Personal Development Planning (PDP) and ePortfolios: Arranged Marriage or True Love?

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1 Introduction

As a life-long learning process Personal Development Planning (PDP) has often been associated in recent years with the use of a portfolio, in particular an ePortfolio. In this paper we report on two pilot studies carried out with language students at the Open University (OU) in the UK using PDP and two different types of ePortfolio. We describe the activities used in the pilots and the design of the ePortfolios, and present the experiences of students working with PDP and their perceptions. Drawing from these findings, this study reflects on the nature of both PDP and ePortfolios, and critically discusses their supposedly intrinsic relationship. It finishes with considerations about possible directions and trends for the development of PDP and ePortfolios.

2   Definitions

2.1   Personal Development Planning (PDP)

Context

The origins of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Progress Files can be traced back in a number of macro-socio-political and pedagogical debates that took place in the UK around 2000–2001 (Clegg 2004). The main aim was to put the autonomous learner at the centre of Higher Education (HE) policy and practice.

The original guidelines developed to support the implementation of the HE Progress File (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] 2001) do not make it a requirement that PDP is integrated with the curriculum, but only require that students are provided with opportunities for PDP and guidance to support the process. Therefore, every HE institution in the UK is required to provide students with the opportunity to engage with PDP. In addition to the QAA guidance, the Generic Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network in the UK has produced some guides. These emphasize the importance of improving students' understanding of how they are learning, of offering students an opportunity to develop a holistic overview of their course, of enabling them to reflect critically and become more independent and encouraging students to consider actively their academic experiences, extracurricular activity and career opportunities (Houghton & Maddocks 2005).

Definition and aims

PDP has been defined as a "structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development" (QAA 2009: 2).

According to Gough et al. (2003) the primary objective for PDP is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning. PDP helps students

- to become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners;
- to understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context;
- to improve their general skills for study and career management;
- to articulate personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement;
- to encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life.

QAA (2009) suggests a cyclical process or learning cycle in relation to PDP, based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (Figure 1). However, QAA (2009) also places importance on guidance and support for the process.
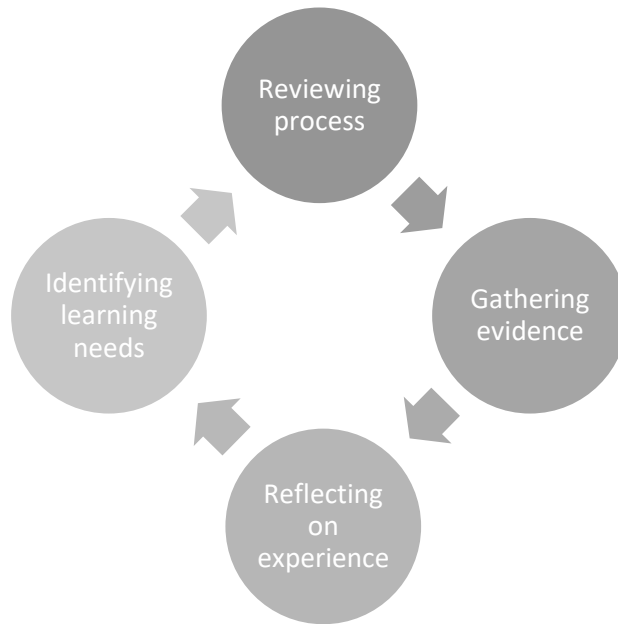

Figure 1: Cyclical Model (based on Kolb 1984, adapted from QAA 2009: 6)

Like McEntee (2013), the OU defines five stages, as seen in Figure 2, provided to students via the OU Help Centre in the section entitled "Develop your career" (Open University 2018).
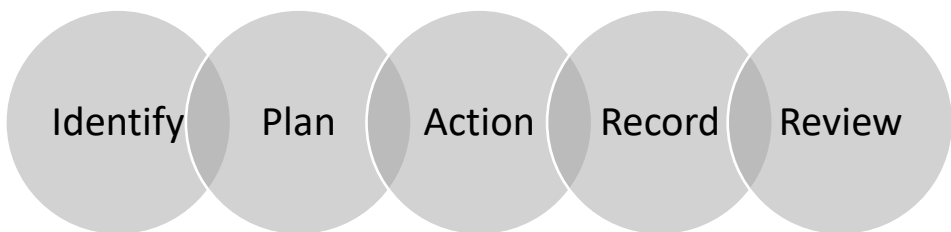

Figure 2: Stages within the OU PDP process

Similarities to the QAA learning cycle can be noted as follows in Table 1:

Table 1: Similarities between the QAA learning cycle and the OU PDP process

QAA learning cycle	OU PDP process
Identifying learning needs	Identify, Plan
Gathering evidence	Record
Reviewing progress, Reflecting on experiences	Review

The holistic framework of PDP comprises three overlapping areas of students' learning: personal, academic, and career and employability (Figure 3). As indicated above, the QAA defines PDP as a process undertaken by students to reflect on their own learning and to plan for their personal, educational and career development. It is an inclusive process (QAA 2009).
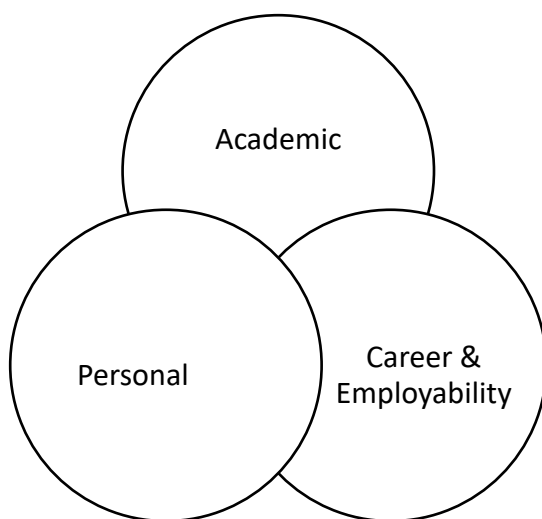

Figure 3: The three overlapping areas of PDP – academic, personal, and career and employability

2.2 ePortfolios

The term ePortfolio can mean different things to different people and there are many tools that are labelled ePortfolio. The overarching concept is that of the Joint Informations Systems Committee (n.d.), in which an ePortfolio is defined as a collection of digital artefacts created and collected by students as a record of their learning achievements. This study aims to explore further the key functionalities of an ePortfolio supporting PDP.

Definition and aims

An ePortfolio

- is a space to identify and capture plans for future learning and development;
- is a repository to enable students to collate not only evidence of their academic learning, but also from other learning experiences. It needs to accommodate various file and media types, and having the facility to tag or label these items would promote searchability;
- is a tool to facilitate deep and embedded reflection (Moon 2005). It should enable written reflections to make them permanent, as encouraged by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (2009), but could also involve thoughts being audio-recorded;
- should support assessment if required. This might mean a sharing feature so that tutors or peers can assess ongoing work, or a more formal link with the institution's official assessment system;
- 2hould allow the content – plans, evidence, reflections – to be portable (not tied to a particular institution) in order to facilitate lifelong learning;
- must provide data security and be easy to use, including for disabled users.

3   Previous research

3.1 PDP

A systematic review of the effectiveness of PDP in improving student learning was carried out by a team from the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre in 2003 (Gough et al. 2003). After reviewing 157 studies the researchers found that these demonstrated that the use of PDP had a positive impact on student learning in terms of outcomes and student approaches to learning (Gough et al. 2003).

Atlay (2009) considers the importance of the student being the owner of the PDP process and sees PDP as a mediation process, as a bridge between learning and career. As a matter of fact, this bridging role of PDP between academic training and career has had an impact on the different ways that PDP has been implemented in UK universities (Quinton & Smallbone 2008), as there is no clear consensus over where the responsibility for PDP fits within a university. Some institutions place the emphasis with the careers and skills departments, whereas others place it within the academic units.

There are also a number of different ways to integrate PDP within the curriculum. Atley (2009) has explained and exemplified five macro models (discrete, linked, embedded modular, integrated and extended). The variety and richness regarding PDP implementation has also been documented by Rob Ward and colleagues with numerous case studies from UK universities (Ward 2009).

3.2 ePortfolios and PDP

Numerous research studies suggest that an ePortfolio tool can enhance PDP. The main difference between the studies is the context in which they were carried out. These contexts include staff development (Hoekstra & Crocker 2015), children's classrooms (Barrett 2007), postgraduate students (Marais & Perkins 2012) and nursing undergraduate students (Howes et al. 2011; Toner & McDowall 2015). While these contexts do not correlate directly to OU undergraduate language students, the findings do seem to be consistent in suggesting that ePortfolios can encourage students to become aware of PDP in general, as well as encouraging them to reflect on areas needing improvement.

3.3 Perceptions

Despite the evidence for PDP's effectiveness (see 3.1), recent research into student perceptions of PDP has resulted in mixed findings. On the one hand, some students were positive about PDP. Baker et al. (2014) found that once PDP had been explained to them, students were able to recognise employability benefits when engaging in PDP. However, the study focused on postgraduate students, who may be deemed to be more driven than average, and the authors themselves acknowledge potential differences when it comes to undergraduate perceptions. Buzzetto-More (2010) also suggested that students found ePortfolios useful for reflecting on skills, although this finding was based on a study in one institution in the USA and focused on ePortfolios for summative assessment rather than PDP.

On the other hand, some findings were less positive. Hush (2012), for example, found that while employers welcomed modules with a heavy PDP focus, students did not.

3.4 Learning design

The importance of learning design in supporting student engagement with ePortfolios and PDP has been researched by many, with varying recommendations.

Clark and Neumann (2009) and Baker et al. (2014) advise PDP and related tools be integrated into the curriculum. What does this mean? Hush's (2012) approach was to create entire PDP modules as *bookends* to a degree but this did not seem to be entirely successful from the student perspective. Baker et al. (2014)

referred instead to PDP resources and Howes at al. (2011) suggested a structure be put in place within the ePortfolio.

3.5 ePortfolio tools

There is not much literature on ePortfolio tools provided by universities in the UK. However, exploring UK university websites suggests they use a range of ePortfolio tools – in-house or third-party tool solutions such as PebblePad and Mahara. There is, though, little information regarding the effectiveness of each tool in relation to PDP, nor to supporting language students.

Kim et al. (2010) warn of limited capacity of in-house ePortfolio solutions and of restricted portability of ePortfolio content when students graduate. Instead Kim et al. (2010) recommend cloud solutions for ePortfolio purposes.

3.6 Programme-wide use

It is not easy to find information about the benefit of a single ePortfolio tool being used throughout a programme. Hallam and Creagh (2010), although referring to data acquired some years ago, report on a large-scale research project across Australian universities using focus groups, interviews and surveys, which should suggest reliable results. They recommend universities establish an academic policy around the use of ePortfolios. In a smaller-scale study, but one conducted in the UK, Beresford and Cobham (2010: 7) concluded that the University of Lincoln needed "a strategy for the implementation of a student-centred ePortfolio to aid personal development planning at the university".

3.7 Languages

Very little research seems to exist in relation to language students' use of ePortfolios for PDP. Cummins and Davesne (2009) simply refer to the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which was new at the time, advising training for both teachers and students in its use. The ELP, though, has a separate purpose. Consequently this paper, by bringing together PDP and ePortfolios in the specific context of undergraduate language students, is contributing to research in this field.

4 The pilot studies

The OU's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas; and as such, most undergraduate courses have no formal entry requirements. Dedicated to distance learning, the OU is one of the largest universities in the UK with around 175,000 students. On the one hand, many OU students are mature students,

already in work, perhaps looking for a promotion or career change. On the other, some OU students study mainly for interest and may be retired or nearing retirement. The OU is currently exploring ways to help students become more aware of connections between their learning, personal contexts and employability.

In these pilot studies then, we wanted to find out more about the experiences and perceptions of OU language students working with PDP and with ePortfolios. For example, what sort of impact does PDP have on our students? On what aspects of their learning? How useful is it for their current studies? Does it make a difference? What about non-academic areas? What was their experience of working with an ePortfolio like? Although the pilots were carried out for specific modules, that is at micro level, the idea was to gather information and evidence to inform the integration of PDP at a macro level, that is at qualifications and programme level (and potentially university level).

The way we designed the activities was by following an embedded modular model as recommended by Atlay (2009: 24): "These modules provide the main support for PDP and may serve to link with material studied in other modules. They will also link to the student's Progress File. Such modules may have a skills and/or a subject focus as well as emphasising PDP processes."

It is also worth mentioning that in the curricula of the OU modules there is an explicit focus on skills and capability through the academic curriculum. In this context, "PDP becomes an important sense-making, progress-monitoring and development tool" (Gough 2003: 11).

In our pilots we focused on two principles of PDP to test their pedagogical relevance for OU students: The interrelation of the three areas (academic, personal, career) and the self-regulation pedagogical cycle (identify, plan, action, record, review). Therefore, the particular emphasis of our PDP approach was to enable students to see connections, and to reflect on and experience the benefits of linking the three areas in terms of common and overlapping goals.

The other main aim was working with the functions "identify, plan, record, review". As these were the main categories we were using, we designed the ePortfolio accordingly, presenting each function as a "tab" or section in the ePortfolio.

In addition to the principles of PDP, we used the pilots to explore the role of learning design, in terms of scaffolding and support provided to students. This included a "bridge website" (acting as a bridge between the module website and the ePortfolio space) which contained the activities, technical support documentation and an online forum for students to communicate with one another, their tutors or the pilot team as well as the actual ePortfolio tool.

In this section we report on two pilot studies carried out with OU language students: Pilot A, which ran from February to May 2017, and Pilot B, which ran over two weeks in November 2017. Table 2 provides a comparative overview.

Table 2: Comparative overview of the two pilot studies

	Pilot A	**Pilot B**
Participants	Level 1 L161: *Exploring languages and culture* students (11 completed responses)	Level 2 Spanish alumni (15 completed responses)
ePortfolio tool	EPOS (Mahara-based ePortfolio developed by the University of Bremen, Germany)	MS OneNote template (desktop and online versions)
PDP activities	3 Activities, each of them with a special focus on: Academic, Personal or Career	2 Activities: Activity 1 focused on the three areas (Academic, personal, career) Activity 2 focused on the self-regulation cycle (identify, plan, record, review) whilst relating the current studies with career and personal goals
Data collection	Pre-survey questionnaire, post- survey questionnaire, open comments, interviews	Pre-survey questionnaire, post- survey questionnaire, open comments, interviews

4.1 Pilot study A

The purpose of this pilot was to investigate ways of enhancing PDP activities in an existing level 1 module, L161: *Exploring languages and culture*, which is the core level 1 module of the OU languages degree. While this module already includes some PDP-related activities, they do not obviously relate to the three areas (academic, personal and professional), nor to the five stages (identify, plan, act, record, review). There is also no specific tool provided to support the activities. With this objective in mind, we designed three activities to test a more explicit approach to PDP-related activities and the use of an ePortfolio.

Data Collection

We used a pre- and post-survey online questionnaire. 27 students were invited to take part in the survey by email and at the end of the survey we collected 11 end-of-pilot survey responses (40.7 % response rate). Due to the low number of participants the quantitative data in terms of percentages are not significant. However,

as the questionnaire was semi-structured we collected a useful number of open comments. We also carried out 8 in-depth interviews with students. It should also be noted that, despite the low numbers, the student profiles reflected a typical range of OU language students.

PDP Activities

Within the pilot, students were asked to engage in three activities using the ePortfolio. Each activity focused on one area (personal, academic, career and employability). There was also an introductory activity where students could identify their priorities for their PDP. When designing the activities, we took into account the importance of reflection for working with PDP. Reflection is the basis of the cyclical model described above (Kolb 1984) and the stages of PDP (see Figs.1 and 2). Structured reflection involves 'standing back' from an experience and using a framework to explore the experience in depth to learn from it. The following quote from Gibbs clearly expresses the relevance of reflection for learning:

> It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential is lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively (Gibbs 1988: 9).

Whilst designing and piloting the activities we encountered some challenges. For example, how to address the needs of students who are not studying for career-related reasons; and building in viable timescales to enable students to identify and plan, then take action, then record and finally review.

ePortfolio tool

In this pilot we used an ePortfolio tool developed by the University of Bremen called EPOS. Originally designed as a languages ePortfolio following the structure of the European Language Portfolio, we adapted EPOS specifically for PDP at the OU by integrating the pedagogical functions (identify, plan, record, review). For more information about EPOS see Kühn and Langner (2012) and Kühn and Pérez Cavana (2012).

Figure 4: Tabs within EPOS changed to match the OU PDP process

Data Analysis

The open comments and transcripts of the interviews were analysed using a procedure of four stages of thematic analysis as described by Bryman (2008). These involve:

1. Reading through the transcripts without taking any notes or considering an interpretation, and afterwards writing down some general notes about what we considered interesting, important or significant.
2. Reading the transcripts again, this time marking the text, making marginal notes, finding labels for codes and generating an index of terms.
3. Reviewing our codes, establishing themes and concepts, considering possible connections.
4. Considering more general theoretical ideas in relation to the codes and data.

As such, we aimed for internal reliability through the two researchers agreeing about what we saw and heard (Bryman 2008).

Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis, the following areas were identified.

a) Taking control of their learning

Students reported that working with PDP enabled them to develop new competences. In particular, they developed a sense of responsibility in relation to their learning. They were able to relate PDP to their life and to making progress in meeting personal goals. These new competences included the ability to identify their skills, the ability to critically reflect, to recognise things of importance and the ability to carry out self-analysis. They were able to give more in-depth responses and be more focussed on their study.

One student said: "It does make me think about how I learn and it makes me think where I want to go with my modules… I'm taking control of my learning rather than just going with the flow."

b) Awareness of strengths and weaknesses

Students developed a new awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and of their limitations. Their ability to clarify and identify weaknesses and strengths made their goals more achievable as they could see where they were going and how to get there. In this sense some students reported that PDP gave them "self-confidence". They were able to identify where improvement was needed, and that made them feel more confident and focused as they realised the relevance of the activities. Having a better understanding of what they were doing and why was deemed helpful. Just the fact of understanding and realising made things more relevant: looking into their goals and tasks, being able to define exactly what they wanted, revealed that these goals were more achievable. They also had the experience that when you learn to plan, goals seem to be more manageable, easier to reach. One student commented: "The more conscious you are of your strengths, weaknesses and what experience has taught you, the more likely you are to make informed choices about what to pursue."

c) Providing a broader perspective

Working with PDP allowed students to see things from a different perspective. It showed them that there are many reasons to study, and it is possible to envisage and consider a career plan. They were able to make links between working independently and managing their time. It encouraged them to expand their thinking when completing assessment tasks and it showed them the advantages of this type of "linking thinking" rather than considering the module materials in isolation. This was mind opening.

One student wrote about how working with PDP was life-changing for him: "I wasn't expecting much from PDP, but I am so happy that I participated [in the pilot]. I was able to think about things I haven't thought [about] before. I started studying to escape from a difficult situation in my life and to keep my head busy, but through PDP I realised that I can make plans and relate to what I really want for my future. […] I am going to do my degree in languages to become a language teacher."

d) Awareness of their learning process

Students felt that working with PDP was enabling and helpful in different areas. One aspect was in relation to managing their learning: it enabled them to revise and improve further, it also helped them to orientate their thinking towards module content. Working with PDP enabled them to develop their metacognition, and it helped them to critically analyse, carry out self-evaluations and review. It also helped them to organize their learning, to manage their time and make informed choices. One student wrote: "Some skills I had not previously been able to de-

scribe, and by seeing them written down in activities I was able to look at them from different perspectives."

e) The ePortfolio: a support structure for employability

Students felt that putting everything in one place was a big advantage, as it helped them to develop and link their goals and experiences. Students also felt that the ePortfolio helped to structure their thinking. Being able to link self-evaluation and planning in EPOS was deemed very useful. It was also considered very useful in relation to employability, in areas such as being able to articulate and present capabilities to an employer, and to apply for a job. One student wrote: "I think that the ePortfolio is a great idea and enables you to put a full breakdown of your skills, development goals and experience in one place. Excellent for job applications and being able to better articulate your abilities to an employer."

f) Challenges

The main challenge that students reported was in relation to time. Even if most of the students considered working with PDP very beneficial, it certainly took time. In fact, some students felt they did not have enough time to engage with the suggested activities.

There were also some challenges relating to technical difficulties in that some students found the website and ePortfolio tool not particularly user-friendly.

One student, who was retired, found PDP irrelevant for his personal circumstances. Another felt that being reflective "in his head" was enough, whereas others found reflection difficult and time consuming. This confirms the critical view of some scholars (Clegg 2004) in relation to reflection, as well as in relation to the need to get students to take PDP seriously (Ward 2009).

4.2 Pilot study B

The purpose of this second pilot was to explore ways of integrating PDP activities into the production of a new level 2 Spanish module entitled L226: *Spanish Studies 2*. Spanish-speaking students at levels 2 and 3 were invited to test draft content in order to feed into the design of the module. With this objective in mind, we designed two activities linked to the first unit of the module for students to try out before the module went live.

Data collection

We recruited 25 volunteer students. The students were sent an invitation to complete a survey after having done the activities. 15 students responded in total. 10 responses were complete and 5 were incomplete (40% response rate).

The survey consisted of a semi-structured questionnaire. Most of the questions had an open response box, therefore a significant amount of qualitative data was collected. We also carried out 3 telephone interviews.

PDP Activities

Key elements of the second pilot were the integration of short PDP tasks, the ePortfolio tool and student workload. We designed two activities: one was an introduction to PDP as a whole and the other was related to the module materials. Both activities had several steps. Activity 1, "My study, my work, my life: working with my PDP", explored the definition of PDP and its purpose, and it introduced the three areas: academic, personal and professional. Students were asked to write their goals for the three areas and then to ascertain links between them as some were likely to be in the overlapping zones between these areas.

The second activity "Applying PDP to my module studies" worked through the functions "identify, plan, record, review". Students worked with self-assessment descriptors in relation to the learning objectives of the unit, and identified weaknesses or gaps. They planned how to work on the weak points in their learning. They also worked with their strengths, gathering evidence in the "Record" section. Finally, they reviewed and reflected on the whole process.

ePortfolio tool

After the first pilot, it became clear that the particular ePortfolio tool used in that pilot was not a feasible option for our modules. Technical difficulties aside, the main issue was the reluctance of the OU to use tools with high licensing fees, given the large number of students the OU has. Within this context we decided to try another tool.

At the time of writing, the OU was making Microsoft Office 365 available to students. Part of the Office 365 suite is OneNote. While not specifically an ePortfolio tool, we wanted to explore how this digital space could be used by students to support their PDP process. As advocated by Howes at al. (2011), we provided a structure within the 'ePortfolio' through the creation of a template in OneNote, which we then made available to the students. This template was a simplified version of the ePortfolio used in Pilot A but maintaining the idea of the tabs to provide guidance through the stages of PDP (identify, plan, record, review).
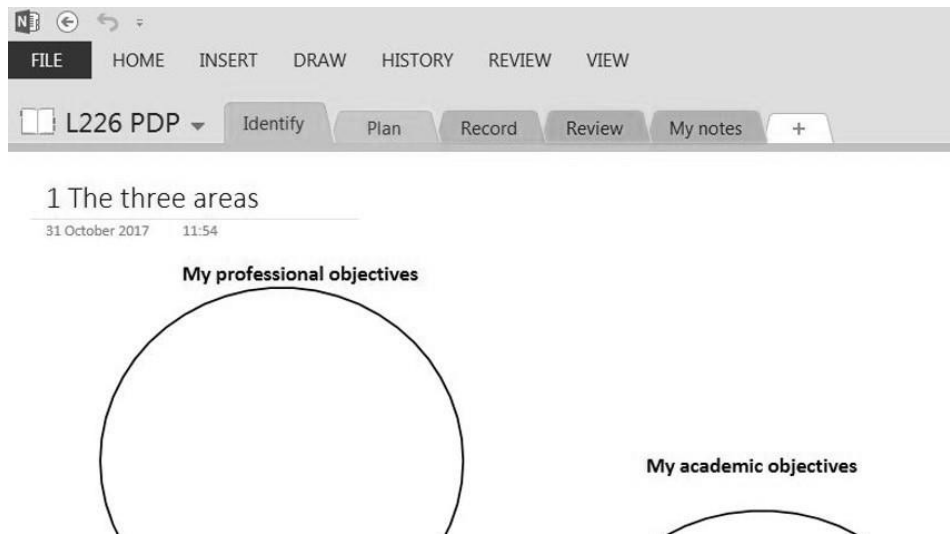
Figure 5: Tabs created within OneNote to match the OU PDP process

Data analysis

As in Pilot A, the open comments from the survey and the interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis. We followed Bryman's (2008) procedure of four stages of thematic analysis as described previously.

Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis the following areas were identified.

a) Increasing motivation

Different aspects of motivation were reported by students when describing their experiences working with PDP. For example, working with a new tool can increase motivation through being able to

- see their own goals clearly and realise that they are achievable;
- revisit the initial reasons for studying;
- set out what they want to get out of their learning journey;
- reflect on goals and understand them;
- become a more effective learner.

The fact that PDP helps to make their learning goals clearer and more tangible motivates students to achieve them.

One student said: "It enables you to collect the evidence of competencies, achievements, feedback to look back [at] when you feel slightly demotivated or in need of a push."

b) Making connections

PDP allowed students to see connections between different goals and different areas of their lives – personal, academic and professional. Thinking about their goals in relation to each of the three areas and then seeing how the goals interrelate was an unexpected experience for some of the students, as they had not had this opportunity before. They also realized how working towards one particular objective enhances the achievement of other objectives, because they are often connected. In relation to this, students wrote: "Understanding connections of efforts can help achieve goals"; "I guess it was both motivating and as a consequence useful to become a more effective learner. It was interesting to see how one simple exercise could change the way of thinking and made me realise how connected the objectives are."

c) Seeing the bigger picture

A number of words related to "seeing" were used to express how PDP enabled students to achieve clarity about different aspects of their learning, their strengths, their weaknesses. It enabled them to see the bigger picture in relation to their goals, keep track of progress and think about what to focus on.

One student wrote about their experience: "It allows us as a student to see what we are capable of, what we have achieved and what we are competent in."

The "bigger picture" seems to refer to the fact that through PDP students develop the ability to look at the wider context of their learning, it broadens their field of vision. It has to do with remembering why they are undertaking the module and connecting it with their long-term goals, but also with having a better understanding of the aspects they need to improve. One student commented: "Identifying the goals and aims, breaking them into different categories and then seeing the bigger picture would allow me to better focus on the weak parts and find tools and strategies to improve them."

d) Sense of direction

Students reported that having a clearly structured path helped with orientation, acted as a "reminder" about their learning objectives and their learning trajectory. For example: "Reflection can serve as a reminder when you lose your way on the learning journey and gives you motivation to keep going."

The different steps of PDP helped them to learn how to be methodical in approaching their learning. One student wrote: "Method helps focus on what you have achieved and what is still to do"; another student said: "I think […] PDP will help students to adopt a more structured and systematic way of talking about their studies; it shows you how to be methodical so that you set out a study plan and regularly review your own progress as you learn."

e) Breaking the journey into smaller steps

The activities were divided into four steps:

1. Identify strengths and weaknesses in relation to the learning objectives;
2. Plan how to improve what was identified as a weak point;
3. Record evidence of strong points;
4. Review the whole learning process.

This step by step approach used in the PDP activities was perceived as very useful by some of the students. A student wrote: "Interesting to break down in smaller mini-activities or mini-challenges. A good tool for future use." Table 3 presents a comparison of thematic findings from Pilot A and B. While it could be said that there are some similarities, such as providing a broader perspective and seeing the bigger picture, or awareness of the learning process and sense of direction, there are also subtle differences or developments. For example, taking control of their learning expands to encompass increasing motivation; and awareness of strengths and weaknesses evolves into making connections.

Table 3: Comparison of thematic findings from the two pilots

Pilot A	Pilot B
a) Taking control of their learning	a) Increasing motivation
b) Awareness of strengths and weaknesses	b) Making connections
c) Providing a broader perspective	c) Seeing the bigger picture
d) Awareness of their learning process	d) Sense of direction
e) The ePortfolio: a support structure for employability	e) Breaking the journey into smaller steps
f) Challenges	

5   What is the role of an ePortfolio tool?

Returning again to the definition of an ePortfolio, this can comprise both the tool and the student's content. Throughout this research we have repeatedly asked ourselves: "what makes an ePortfolio an ePortfolio?" What are the essential features, elements or dynamics that characterize an ePortfolio? By working with the OneNote template, we pushed a possible ePortfolio definition to the limit by asking: Can something as basic and simple as OneNote deliver the full functionality of an ePortfolio? What would that be like for students?

The experiences of the students involved in the two pilots seem to suggest an answer: an ePortfolio is a *place* – students appreciated being able "to have everything in one place". The greater or lesser interconnectivity between the different parts of the ePortfolio does not seem to play an essential role. The important thing was to have a place as a space to reflect, to put things in order, to collect completed work, to gather thoughts and to make plans.

As Edward S. Casey puts it in his thought-provoking book: "Our lives are so place-oriented and place-saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placelessness would be like. For just this reason, we rarely pause to consider what being no place or having no place might mean" (Casey 2009: ix).

Indeed, in our pilots, as students were reflecting on their learning, finding their way through their learning journey, and discovering their strengths and weaknesses, they needed a space to materialize their reflections, their plans and their achievements. This space – their ePortfolio – helped them to see the "bigger picture" of their learning in relation to personal and career goals. The space also helped them to divide their learning and goals into smaller steps and make them more manageable.

It would seem that providing students with a space – both physically (EPOS or OneNote) and mentally (sufficient time) – in order to engage in PDP is beneficial. The space, if not owned by the university but easily available to students in their personal and professional areas (as well as their academic area), can be used by students throughout life, in support of PDP as a lifelong process. The space, if digital, enables access wherever and whenever and therefore portability; and allows for the collection of evidence and for that evidence to be shared with employers, or academic tutors, or friends and family. The space, if scaffolded, supports students in the complexities of PDP – in working through the five stages, considering the three areas and establishing connections.

This would have been more difficult to achieve without a space. An ePortfolio, as simple and basic as it might be, can serve the purpose of this space.

With reference to the definition of PDP as "a structured and supported process", the need for a place in which this structured and supported process takes place seems logical. The simple and clear system of tabs "Identify, Plan, Record, Review," demonstrates this idea: not only does each pedagogical element have its place, but the relation of the elements to each other bring the process to life.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to work with a structure or a process without the visual and material aid of an actual place where you can see the structure and where you can collect evidence and perceive the development of the process.

6   Conclusion

The pilots carried out with language students at the OU in the UK have provided valuable insights into the usefulness for students of engaging with PDP during their studies, as well as into the challenges that embedding PDP within a module or programme might involve. The pilots also revealed what students most valued about their work in relation to PDP and what it brought to their studies, which included the possibility of developing new capabilities and a new self-awareness; the possibility of becoming a more autonomous learner and feeling more motivated. PDP enabled students to make connections and to see the bigger picture in relation to their studies. It enabled them to find their way on their learning journey and to make challenges more manageable by breaking them down into smaller steps.

What the participants in this pilot study reported and described is closely related to the concept of Self-regulated Learning (SRL). Although there is a notable richness in relation to the development of this concept over almost 30 years (Panadero 2017), SRL, as introduced by Zimmerman (1989) refers to a process of taking control of and evaluating one's own learning and behavior. According to Zimmermann, "students can be described as self-regulated to the degree that they are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process" (Zimmermann 1989: 329).

While some students may plan, reflect and collect without an ePortfolio tool, providing an ePortfolio-type tool – or digital space – can enhance the student's journey. The pilots have shown how the functionality of PDP in many ways was inseparable from the place where students engaged with it – the ePortfolio. The minimal version of an ePortfolio that was used for the second pilot clearly showed that the tool does not need to be sophisticated or complicated, but it should afford a space that facilitates the structure that characterizes PDP, as well as the learning processes. PDP and ePortfolios have been shown to have clear affinities and synergies. They are closely interwoven in such a way that when planning to implement PDP in an educational setting, the *material-digital place* where it is going to happen should be taken into account. Consequently, while for some students PDP and ePortfolios may be an arranged marriage they feel uncomfortable with in the beginning, over time and with support and scaffolding, it would seem that true love can indeed blossom.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ELP   European Language Portfolio
EPOS   *ePortfolio für Sprachen*
HE   Higher Education
OU   The Open University
PDP   Personal Development Planning
QAA   The Quality Assurance Agency
SRL   Self-Regulated Learning
UK   The United Kingdom

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