

**Pedagogical Research Fund
for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies
in Higher Education**

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

**A case study of the effects on student attainment, and on retention,
of personal development planning (PDP) via departmental
mechanisms for improving student learning and through the
institutional Progress File**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, academic staff from the Languages Department in the University of Chester (formerly University College Chester) have been involved in a variety of small projects and pilot studies aiming to enhance student learning via Personal Development Planning (PDP). With this Pedagogical Research Grant, colleagues proposed to develop this area of study further, in particular by assessing the extent to which PDP structures impact on student achievement and retention. This report will firstly give an overview of the background to PDP in the Languages Department in the University of Chester and describe the support mechanisms in place. Secondly it will report on the analysis of statistical data comparing levels of engagement with PDP and student achievement and progression as well as the extent to which our expectations of the project were realised. Thirdly it will evaluate staff and student perceptions of the value of our PDP mechanisms for supporting independent learning, based on qualitative data collected over three years and, more recently, in focus groups. Finally, there will be some consideration of future developments both within this institution and beyond.

RATIONALE

The importance of Personal Development Planning as one of the transferable skills of value to language students for all aspects of their development (personal, professional and academic) has been underlined by the Quality Assurance Agency in its Benchmarking Statement for Languages and Related Studies. Reflection on learning enhances a range of skills, including cognitive (e.g. the ability to use language creatively), practical (e.g. the ability to work autonomously) and intercultural awareness and understanding (*'Students of LRS will develop sensitivity to...the similarities and dissimilarities between other cultures...and their own....and an attitude of curiosity and openness towards other cultures'*

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/languages/pd>). The QAA also stresses the importance of PDP, through the Progress File, for life-long learning and for employability

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressfiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp>.)

Moon (1999), too, has observed that for many learners, in all subject areas, reflection occurs most successfully when the learning environment offers guidance or an incentive, and that one means of doing this is a reflective portfolio. Anderson, Boud, and Sampson (1996) emphasised the importance of learning contracts to build on students' existing skills and experience and to develop them further. The establishment of clear goals, based on negotiated learning objectives and strategies, recognises individual differences and helps to focus learning by tailoring it to each learner's specific needs and interests. It was for these reasons that in the academic year 1998-9 a portfolio of self-directed study was introduced as part of the assessment for Languages at Level 1 in the University of Chester.

Colleagues in the department were surveyed in 2003 about the value of PDP mechanisms for supporting independent learning at Level 1. They identified a number of advantages, including the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills, increasing the student's share of responsibility for her/his own learning, opportunities for creating links between subjects/disciplines leading to a more holistic and coherent approach to study, the setting of learning in a longer term context and employability. Colleagues were also aware of some challenges. One of these was that closer links with the institutional Progress File needed to be made.

CONTEXT

A variety of local factors have been particularly significant in influencing our decision to encourage the use of Personal Development Planning in the Languages Department in Chester. A major consideration has been that contact time between teachers and learners is limited (3 hours of formal classes all semester and one hour oral/conversation class, for eight weeks of the semester's twelve). This is in contrast to the need for learners to engage regularly with the target language. Colleagues are also conscious of the diversity of student needs: all four skills must be developed to a similar standard, the department offers two-level entry (post-GCSE and post-A Level, students from these two groups sometimes being taught together), students sometimes arrive via non-traditional entry routes (so may not have, say, A Level experience of formal grammar), etc. Moreover while students are undertaking placements abroad, they have no choice but to rely on their own resources. For these reasons, as well as because the key skill of improving one's own learning is a valuable lifelong learning skill for its own sake (see 'Rationale', above), PDP is considered an integral part of the student experience. Moreover, the Department has recently moved into a new Languages facility with up-to-date electronic language laboratories and full access to the University's Intranet as well as the World Wide Web. These facilities have greatly increased the range of resources easily available to students, both on campus and while working at home. Moreover, one colleague has been nominated as a Teaching Fellow in the institution, selecting as her project an initiative to extend and rationalise online materials for all three languages offered. Thus online resources and a growing bank of software provide an excellent starting place for independent learning and self-directed study, to meet the varying needs of individual learners.

Over a period of a number of years, mechanisms to support and enhance independent learning have been developed and have evolved within languages programmes and throughout the institution. As has already been indicated, students submit a Portfolio of self-directed study as part of the assessment at Level 1 (now 20% of the overall mark for each of two core modules). This consists of a Self-audit of Skills and a Learning Agreement, then evidence of a variety of tasks matching the targets set and finally a Reflective Evaluation. Although much of the work undertaken is reliant on Internet resources, video material and paper-based resources are also accessible within the department and the library. 'Tandem learning'

arrangements (structured paired sessions between undergraduates in languages and incoming Erasmus students) also form the basis for some inclusions. A bank of Study Skills advice was also collected and uploaded onto the Intranet to provide instantly accessible support for self-directed work. A small internal 'Action Research' grant in 2003-4 enabled further development of this portfolio: student and staff perspectives were sought and collected in a data bank which is still ongoing (see below), and ways of dovetailing the portfolio and the institutional electronic Progress File were investigated. These have had some limited success, but finding more successful ways of encouraging Level 1 students to make fuller use of the Progress File facilities has continued to exercise our ingenuity.

A departmental mechanism that exploits the Progress File more successfully is the Placements Abroad Personal Development Portfolio (PD Portfolio). In 2003-4 the department participated in a British Council pilot project to accredit assistantships with a certificate in recognition of the personal and professional (as well as academic) skills acquired during the post. Participation in the project enabled us to set up a website to support students while abroad and develop online Learning Log facilities in conjunction with the institution's Progress File Steering Group. A similar scheme has since been extended to all languages placements abroad (since 2004-5). Students create an electronic PD Portfolio, including online monthly diary submissions, through the Progress File. The more successfully students engage with personal development planning throughout Levels 1 and 2, the more they are likely to benefit from the Residence Abroad facilities, so this was a further reason for us to continue to improve structures and student exploitation of them.

THE PROJECT

1. How useful do students think the portfolio is?

One on-going aspect of monitoring, begun in 2003, is the evaluation, by questionnaire to the whole cohort, of students' perceptions of the value of PDP mechanisms for supporting independent learning at Level 1. We note that by 2005 a majority of respondents believe that completion of the Portfolio does enable personal reflection on progress: 50% indicated 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5, 94% attributing 3 or above. We see evidence of an increase over the two years in the professed 'usefulness' of the task, 58% in 2005 finding the completion of the Portfolio 'useful' or 'very useful', whereas 46% had indicated this category in 2003. In 2005, too, 59% 'agreed strongly' or 'agreed very strongly' that it enabled improvement of those areas that needed most attention. We were heartened, moreover, to see some apparent increase in the number claiming to use the Progress File: in 2005 a mere 10% of questionnaires indicated no use whatsoever made of it, but this 60% had claimed never to access it in 2003. (See Appendix 1 for full data for 2005).

Focus groups held in Semester 2 (academic year 2004-5) and Semester 1 (academic year 2005-6) support some of this information (see Appendix 2 for the questions which formed the basis for the discussion). As over the past three years or so a number of questionnaires had been administered in the department, it was decided to hold discussions to elicit student feedback on this occasion. The groups consisted of approximately ten students and one, or sometimes two, tutors. In the Autumn term 2005, students at Levels one and two recognised the relevance of the portfolio in supporting self-study and building skills for independent learning; they had enjoyed the ability to focus on topics of interest. They valued the materials provided on the University's Intranet and had found the portfolio a useful opportunity to familiarise themselves with departmental resources. Some thought the portfolio had enabled them to make the transition from A Level to Higher Education more easily, as it was a half-way stage between the close supervision of school and the increased independence of university. Some students noted that the portfolio gave an opportunity to go over a point that had caused difficulty and gain credit for it! Others used tutor feedback as a basis for deciding what to put into their portfolio, or discussed the content of their portfolio with others in the group.

Some negative points were agreed during these discussions too, and will be discussed later (P.7), but the following verbatim comments are indicative of some of the positive points:

LEVEL 3 STUDENTS (JUST COMPLETED THEIR DEGREE)

- ▶ The fact that evidence HAD to be presented meant that you did do something...
- ▶ The portfolio gave us choice so we could work on our weaknesses
- ▶ It was a good introduction to a variety of sources
- ▶ Actually we did do this kind of work quite naturally while we were abroad
- ▶ I think it helped me work within wide time margins on my year abroad
- ▶ If learning a new language in future I would feel more confident about undertaking this independently
- ▶ We're certainly better equipped to learn new skills now

LEVELS 1, 2 AND 3 STUDENTS

- ▶ The portfolio is all about growing up, maturing, moving on from A Level
- ▶ I don't always keep to my plan, I adapt as I go along
- ▶ I think I'll do more work of this type when I'm abroad, as there won't be much structure then. I'll feel I'm doing it for myself, not the teacher
- ▶ Doing my portfolio got me into the habit of watching (target-language) videos

2. Are there any links between successful engagement with PDP and progression?

As well as continuing to evaluate student perceptions of the value of PDP, we wished to investigate links between levels of achievement in self-directed study and end-of-module average marks, for our full-time undergraduate students, almost all of whom are studying for a Combined Honours degree. Does engagement with PDP actually help students progress?

When the portfolio was first introduced, it counted for 10% of the annual mark for a pair of general language modules (equivalent therefore to 5% per module), was increased to 10% per module in 2002-3, and was increased further to 20% per module in 2004-5. Portfolios are assessed according to the level of personal reflection shown (see Appendix 3 for Marking Guidelines) rather than, say, level of language (grammatical accuracy, comprehension, etc.) shown in the pieces included. In this way, it is hoped, students are not discouraged from taking risks, and marks should reflect as closely as possible the student's capacity for reflection on her/his own learning rather than her/his level of achievement. The end-of-module mark, on the other hand, is made up of 80% of 'traditional' tasks, aural, oral, reading, writing, assessed for the quality of content and language, and should therefore reflect the standard attained in the language. We undertook to compare a student's mark for a year's self-directed study portfolio (or average for more recent years when more than one had been completed) with her/his end-of-year average for the general language modules.

Pearson Test correlation coefficients are high for both German and Spanish (German 0.786 Spanish 0.895), indicating that, in the main, students who achieve a high standard for the portfolio gain a similar average module mark, and vice versa. The coefficient for French is moderately high too (0.527 and indeed increases to 0.640 if two marks are excluded). There appears, then, to be a link between students' capacity for reflection on their learning and the standard they attain in language work. However, these coefficients do not provide evidence to indicate whether the level of capacity for reflection influences overall achievement or whether the reverse may be the case.

It was interesting therefore to take a closer look at the profiles of both those students who withdrew or suspended studies at the end of Level 1 and of those who failed language modules. Thirty-seven students out of 363 (10.2% of the whole cohort) left the institution before proceeding to Level 2. Of these, more than half (54.1%) had not submitted portfolios. A further 10.8% gained marks in the 'fail' category. A significant number, therefore, had apparently found the task challenging, although it is not possible to draw firm conclusions as the portfolio is handed in only at the end of modules, so there are a number of possible reasons for non-submission. Moreover, five of the thirty-seven students leaving had gained a mark above 60% for the portfolio element of the core modules. Among the students who failed Level 1 modules, however, there were none scoring above 60 (although 23.8% did

achieve pass marks). Just under 62% of those who failed language modules had not submitted a portfolio at all and the remaining 14.3% submitted portfolios but failed to gain a pass mark. Thus, there are three categories of students having a higher than average fail rate in the portfolio task: firstly, those who choose to withdraw from the institution, secondly those who leave because they have failed modules in other disciplines, and thirdly those who are unsuccessful in passing language ones. It may be that these students have found the ongoing nature of the portfolio task challenging, or they may have already 'given up' on the module; in some cases they have not submitted other assignments either. Whatever the circumstances, the portfolio does, in our experience, appear to be an element of assessment that is decisive for Level 1 students who are hesitant about the module, the programme or the institution. It is hardly worth observing that there appears to be a link between motivation (and commitment to independent study) and achievement!

3. More direction in self-directed study

The idea that motivation is a key factor in completing the portfolio was certainly borne out by focus group discussion; this will preferably will be some kind of external incentive (that is, it should be part of their assessment!). Students at all levels admitted that they undertook their portfolio work at Level 1 because it forms part of the assessment, rather than for its own sake. Many pointed out that when they have a heavy workload, it's a case of having to prioritise, and work that's assessed inevitably takes this priority. As a result, they have not continued to complete a personal portfolio of work, or other systematic independent study, beyond Level 1. Even at Level 1 many students tended to postpone the portfolio until just before the deadline: several requested a more frequent and regular review of portfolio progress, since deadlines would discipline their approach. In many cases students admitted that they undertook tasks they knew would be easy, in order to have work to hand in. Some asked for portfolio tasks to be aligned with the taught coursework. Others recognised that they completed the portfolio because they had to and did not apply the skills to other subjects. For some, the transition from A Level hadn't been easy. In summary, many learners lacked confidence in their own direction (or were seeking the easy option) and were, ironically, asking for more tutor guidance in their self-directed study.

- ▶ The portfolio is a nice concept – in an ideal world (if we had 100% of our time available, for example) it would be very useful. But it's the practicalities!
- ▶ I left the work until the deadline was close, then it was rushed...it was hard to manage time at level 1... There's a need to review progress more frequently
- ▶ I would have preferred more direction and specific topics
- ▶ I needed more guidance on what my strengths and weaknesses were
- ▶ It was quite easy to do the tasks, but not so easy to record and evaluate them

- ▶ The Portfolio is an extra weight on your shoulders
- ▶ I wouldn't say I've taken risks – I've done what I thought I needed to work on, but not gone outside the comfort zone, so to speak...Because it's assessed
- ▶ I for one wasn't ready for that jump! (From A Level) it's not so much to do with the language but with tackling higher education in general
- ▶ It might be a matter of SELF-motivation. The first semester was always going to be difficult – semester 2 will be better!

In many cases, the focus groups developed into genuine two-way conversations between tutors and students, and students seemed relaxed. It must be noted that the request for some further support in completing the portfolio had also already been raised in the Staff-Student Liaison committee. As a result of these discussions, therefore, the department has already made some changes to practice. Firstly, a further booklet has been produced, providing more practical advice on portfolio completion (e.g. a list of the types of activities that may be included), and adding to the Study Skills advice already available on the university's Intranet. Secondly, from next Semester, individual tutorials on progress with the Portfolio will systematically replace one taught session one third of the way through the semester, adding to the informal monitoring which takes place already. A further aspect of the discussion was that changes to Induction could be made: a small project, funded within the institution, where a more generalised review of Induction procedures is in progress, is now also being undertaken within this department specifically to evaluate and modify the Induction process.

Finally, comments from the focus groups regarding the use of the Progress File were not encouraging. Most simply added the minimum to meet the requirement for the portfolio (a copy of aims and of the reflective evaluation) but did not use it subsequently. Again, we are changing our practice so that in future the initial Action Plan will be completed electronically within the Progress File and subsequently printed out, rather than the other way round.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I have to conclude that our project has met some but not all of our expectations, and has had some outcomes that we didn't anticipate. The use of the term 'successful engagement with PDP' has not been entirely satisfactory, since there is a lack of clarity in its interpretation: attainment that matches overall achievement, or high marks for the portfolio? Once we had embarked on the comparison of attainment in PDP with levels of overall attainment, we didn't have time to look systematically at end-of-module marks for students obtaining a *high* mark for Portfolio. This is a possible area for future investigation, as we continue to update the statistical data. Moreover, once the data was available we were aware of some shortcomings within it, as, for example, our data didn't enable us to calculate progress made in PDP, or 'value added'. In general, I am inclined to conclude that qualitative data from the focus groups has been more significant than the

statistical information. With hindsight, though, the time needed for our IT consultant's work was underestimated in the initial proposal; more time for analysis could have enabled us to make further comparisons from the data collected.

Nevertheless, a number of valuable outcomes can be noted from the project. Not least is the need (at least within our own institution) to provide further support for independent learning, even though this may seem like a contradiction in terms. We have been reminded yet again that the more encouragement, indeed incentives, we can give to students to use their Progress File, the better. Furthermore, the opportunity to continue to administer and analyse end-of-year questionnaires on attitudes towards PDP has been valuable, building up a significant bank of data over three years so far. The Focus Groups' discussions also relaunched for us the debate as to whether the portfolio could become electronic, so we will have a contribution to make to the broader discussion about e-portfolio as a development of the Progress File. In my experience to date of disseminating the results of our experience, many of these challenges concerning our own practice strike a chord with colleagues in other institutions, so I think that our project, albeit less far-reaching than we anticipated, will be of interest to the wider community as well as providing a basis for further examination in the future.

DISSEMINATION

In May 2005, colleagues from the department delivered a workshop on PDP and use of Progress File at the in-house annual staff conference. This included early data on the links between marks for portfolio and end-of-module grades.

A mid-way report on the project was given at a workshop held by LLAS at CILT in November 2006.

A paper was presented jointly with the University's Head of Careers at a Day Conference on PDP at the University of Manchester, also in November 2006.

A proposal for a workshop session has been accepted for the LLAS/CILT conference in Cardiff in July 2006.

I plan to submit an article for the Centre for Recording Achievement's newsletter.

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