

The role of personal development planning (PDP) in undergraduate learning: perceptions of its value and links with attainment in the Languages Department of the University of Chester.

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A number of small projects undertaken in this institution have assessed the extent to which Personal Development Planning enhances student learning and impacts on achievement and progression. Having provided an overview of PDP in the Languages Department, this paper will describe the support mechanisms in place (including the institutional Progress File) and provide statistical data comparing levels of engagement with PDP and overall student achievement. Staff and student perceptions of the value of PDP mechanisms in supporting independent learning will be reported and a pilot scheme for early induction to PDP processes evaluated.

The importance of Personal Development Planning (PDP) as one of the transferable skills of value to language students for all aspects of their development is 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. using language creatively), practical (e.g. working autonomously) and intercultural awareness and understanding. The QAA also stresses the importance of PDP, through the Progress File, for life-long learning and for employability (QAA, 2001). Moon (1999), too, has observed that for many learners reflection occurs most successfully when the learning environment offers guidance or an incentive, for example through 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. In 1998-9, with these considerations in mind, a portfolio of self-directed study was introduced as part of the assessment for Languages at Level 1 in the University of Chester. Five years later, in a survey on the value of PDP mechanisms for supporting independent learning, tutors identified further advantages: increasing the student's share of responsibility for her/his own learning and creating links between subjects/disciplines, leading to a more holistic and coherent approach to study. Colleagues were also aware of some challenges. In particular, closer links with the institutional Progress File should be made.

Various local factors have influenced and enabled the inclusion of PDP as an integral part of the student experience. Contact time between teachers and learners is limited, for example, yet all four skills need to be developed and students' individual needs are diverse. Moreover, when undertaking placements abroad, students are compelled to rely on their own resources. At the same time, the installation of electronic language laboratories and the development of the University's Intranet have greatly increased the range of resources available for independent work both on campus and at home. Consequently the portfolio of self-directed study continued to evolve, becoming 20% of the overall assessment for the two Level 1 core modules. Ways of further dovetailing the portfolio and the institutional electronic Progress File were identified. In 2003-4, the Placements Abroad Personal Development Portfolio was developed, thanks to participation in a British Council pilot project. This scheme awards certificates in recognition of the personal, professional and academic skills acquired during assistantships. A website was set up to support students and develop online Learning Log facilities, via the Progress File. (A similar scheme has since been extended to all languages placements abroad.)

In 2003-4, student perspectives on the Level 1 portfolio were sought and collected in a data bank that is still ongoing. Responses indicate changing perceptions of the value of PDP mechanisms for supporting independent learning. By summer 2005 a majority believed that completion of the Portfolio did enable personal reflection on progress. There was evidence of an increase in the perceived 'usefulness' of the task and in 2005, too, a majority agreed that it enabled improvement of those areas that needed most attention. Moreover, there was some increase in the number claiming to use the Progress File.

Focus groups held in 2005 and consisting of approximately ten students, covering the whole cohort and led by one or two tutors, support this information. Level 1 and 2 students recognised the relevance of the portfolio in supporting self-study and building skills for independent learning; they had enjoyed focusing on topics of personal interest. They valued the materials provided on the 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: 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 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 include, or discussed content with classmates.

The following comments are indicative of positive points made:

- 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
- 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
- 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

However positive student perceptions of the value of PDP may be, does engagement with the portfolio actually help students progress? We undertook to compare a student's mark for the self-directed study portfolio (assessed according to the level of personal reflection shown rather than quality of language or content) 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). 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.

We therefore looked more closely 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. Of the students who left the institution before proceeding to Level 2 (10.2% of the whole cohort), 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 reasons for non-submission have not been investigated systematically. Moreover, 13.5% of the students leaving had gained a mark above 60% for the portfolio element. 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: those who choose to withdraw from the institution before completing the year, those who have to leave because they have failed modules in other disciplines, and those who are unsuccessful in passing language ones.

According to focus group discussion, one key factor in conscientious completion of the portfolio is motivation; this will preferably be some kind of external incentive (i.e. 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 assessed work inevitably takes this priority. As a result, they have not continued to complete a personal portfolio of work beyond Level 1. Even then, many students tended to postpone the portfolio until just before the deadline: several requested a more frequent review of portfolio progress, to 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 (at the tutor's instigation). 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!
- It was hard to manage time at Level 1...
- 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
- I wouldn't say I've taken risks – I've not gone outside the comfort zone, so to speak...
- 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!

The request for further support in completing the portfolio had also already been raised through regular evaluation channels, so some changes to practice have already been made. For example, a further booklet of practical advice on portfolio completion has been produced, and individual tutorials on progress with the portfolio now systematically replace one taught session. Comments from the focus groups regarding the use of the Progress File were less encouraging. Most students reported simply

adding the minimum to meet the requirement for the portfolio but did not use it subsequently. Again, we have changed our practice so that the initial Action Plan is now completed electronically within the Progress File (and, anecdotally, in June 2005-6 some students chose to submit their entire Portfolio online).

The discussion also centred on Induction procedures, adding to feedback from student questionnaires and interviews. New arrangements for Induction Week, instigated by the institution in September 2005, allowed increased contact time within the department; this was used for early introduction to PDP and the Progress File, completion of the initial skills audit, setting personal learning objectives and exploring resources. There was unanimous recognition of the value of this early induction to PDP, but a strong view too that this should not be to the detriment of traditional language activities early on, nor should the focus on personal needs shift the balance too far away from early development of a supportive group ethos. Some tutors were anxious to ensure that regular, ongoing induction to PDP should not be relaxed. It was suggested that a practical, collaborative language task (the first submission for the portfolio, perhaps) begun in Induction week and submitted through the Progress File would allow PDP theory to be supplemented by practical experience.

In summary, the correlation between student attainment (and progression) and PDP as well as student perceptions of its usefulness are strong enough to encourage our continued development of departmental mechanisms and the strengthening of links to the Progress File. Evaluation has confirmed our belief that successful engagement with PDP adds cohesion to the student experience (including by early preparation for increased self-reliance while abroad and for lifelong learning). Nevertheless, many learners, at Level 1 in particular, lack confidence in their own direction and ask for more tutor guidance in self-directed study; it is clear to teaching staff too that increased individual support is needed, time which may not be easy to find. Some changes towards addressing these issues have already taken place, including at Induction; review, reflection and development continue.

Bibliography

- Anderson, G., Boud, D., Sampson, J. (1996) *Learning Contracts – A Practical Guide* London: Kogan Page
- Moon, J.A.(1999) *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Links

- <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/languages/pd>
- <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressfiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp>