

PDP portfolios in Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Hanno van Keulen

Utrecht University, a large and fairly traditional (but highly successful) research university in The Netherlands, embraced the concept of personal development and planning portfolios in the aftermath of the Bologna agreements. Five-year HE programmes without much freedom or choice were changed into three year bachelor programmes with much more freedom of choice, an active learning philosophy and an emphasis on generic academic skills, followed by two-year master programmes dedicated to the development of discipline-specific research and professional skills. Bachelors with freedom of choice meant the need to reflect and plan, so it was thought. Moreover, academic skills like critical thinking, presenting, or writing, are not an overnight affair to be dealt with within ten week courses but need careful nourishing over several years. The PDP portfolio was born and fully implemented as a mandatory thing in 2002. With surprisingly little resistance from staff, given the fact that many Schools had been experimenting idiosyncratically with reflection, academic skills and academic development in ways that suited their own discipline specific needs. Then a few interesting things happened. On the technological frontier, it took several more years to smoothly accommodate some 26.000 students and their countless tutors into cyberspace. Systems are stable right now. Meanwhile, students found out that freedom of choice in a traditional research university is not always the kind of thing that keeps you awake during the night: "Shall I opt for Quantum Mechanics II or rather chose Nanotechnology?" Academic skills tended to be graded within courses anyway, so little need to reflect and plan them for more than a fortnight. Portfolios were little more than paperclipped course certificates. Tutors found out that tutoring is complicated and that their efforts were not really compensated by the system. The PDP portfolio, a failure, then? Not quite so. As an integral part of the radical educational change that took place over the last six years it has accomplished its role. Bachelor-master has been established, as well as generic academic skills and flexibility. The Vice-Chancellor has decreed that PDP portfolios are no longer compulsory, and, hey, variety is back again. The Biologists focus strongly on professional skills like working in the laboratory, Theology focuses on critical thinking, Teacher Education uses portfolios to supervise classroom assignments, Medicine uses portfolios to assess clinical reasoning skills, et cetera et cetera. So right now, we have personal development and planning portfolios, academic skills development portfolios, and assessment of professional skills portfolios. Technological innovations like streaming video and mobile learning devices are introduced if these techniques are appropriate. Some students start weblogs instead of adopting the fixed format (Blackboard). The strain of the apodictic 'thou shalt reflect' has been relieved. And yes, not all 26.000 students have become dedicated portfolio addicts. But has there ever been a successful one-size-fits-all approach in higher education?