1, 2, 3 – A journey of PDP at the University of Wolverhampton

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Abstract

This paper is a synthesis of the findings of three research projects to identify Personal Development Planning (PDP) progress at the University of Wolverhampton. The three projects look at PDP from a number of perspectives. Firstly, a university-wide e-Portfolio evaluation that explored e-Portfolio practice through the measure of PDP objectives evident in practice – the objectives used within this provide the structure for the discussion within this paper. Secondly, the paper is informed by the Inter/National Coalition for EPortfolio Research INCEPR) project, which involved looking at the facilitating and inhibiting factors affecting the scalability and sustainability of e-Portfolio and e-Portfolio based PDP across the institution. Finally, a Doctoral research project that looked at factors that contribute to engagement with PDP. Aspects of three of these pieces of research were pulled together as part of the Higher Education Academy/National Teaching Fellowship Scheme National Action Research Network On Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and ePortfolio Practice Project (The NTFS NARN project).

Key words: PDP and e-PDP; e-Portfolio; pedagogy; evaluation, strategy.

Institutional context

Since the start of the academic year 2005/06, the e-Portfolio system PebblePad was made available to all staff and students within the University of Wolverhampton. The system was introduced as an institutional tool to support personal development planning (PDP)

processes. Primarily, PDP activities were offered within the taught curriculum. The institutional context, including such issues as, what the PDP framework is at the university and our concept of an e-Portfolio system, have been previously published (Lawton and Felce, 2008; Lawton and Purnell, 2009; Lawton and Purnell, 2010).

The responsibility for implementing, evaluating and developing PDP practice within the university has been strategically placed within the University's Learning and Teaching Strategies since 2000. This is brokered through the Institute for Learning Enhancement (ILE). As members of this department we, the authors of this paper, have approached the research from an educational development perspective. We are not neutral to the research as we have both been at the forefront of PDP and e-Portfolio initiatives both internally and externally in the UK and overseas.

In the academic year 2008/09 the University's Quality Enhancement Committee (UQEC) requested that a university-wide evaluation of the impact of pedagogic processes for PDP and e-Portfolio development (Lawton and Purnell, 2009) was conducted. A follow-on study to this evaluation was carried out to identify what the facilitating and inhibiting factors were for building capacity and capability in staff in the area of e-Portfolio based learning (Challen et al., 2009). Running simultaneously to both these projects is a Doctoral research project in the area of PDP. The institutional evaluation, the staff development investigation, and the Doctoral project findings and methodological frameworks form the core activity of the University of Wolverhampton's membership to the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) National Action Research Network (NARN) project for researching and evaluating PDP and e-Portfolios (2007-2010).

Our NARN project involves bringing together the findings and experiences of the three separate research projects already mentioned to provide a synthesis of the journey and developments of PDP in the University of Wolverhampton. Two of the projects focussed on PDP development from staff perspectives, and the third provided insight into PDP as measured against set objectives affecting the student experience. One of the most significant findings of this synthesis project has been that having objectives set at the beginning of the PDP journey provides a framework against which you can measure engagement and identify progress over a period of time. The structure of the paper uses the objectives set in our 2003 PDP framework to explore the PDP distance travelled and the lessons learned along the way, based on findings from the three research projects.

The objectives set in 2003 were that PDP should:

- Be a formative student-centred process.
- Provide a product that documented a student's achievement and experience at the University.
- Be integrated throughout the whole of the student experience at the university.
- Be developmental.
- Be used by students with tutor guidance.

(Lawton and Felce, 2008)

PDP should be a formative student-centred process

The University of Wolverhampton designed its PDP framework through consultation with all its academic schools. Accommodations were made to establish the principle that PDP is a student-centred process that is supported by staff. Point 11 in the QAA guidelines (2009) states that 'these [a transcript and an individual's personal records] would be supplemented by structured and supported processes…The term personal development planning was used to denote this process'. The e-Portfolio system that the university helped develop, PebblePad, is seen as providing an institution-wide tool that can be used by individuals to support the PDP process. In all the examples within this article, PebblePad has been the software in use.

At present there exist many different definitions of an e-Portfolio (Lawton and Purnell, 2010), for example, a presentational tool, a reflective journal, or a competency profiling tool for a specific career or a professional body. As educational developers within the University of Wolverhampton we have observed more use of our e-Portfolio system to help students make sense of their learning experiences by the selection of and 'stitching' together of various elements, such as reflective accounts, assessment tasks, peer and tutor formative feedback, as in the concept of 'patchwork' texts (Winter, 2003). A key element of this is a reflective narrative written for different audiences and providing a rationale for the various elements selected. By using an electronic system there is immediacy and dialogue taking place which have not seemed to happen in the same way using paper-based systems. Within our institution we have changed our language from e-

Portfolio to e-PDP, which we are defining as PDP processes mediated and supported through the university's e-Portfolio system.

The QAA (2009, point 29) guidelines identify five different models of PDP implementation as follows:

- Discrete: where PDP is separate from or additional to the curriculum.
- Linked: where practices run in parallel to the curriculum but have links to it.
- Embedded: PDP embedded in particular parts of the program.
- Integrated: where all tutors are responsible and there is a whole curriculum approach.
- Extended: integrating learning and teaching activities with informal learning such as volunteering and extra curricular activities.

We are aiming to move from an embedded to integrated model through our university curriculum refocusing project, 'Learning Works'. This project has redesigned the academic year structure. Instead of having eight modules per year in two blocks (four modules each semester), the new framework now has six modules in each academic year. The six modules will be delivered in two year-long 'thin' modules at each level, and two short 'fat' modules in each of the two semesters. The majority of new courses have utilised these year-long modules to embed contextualised e-PDP, significantly reducing the risk of e-PDP being a bolted on activity. The QAA (2009, point 16) highlight that:

> PDP has an important role to play in making the outcomes or results of learning in HE more explicit. When learners are clear about what is expected of them and what they, in turn, might expect of HE, the quality of learning improves.

The aim of the year-long modules is to develop connectivity across 'content' modules and between levels. This will give students the ability to look holistically at their learning, rather than them seeing their learning in unrelated chunks. This is also particularly important to a widening participation institution such as ourselves, with many first-generation learners with little or no experience of HE. Students found that by using an e-Portfolio for PDP they had the ability to go backwards and look at their previous work, as well as plan forwards. 75% of the 606 students who responded to one of the research projects said they enjoyed participating in e-PDP activities and found them useful (Lawton and Purnell, 2009).

PDP to provide a product that documented a student's achievement and experience at the university

Since identifying the range of e-PDP and e-Portfolio practices that exist through the evaluation (Lawton and Purnell, 2009), there have been a number of conversations between key stakeholders (including our Registry department, the Institute for Learning Enhancement and the Office of the Dean of Students) as to how e-PDP could support a future sector-wide Higher Education Achievement Records (HEAR) initiative (Burgess, 2007). There is considerable debate both internally and externally as to how an individual's rich personal journey through HE could be verified and in what way PDP can be used to be included in a HEAR transcript:

> The HEAR will contain information which the institution is prepared to verify. Further work should be done on how to measure and record skills and achievements gained through non-formal learning but this, along with other student-generated/driven information, should be part of Personal Development Planning (PDP). (Burgess, 2007, p.9)

Within our institution, e-PDP and e-Portfolio-based learning is increasingly being used for both formative and summative assessment. An unintended outcome identified (Lawton and Purnell, 2010) is the increased submission of work when the e-Portfolio system is used for this purpose. This has been a significant event which has led to both changes in the software and to institutional practice. What started as a tool to support individual PDP processes has evolved into a collaborative tool to support other areas of teaching and learning, such as delivery of learning materials and internal and external moderation. An unanticipated outcome of submitting e-PDP activities online for formative feedback has been that staff are able to identify students at risk. The electronic submission has encouraged an early stage dialogue between students and teachers, and identified non-submission and non-engagement with tasks. Teachers have been able to provide 'just in time' support and thus increase retention and attainment (Lawton and Purnell, 2009).

With the evolution of the tool and innovative pedagogic use, there is an increase in the capability and willingness of teaching teams to see e-PDP as another learning and teaching option. The new Learning Works structure to the academic year (referred to above) has provided an opportunity to 'design-in' e-PDP activities in discipline curriculum.

PDP to be integrated throughout the whole of the student experience at the university

In the QAA (2009) guidelines, point 3 states:

> Effective PDP improves the capacity of individuals to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning and to understand what and how they learn. PDP helps learners articulate their learning and the achievements and outcomes of HE more explicitly, and supports the concept that learning is a lifelong and life-wide activity. It is important to bridge the transitions between these levels.

In the majority of new courses, the year-long modules are designed to give prominence to different skills and experiences depending on their level. For example, at level 4 the emphasis is primarily on understanding the expectations of studying in HE and on students identifying and developing their own learning skills. At level 5 there is a greater emphasis on transferable employability skills, and at level 6 on helping students reflect on, articulate and evidence their HE learning experience to external others, such as future employers.

In addition to designing-in opportunities which support PDP processes, the university is developing and implementing the concept of graduate attributes. We want to help our students to reflect on, evidence, articulate and apply what they have learnt while studying at the university. Currently our statement is that 'we aim to produce Wolverhampton Graduates who are digitally literate, knowledgeable and enterprising, and are global citizens' (University of Wolverhampton, 2008, online). In addition, there are continued discussions to develop the Alumni provision to include continued access to the e-Portfolio system. This will be a positive move towards university support of lifelong learning provision.

The university is currently researching the expansion of e-PDP into work-based learning through a JISC funded project, 'e-Portfolio-based Pedagogy for Small to Medium Enterprises' (ePPSME). This is exploring the potential e-PDP to further the opportunities for lifelong learning.

PDP to be developmental

The institutional framework for PDP processes was aimed at the student experience, though the tool to support this process was made available to both staff and students. There are multiple cases of staff using PebblePad to work collaboratively across campuses on research and development projects. This has included collaborative webfolios for the Cohort IV engagement with INCEPR, the ePPSME project and the Graduate Attributes Project. There has been a significant growth in the use of e-Portfolio system for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as well as PDP, and it is now embedded within the institutions in-service Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. In addition, members of staff are using the e-Portfolio system for professional accreditation, such as for Certified Membership of the Association for Learning Technology (CMALT) and professional accreditation in the Institute for Further Learning (IFL).

PDP to be used by students with tutor guidance

The institutional framework clearly states that PDP processes should be used by students with tutor guidance. At present this tends to refer to module tutors within a specific taught module. However, QAA (2009, point 22) offer examples of 'others' who could support PDP processes such as, 'tutors, peers or 'significant others' (for example, workplace or placement supervisors or careers advisers)'.

The majority of e-PDP activities which have taken place to date have happened in the taught curriculum though tutor-driven activities. Examples of these activities can be found at: www.wlv.ac.uk/pathfinder. These are predominantly aimed at developing personal and professional attributes in students, but also include the development of study skills, reflection, self-analysis, confidence, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, subject knowledge, collaboration, critical thinking and meta-cognition, and learning how to learn. Though tutors generally see the value and benefit in e-PDP activities, these can also be perceived as being overly burdensome (particularly with large groups) when the perception of the function of PDP is as an 'add on' to discipline content. This perception can also be observed in some students.

Unintended outcomes

Since 2005 the use of Pebble Pad for PDP at Wolverhampton has led to the need for new software skills among staff and students. This issue formed the basis of the Inter/National Coalition for EPortfolio Research (INCEPR) project. The question posed was: 'What are the facilitating and inhibiting factors in building capability and capacity of staff in supporting the use of e-Portfolio?'. The project outcomes are due to be published during the academic year 2010/2011. The project highlighted the need for staff development time and support to engage with the principles and capabilities needed to deliver e-PDP activities. In general, two different kinds of need were encountered among staff: firstly those who wanted to know how the software worked, and secondly those who weren't so interested in the software but wanted to engage their students in a particular way and thought that there was potential for the software to support what they wanted to do. There was some concern expressed in trying new methods of both delivery and content because of the potential effect on internal and external quality measures, such as Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs) and The National Student Survey (NSS). To reduce this fear and the risk of things going wrong, research was conducted into the use of developmental mentoring as part of a Doctoral project and the Higher Education Academy Pathfinders Project.

An outcome of both of these pieces of research was the development of a new role within the university – that of Blended Learning Adviser – who can mentor and support staff in any aspects of blended learning including the use of e-PDP and PebblePad. The Blended Learning Advisers will not directly work with students but will support tutors to support students. This is deemed very important so that the capabilities are gained and owned by the member of staff within their discipline context.

Over the last year there are more cases of students using the system for PDP without tutor prompts or support. From discussions with students they say that they are using peers and external social networks, such as family and friends, to offer support, share their work with and give formative feedback. As the e-Portfolio system does not record individual statistics, it is impossible to see where the system is being used or how many students are engaging in e-PDP as a self-directed activity.

Over the years within the university, the terms e-Portfolio and PDP have become interchangeable; now it would be difficult to find and extract the process without reference to the tool. An unintended outcome of this has been the development of pedagogy that is informing the wider HE sector both in the UK and overseas. In 2010, the university gained international recognition for this work by gaining the Platinum Learning Impact Award. The research conducted on e-PDP – including the internal evaluation, the INCEPR project and the Doctoral project, all aspects that were brought together as part of the NTFS NARN project – provided a substantial amount of evidence for the award submission. The Learning Impact Awards (LIAs) recognise use of technology to improve learning across all industry segments and in all regions of the world. Staff from the University of Wolverhampton teamed up with Pebble Learning, the company behind the e-Portfolio tool PebblePad, to present a submission entitled 'PebblePad: from project, to pilot, to personalised learning for all'. One of the five impact areas identified in the award was that of wider impact. Further details of these can be found at www.tinyurl.com/uow-wider-impact.

Conclusion

What have we learnt? The PDP objectives set in the institutional framework in 2003 are still relevant to current practice. However, there have been significant changes to the delivery of PDP with the introduction of PebblePad software. This has had an impact on pedagogic practice and educational development at the university. PDP has become linked with the implementation and use of an e-Portfolio system. It is important not to assume that PDP processes are easy to do, for either staff or student. An institutional driver, such as the University of Wolverhampton's Blended Learning Strategy (2008) can give direction to and encourage engagement with PDP – although both staff and students need to see the inherent value and benefit of the process, rather than seeing it simply as an 'add-on'. Where PDP may have been on the periphery in the past, the curriculum refocus project has meant all courses could be looked at holistically and without having to refer to past discipline narratives. PDP has been able to be contextualised within new course structures and into content with relevant activities at different levels. The journey we are on has created new opportunities for pedagogic development within different discipline contexts supported by new models for educational development. When PDP is designed for and supported within a particular frame of reference, whether a shared

discipline, community or similar, the meaning and benefit to engagement becomes clearer to those within the context. One size does not fit all.

Acknowledgement

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