on work placements can effectively be captured to maximise the benefits to be gained from such experiences. Our case study describes how the RAPID Progress File (<http://rapid.lboro.ac.uk/>) is implemented as a tool to support 2nd Year BSc Construction Engineering Management students whilst on their initial six month work placement. We outline how the regulations regarding the assessment and accreditation of students on work placement are linked to the students' use of the RAPID Progress File. Furthermore, we describe the induction offered to the students, the experiences of students in using the Progress File whilst on work placement, and the reflections of staff and students on its effectiveness in enabling students to benefit from their experiences. In addition we place this approach within the context of current developments within Higher Education to promote the use of Personal Development Planning (PDP) by students (a facility that Higher Education Institutions will be required to offer their students by 2005/6).

Good Practice Points:

- Best applied to support students engaged in work-based learning/practice
- Encourages self-awareness and reflective practice
- Operates effectively with or without a high level of tutor involvement
- Encourages students to relate academic study and work-based learning to the competence requirements of professional institutions/bodies
- Exploits the medium of the Web to encourage personal and professional development practice.

Defining the Problem

Tutors have long been concerned that the wealth of experience and knowledge gained by students engaged in work-based activities (as part of their recognised degree programme) has often not been fully captured or adequately exploited. The primary reason for this has been that students have not had access to a tool that would enable and encourage them to record and reflect their activities, experiences and competence gained. As a result, much valuable experience is lost. Students (and tutors) often fail to recognise the range of accomplishments achieved, or the depth of knowledge gained, for the lack of a tool that effectively records and captures these. The importance of reflecting on experiences and recording skills and knowledge has been identified as vital to learning and improving practice (e.g., Portwood and Costley 2000; Schön 1987).

The RAPID Progress File

The RAPID Progress File (<http://rapid.lboro.ac.uk>) has been developed to enable students within the Construction Management discipline maintain a record of achievement and to audit and develop skills compatible with the competence requirements of Professional Institutions. The original RAPID Progress File was developed to prepare students for the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB)'s Professional Development Programme (PDP). It is available as a Web-based tool.

The Work Placement

At the start of their second academic year, students on the Construction Engineering Management degree programme engage in a six-month work placement. At Loughborough each student on this degree programme is sponsored by a major contractor (e.g. Bovis Lend Lease, Carillion, Skanska etc.). As a result students are exposed to interesting and challenging work placement opportunities, often on leading edge, high profile projects. Students are required during this time to build a record of their activities and experiences, and to produce a report on the completion of their work placement. Successful completion of the tasks set for the two six-month work placements that students complete during their degree programme, leads to the award of the Diploma in Industrial Studies (DIS).

Implementing the RAPID Progress File During Work Placement

The Preparation

Since the academic year 2000-2001, second year students use the RAPID Progress File whilst on their work placement. To accommodate the change to the nature of what was being asked of them, the regulations concerning the conduct and submission of work relating to the DIS were rewritten at this time. The new reporting requirements now focus on producing a report that relates the competence gained by each student to the competence requirements established by the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) in their Professional Development Programme (PDP).

The RAPID Progress File provides the vehicle to enable students to:

- Plan their activities in relation to the task set
- Record outcomes of their activities and to gather appropriate evidence of competence
- Assess competence in relation to a range of relevant skills
- Relate these skills to PDP units/elements

The skills within RAPID range from key skills, such as communication, IT and working with others, to self-management skills such as time-management, inter-personal skills such as negotiation, discipline specific skills such as technical report writing, to problem solving and decision-making. In total there are over forty discreet skills within the original (Construction Management) version of RAPID. These skills are based on the competence requirements as set out in the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB)'s Professional Development Programme (PDP). There is a skills mapping function within this version of the RAPID Progress File that directly links skills relevant to individual units and elements of the CIOB's PDP.

* An [example template of a RAPID Skill](#) is provided at the end of this Case Study.

The Induction

Six weeks prior to starting their work placement students are introduced to the Web-based RAPID Progress File as part of an assessed module. The main features of the Progress File are demonstrated and students are set tasks to complete. These included recording their personal details and achievements, self-assessing their competence in a range of skills, and undergoing the development of an existing skill by following the processes laid out within the Progress File. In addition, students are asked to provide a reflective account of their experiences in using the Progress File.

These activities are complemented by an induction session that provides an explanation of the assessment requirements (DIS specifications) for their upcoming work placement, and a brief on how RAPID should be used to assist students in the planning, recording and reporting of their activities and experiences. The link with professional development inherent in the task set and the tool provided enables tutors to emphasise the benefits of the activity they are about to engage in, and the use of the RAPID Progress File to facilitate this engagement, within a meaningful context of personal development for the students.

The Execution

On placement, students are able to access the RAPID Progress File via the Web. If there are logistic reasons why this might not be possible, students are provided with a paper-based version.

On placement students are encouraged to negotiate with their Site Manager / Mentor on how best to relate the activities they are engaged in to the reporting requirements as laid down in the DIS requirements. In addition, each student is visited a minimum of once by their

academic tutor to discuss progress and any difficulties encountered. Students are also encouraged to maintain regular contact with their tutor by phone or e-mail.

Students are engaged in a range of work placement contexts. Some are engaged in on-site placements whilst others are based at their sponsors' main headquarters. This variety of experiences provides a wealth of experiences to complement their academic programme.

Reflections on the Process Involved

Following the work placements, students are encouraged to reflect upon their experiences on placement. These reflections include the effectiveness of the RAPID Progress File as a tool to facilitate the work placement process.

Indications are that students have used the RAPID Progress File with varied levels of success, determined in large part by the willingness of the student to use it as a constant means of recording their activities and experiences.

Whilst students are strongly encouraged to use the RAPID Progress File, its use remains voluntary. Assessment is based upon the report that students present at the end of the placement. Some of the better reports have been generated by students that have made regular use of the RAPID Progress File during their placement.

Student Reflections

Reflections offered by students who have used the RAPID Progress File have noted how the use of the RAPID Progress File has enabled them to:

- Identify more effectively their individual strengths and weaknesses
- Identify a clear process to develop their competence in a range of skills
- Generate evidence of competence
- Record information relevant to their professional development
- Picture a route for progression beyond graduation and onto membership of a Professional Institution

Tutor Reflections

The tutors involved have been likewise impressed.

They have noted that the RAPID Progress File:

- Provides a framework to support students whilst on work placement
- Offers a simple but consistent mechanism to audit and develop student skills
- Provides a focused approach to organising activity whilst on work placement
- Enables a streamlining of the reporting process
- Helps bridge the two periods of work placement
- Imposes little if any additional burden upon them to support its use

Transferability of the RAPID Progress File as a Tool to Support Work-based Learning

The RAPID Progress File is a Web-based tool that is available under licence to all HE Institutions within the UK. The Loughborough experience (and those at other institutions who have used RAPID) indicates that the RAPID Progress File is a comprehensive, flexible and robust tool that can be applied to meet local requirements and a variety of contexts.

At present (April 2004) there are 8 versions of the RAPID Progress File. These are:

- Architectural Technology
- Building Engineering
- Civil Engineering
- Construction Management
- Graduate Professional Development Award (Generic version)
- Quantity / Building Surveying
- Town Planning
- Transport Management

Work is currently in progress to develop a generic 'Engineering' version. This work involves improvements to the appearance, navigation and functionality of the software, as well as the development of additional features such as linking to learning outcomes in module specifications, and an administrative interface to enable licence holders to input their own skill combinations and skill statements.

It is intended that all students within the Faculty of Engineering at Loughborough will be offered this tool to assist them whilst engaged in work placement activity.

The RAPID Progress File: a Wider Perspective

Increasingly, Higher Education is expected to respond to an education agenda that stresses the over-riding goals of the employability and personal development of students within a framework of lifelong learning. This agenda has led to a growing emphasis on guiding and monitoring the activities of the Higher Education community.

Academic Review and Subject Benchmarking processes emphasise the transparency of the development and monitoring of key skills within the programmes of study offered by higher education. The policy for a Progress File for Higher Education requires that students are offered a 'means by which (they) can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development' (NCIHE 1997). By 2005/6 all Institutions will be expected to offer students on all awards a means of engaging in Personal Development Planning (PDP) (QAA 2004).

The RAPID Progress File provides a tool that can be adapted to address many of the issues that face the Higher Education community within this climate of change. It provides:

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- A means of directing the design and development of module/programme specifications compatible with Subject Benchmarking (and Professional Institution) requirements
- A framework that enables the recording of student achievement
- A set of skills that include both generic (key) and discipline orientated skills
- A means for students to engage in auditing their skill competence, planning their skill development activity, and reflecting upon their progress

These features indicate that the RAPID Progress File is a tool that can assist the Higher Education community in meeting the expectations inherent in the Academic Review and Subject Benchmarking processes. Moreover, by providing a focus for skill auditing and development activity it addresses the requirements of PDP as laid out in the policy document for a Progress File for Higher Education.

Beyond Higher Education, the RAPID Progress File offers the learner many benefits. These include:

- A perspective on Lifelong Learning
- An introduction to the processes of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Early progression towards membership of Professional Institutions

Conclusions

This Case Study details one way in which the RAPID Progress File can be implemented to assist in the learning process within Built Environment disciplines. We feel confident in claiming that our experiences to date reveal the potential for this Web-based tool to facilitate work-based learning.

The benefits to both students and tutors are, we believe, considerable. These can be summarised as the provision of:

- A systematic approach to the recording of student activity
- A process to encourage continuous personal and professional development
- A framework to support the assessment and development of students' skills and competencies
- A strategic approach to student progression in line with professional development needs

In addition, the adaptability and flexibility of the RAPID system can enable institutions to customise it to meet local needs and practices. Thus, our experiences, as outlined in this case study, lead us to believe that the RAPID Progress File will have a positive impact on the development of learning and teaching in Built Environment education over the next decade.

References and Further Reading

Schön, Donald A. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, London.

NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report). Norwich: HMSO.

Portwood, D. and Costley, C. (2000). *Work Based learning and the university: new perspectives and practices* [SEDA Paper 109]. Birmingham: Staff and Educational Development Association.

QAA (2004). Policy statement on a Progress File for Higher Education. Online:
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/policystatement/contents.htm>.
[Accessed 06 July 2004]

Example of RAPID Skill

Producing Technical Reports

Recalling and reflecting upon your experiences, consider which of the following statements best describes your competence in this skill:

- I can from given information prepare and produce a structured report form.
- I can from given information prepare and produce a technical report to meet specified requirements ¹.
- I can interpret a technical report brief ² and can select and use appropriate methods for gathering and presenting a report.
- I can identify a need ³ for a technical report, establish a brief, and use the brief to gather information appropriate to the report. I can then produce a report that is clear, accurate and presented in a suitable format ⁴.

Indicate on the grid below your competence in this skill:

Statement A	Statement B	Statement C	Statement D

What evidence do you have to support your claim of competence? Where is this evidence located? Show on the grid below:

Evidence of competence	Location

Terminology

1. specified requirements: e.g. materials wastage on site
2. brief: statement of what the report is required to cover
3. identify a need: recognise circumstances that require reporting on
4. suitable format: one that matches the expectations of those who will need to read it