

Personal development planning; an evaluation of student perceptions

Sarah Nixon
School of Education, Leisure and Sport Studies
Liverpool John Moores University
s.nixon@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Personal development planning (PDP) is delivered differently across institutions and has been labelled a 'chaotic conception'. The key concepts are around supporting, planning and reviewing learning whilst developing self-awareness. This paper uses a qualitative approach to capture the voices of a sample of students studying at a UK north-west university at two points of time, the end of their first and final year. Two main ways of scaffolding PDP are explored, the use of workbooks for goal-setting and reflection and studying in peer learning groups. The workbooks become less useful over time whilst meeting in peer learning groups become more important. The students felt goal-setting was valuable as a tool they would use in the future and also that reflection against their goals was crucial to success. This approach however wasn't for everyone but even the dismissal of the philosophy by some came with an awareness of why it didn't work and how it might have helped. Overall the sample were positive about PDP and this strengthened over the three years of study, thereby showing the ideas behind this concept do have a valuable place within the undergraduate curriculum.

Keywords: personal development planning, goal-setting, reflection, structure and support, self-awareness

Introduction

Personal Development Planning (PDP) is the only approach to learning in UK higher education that is actively encouraged through policy (Jackson, 2010), coming in a variety of guises, implemented in different ways across the sector (Quinton & Smallbone, 2008).

The QAA (2009 p.4) define it 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”. This philosophy is open to interpretation at both institutional and programme level. It has been labelled as a ‘chaotic conception’ (Clegg & Bufton, 2008 p.437) with the guidelines allowing autonomy within institutions (Hulme & Lisewskib, 2010). PDP does not fit easily into a single definition but this does not mean we should not establish its educational value (Peters & Tymms, 2010). Peters (2010) suggests that there is logic and appeal in revealing the experiences of PDP and exploring how it enhances the student experience, which is the purpose of this study.

Despite the difficulties in defining it, the value of PDP is implicit. Houghton (2002) argues that managing your own learning is an important ability and is the ultimate objective of higher education, creating graduates who are autonomous individuals capable of advancing their own learning. PDP should enable students to determine their current skills, identify what they need to learn and develop a future focused plan, thereby making them better prepared for the workplace upon graduation (Bleetman & Webb, 2008). Whether PDP works or not has been a matter for much debate over the years and this type of thinking does not work for everyone (Jackson, 2001). Jackson and Ward (2004) suggest that PDP improves learning and the capacity to learn when done well, with the difficult here lying with what that means in practice. In a later study Jackson (2010 p.1) suggests that “If PDP is implemented in ways that learners find engaging, and can be related to real world experiences, it offers the promise of enabling them to develop and practise capabilities that are important to being an effective self-regulating professional”. There is much literature on approaches and case studies exploring PDP from the delivery perspective (Centre for Recording Achievement, 2013) but less on the perceptions from students. This paper uses the voices of a sample of students studying a sport related degree at a UK north-west university at two points of time, to explore their perceptions of the concept and what it has meant for their learning.

Context and approaches

The philosophy that guides PDP on this programme has been fundamentally about supporting students to be the best they can be, with the processes running across all three

levels of study. This has included building self-awareness and regulation, on-going goal setting and reflection and future planning. Jackson and Ward (2004 p.438) discussing PDP through Zimmerman's (2000) theory on self-regulation note that "personal success involves more than innate ability and exposure to good teaching. It also requires the personal qualities of initiative, persistence, belief in self and self-direction."

The three main principles of PDP have been used to scaffold this paper, the first of these being structure and support. Within the programme there are two mechanisms used, workbooks and student peer learning groups (PLG). These enable the other two key principles of planning and review and reflection to be undertaken by the students. In the first year PDP is a taught element within a module focused on individual learning and development where PLGs meet weekly. In the second and final year, PDP is not linked to a module but is across the programme and is supported in the same way through the workbooks and the weekly PLG meetings. The PDP approaches and content are developmental and grow and change as the students develop. Gosling (2009 p.172) suggests that "PDP provides a vehicle for a more synoptic overview of what is being learnt" and this model of PDP attempts to do that. The workbook is used for both the planning and review element and this is an iterative on-going process, with goal-setting being used supported by a weekly reflective element. Zimmerman (2008) reviewed evidence in support of the educational value of goal setting and found that appropriately set goals can direct students' and can motivate them to greater effort and persistence. Ideas around realistic, attainable and challenging goals (Shunk, 1990) are discussed in PDP to support the students to engage with this powerful tool.

Alongside the workbook all students work in their PLGs with their personal tutor and meet weekly as a group to work through their goals; develop their thinking and support other aspects of their learning on the programme. Research has shown that timetabling personal tutoring through a curriculum module for students can help to generate better relationships between staff and students, as well as between students and their peers (Owen, 2002). Success in PDP according to Jackson (2010) requires teachers to adopt the role of facilitator of students' learning (constructed by each individual) rather than a transmitter of knowledge developed and synthesised by the teacher. PDP in this case is constructed to do just that and it is acknowledged that this needs careful facilitation from the teaching staff and can be a difficult approach to take for some (Griffiths, 2009).

Methodology

This study gathered perceptions from 10% of a cohort of students on one programme (n=7). The sampling was purposive (Robson, 2002) with the methodology for selection of the students designed to be as random as possible. At the time of data collection there were seven personal tutor groups in the first year of the programme, each group was tabled alphabetically and the bottom student from each group was approached to be involved. It was important to get the views from each tutor group as the PDP was delivered and supported by the personal tutors and this methodology ensured the different views and opinions could be collected.

Research ethics and limitations

Ethical approval was applied for and granted by the University ethics panel. Due to the possible bias caused by the researcher being a tutor know to all students it was important the students were free to choose whether to be involved or not (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The four elements of informed consent as defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) were adhered to, these being, competence; volunteerism; full information and comprehension. To avoid any perceived pressure each of the chosen students was approached by their personal tutor, given full details of the study and asked if they would be involved, all seven agreed voluntarily. All of the sample signed consent forms and were informed of the processes if they wished to withdraw from the study, names have been removed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Data collection and processing

As the study was aiming to track perceptions over the time of the degree programme, two data collection points were used the first being at the end of the first year of study and the second at the end of the final year. A qualitative approach, using interviews, was taken as this allowed for exploration of the students thoughts and feeling (Silverman, 2006). The original questions were planned in advance to ensure the students were asked about the same topics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) and this allowed for comparison across the sample. Semi-structured interviews then took place where the questions were asked to each student and areas of interest were explored further (Robson, 2002). As PDP has

many meanings it was felt that this was the most appropriate way of enabling the students to develop their ideas. For the second interview the same questions were asked to allow for comparison across the three years with the addition of extra questions to ensure the students could reflect back over their whole period of study.

Each interview was recorded and then transcribed to ensure the information was accurate. The groups of interviews from each point in time were then themed around the key concepts of structure and support, planning, reflection and review and the overall perception of PDP. Each student's views were then analysed individually to see what had changed over the three years and key ideas were pulled out during this comparison. In the discussion section the interviews have been labelled R1 – R7 and the different years have been split as it was important that the perceptions were gathered as the student progressed through their studies.

Discussion

In exploring students perceptions the discussion has been split into the various facets of the process; which include structure and support, planning, review and reflection and then overall perceptions of PDP. The two time points have been kept separate in the discussion in order to analyse any changes in student perceptions over the three years.

Structure and support

Structure and support for PDP is on the whole driven by the staff and in this case focus on developing the students understanding of themselves and how they can work together to support learning which Buckley (2010) suggests contributes to aspiration-building. At Level 4 the workbooks were received positively, with only one of the seven students not seeing the value. The content of the workbook related to the personal development materials, seemed to grow on some of the students, "*when we first started it was all about who are you and where's your future. I thought, what is this about. I was really kind of confused and I couldn't grasp it at all. But now I see the point*" (R3). Respondent 1 suggested that it might take time to see the value "*I think this book really does make you think about things. And people may not see the value of it in year one but like second and*

third year they might think the book's alright." With Respondent 4 stating *"I think now, people are only just developing to think this is valuable"*. Jackson (2010) believes that PDP processes and frameworks are there to help people think in certain ways and encourage self-awareness. This in part was the rationale behind the workbook and it seems to have worked with this sample. Three of the group were positive about all aspects of the content, *"Going through it sort of makes you learn stuff about yourself...but I needed the workbook to get me to think about those things because I never would have"* (R2). Knowing about how different people learnt came out positively across five of the seven students, *"Some people said they learn better when it is dark and some people say they learn better when there's music around. It was good to see what other people said"* (R7).

The other element in this section was around the tutor groups and their role in PDP. In a study about the role of personal tutors Stephen, O'Connell and Hall (2008) suggest that within PDP the personal tutor role is to facilitate group learning and sharing of understanding and experiences. Within this study five of the seven students were positive about their peer learning groups. *"The weekly tutor group session was the highlight of the week to me, there was a small group and you got to see how others were doing and share your experiences"* (R4). Two students talked about getting to know their tutor, with one stating *"my tutor has been crucial to my development this year and they play a really important part in the group and how it works"* (R1). The two students that felt differently commented, *"I am not that interested in anybody else, I just wanted to get on with my work, so I didn't find the tutor group useful to me"* (R6). Whilst another stated, *"if I had had a different tutor I might have been more positive. He didn't care so therefore why I should"* (R3). Tinto (2002) discussing the first year at University believes that the students' relationship with the academic staff is important and this would seem to be the case here both positively and negatively.

By the end of the final year the workbook had become less important to four of the six, this may be due to the fact that it was a tool that was there for them and not one, as in the first year, that was taught each week. *"It's been like a tool has been given to us. So I read through mine and I did use parts of the processes and some of the things that it said in there but I didn't use it strictly"* (R1). One of the group comments, *"because when you start using it on your own then you realise that it is beneficial and when you keep doing it,*

you keep learning more about yourself as a learner and that's something I would never have considered before" (R2). This seems to suggest an element of meta-learning (Biggs, 1985) where the individuals are developing an awareness of themselves as a learner and using this to develop themselves.

Interestingly the opposite was true of the tutor group which became even more important to the students in their final year and the entire sample said the weekly meeting was invaluable to their learning. Key features of this were about working and understanding others, *"You learn how different people are, so I've learnt how to react to this person and this person and the way that they live their lives and get on with their university course as well"* (R6). Learning from others was recognised, *"you're surrounded by people with all different levels of intelligence, so by receiving feedback and coming to these tutor groups, it really did provide the path for me"* (R5). Support seemed to be important, *"just sitting down on a Tuesday and having that half hour to let of a wee bit of steam and you talk. And you learn from the rest of your tutor group, like what you've feeling you're not on your own"* (R2). This seems to agree with the work of Broad (2006) who suggests students leaning is best fostered when the tutor gives them time and support.

Planning

PDP is fundamentally about the individual learning process, where students recognise their developmental goals and plan their learning towards these (Tymms, Peters, & Scott, 2013). Throughout the PDP processes in this study, goal-setting is a constant variable, therefore planning has been linked to the students' views on this tool. There was a mixed view on goal setting at the end of the first year and some of this may be due to the way the processes are set out and it not suiting everyone's learning needs. *"I find it quite awkward because every time I make a couple of goals, my tutor will have a look at them, and she'll be like, "They're not exact enough, or they're not definite"* (R1). This student continued by talking about if he was forced to write the goals in the tutor meeting they didn't work for him and he needed to goal-set in his own way. Ticking off achievements was important for some *"It definitely helps me because it always reminds me that they're there when I'm ticking them off I just feel good about myself"* (R2). Goal achievement was also highlighted, *"So I feel like I can reward myself when I do a small goal or something"* (R2). This was not the case for everyone however, *"I don't want to be writing goals every week and say did I*

achieve them or not" (R5). Goal setting was recognised as a process that worked and can support learning for some, *"I reckon I'll still be doing my goals next year because without it I won't know what I am doing or what I want to achieve"* (R4). There also seemed to be an element of scepticism about goal setting as a process, *"At the beginning I didn't really think, this was going to help. But then when I actually used it I was like, "Oh, it does actually..."* (R7). However the iteration seemed to get annoying for some *"It does annoy me a little bit when I'm asked every single week to make sure that I've filled in, I'm kind of repeating myself"* (R6).

At the end of the final year the students seemed to have worked out their method of setting goals and they were all using this to help them, both in their studies and in general life. *"So I now break the goals down and I always review them, if I didn't have an action plan attached the goals wouldn't be completed"* (R4). Here the action plan for remedial activity was important for another student it was the target themselves, *"The biggest thing for me, I think, was goal setting, so you're setting yourself targets all the time. Like, if I hadn't been pointed in the way of PDP and things then I probably wouldn't have set goals as effectively as I have"* (R2). Learning through doing enhances self-awareness and self-motivation (Jackson, 2010) and to obtain the benefit the students need to be conscious of what they are doing (ibid) and this seems to be the case for these students by this point in their studies. Even the student that had been very resolute in the fact he don't set goals and wasn't interested in personal development did recognise at the end that the goal setting had helped. *"I'm not one to set goals, I just sort of go with the flow, but I set a few goals and thought just go for it. By setting these goals, it actually helped my time schedule and I was completing tasks which I normally wouldn't do; I'd normally just leave it to the last minute, so it did help me in a way"* (R5). This appears for some students to be a skill they will continue past university, *"when I leave university I will actually be thinking I've got to set myself goals, I think it's a grounding, because I've been thinking of it for three years that I think I'll just do it without even noticing"* (R7). This seems to align with Jackson (2010 p.5) who believes "The strength of PDP is that it is a method of creating knowledge about self. Ultimately the real benefit is to the individuals who create this knowledge and who are able to draw upon it and use in ways that are meaningful and useful to themselves".

Review and reflection

“Usually we reflect because we have a purpose for reflecting – a goal to reach” (Moon, 2001:1) and at the end of the first year all the students when asked what reflection meant to them, talked about it in relation to their goals. In relation to PDP, Peters (2013), views reflection as part of the process and discusses it being about re-visiting goals, values and achievements. *“I just look back to what I've said that I wanted to do, see if I've actually done them, and then if I haven't done them, like why not?”* (R2). Others talked about knowing what they had done and what they then needed to do differently, *“always teaches what you can do better or what you can change, makes things a lot better than they were”* (R5). One student had already decided what they needed to do for the following year based on their reflection, *“I know myself, for next year I want more tutorial support and I'll find that out through reflecting off my other essays and things like that. You can look back at what you've done at the start of year one and the feedback that you've got off tutors and other people of how you can improve them”* (R6). Interestingly there wasn't the negativity about the reflection that there was about setting the goals in the first place, it could be assumed from this that this it is seen as less onerous to look back rather than planning forward.

By the end of the final year reflection seems to have become part of the way of thinking, *“I reflect on things a lot more, on everything, not just work. I found it does help me for next time, without even thinking, oh I've got to reflect on it, I'll do it anyway”* (R3). Another student commented that *“without the reflection I don't think I would've developed so well because you're not reminded, it's easy to forget things, so yeah I think the reflection was key for me”* (R4). The student who hadn't seen the value of PDP had been thinking about what might have happened in his studies and he spoke about another student in the tutor group, *“Thinking about it, I was talking to [named student] the other day and I was thinking I could be like you if I tried to be like you and be as successful and I haven't done that and one regret actually I take with me now is the fact that I wish I had put a bit more effort in; I wish I had been a bit more like that”* (R5). Moon (2001) believes that encouraging students to be reflective encourages the development of thinking that may lead the student beyond the boundaries of what they know or are being taught. Although this realisation was too late at that point of study to affect any actions hopefully this student might act differently in the future.

PDP overall

The processes designed to support and structure learning through PDP are critical to its success but as important is the awareness and development of the individual as they move through their degree programme. Jackson (2010 p.8) suggests that “PDP processes tend to focus on the instrumental features of action planning, record keeping and reflection on action and performance”, all of which are present in the discussion. He goes to say however that “the other important features of self-regulated learning are often implicit. There is often little consideration given to the richness of the forethought process and the underlying motivations, values and beliefs that underpin the sense of self-efficacy that drives the whole process”. In this programme the PDP was set-up to reflect the latter through the processes. When exploring all the concepts the students talked about in relation to PDP, five out of the seven started with a positive frame and this stayed with them and in all cases seemed to strengthen over the three years. One of the seven was mainly negative about everything but did acknowledge it had a purpose, and another was negative in the first year but this had changed to a more neutral stance at the end of the studies.

There was also an element of awareness of a future focus *“it’s a lot more about how you’re going progress onwards, I remember reading one question and it was, ‘What would you want to do when you’re 50?’ And I was like, ‘Are you joking?’ But it makes you think and it makes you think I might have to do this”* (R4). There was a sense that the group had more strategies to deal with things differently and they acknowledged that some of this had come from the PDP processes, *“ now I can identify different ways of improving and that I think is down to what PDP has taught me”* (R6). At the end of the three years the students could see in what ways their thinking had changed and developed, *“First of all I thought it was just setting goals but now I look at it in a more realistic way, where do I want to be, I want to be a manager, but how do I go about achieving that, so I’ve not just set myself goals, I’m internally thinking well what factors are going to make me achieve that goal”* (R7). In a study of 16-19 year olds Broad (2006) found that students felt that learning independently was motivated by personal goals or ambitions for the future. Therefore it seems the PDP in this setting has supported individuals to know what they want and in some ways how to go about achieving it.

Conclusion

Overall it seemed that this type of thinking about personal development takes time to develop and the views of the students changed the more they used and engaged with the ideas. It almost had to prove itself as useful. It seems that in the first year the workbook as a structure can support PDP thinking however this became less useful over time as it moved to be an independent tool rather than a taught approach. The perceptions of the tutor groups and weekly meetings on the other hand, became more positive, it was seen as a place to let off steam, learn from others and get help and support. The core processes of goal-setting and reflection became central to how the students interacted with their learning. As these are key elements, it is therefore a positive sign that PDP works and has a place in the student experience and in the development of life-long learners.

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