Integrating personal and professional development in higher education: history, implementation and future directions

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of personal and professional development within higher education. Using the case of Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, we describe how personal and professional development can be addressed in a dedicated course. The course aims to equip students with essential skills for a rapidly changing world, emphasizing self-awareness, self-management, and adaptability. Initially designed to support first-year students in their transition to higher education, the course has evolved to address the needs of students throughout their academic journey and beyond, including career guidance post-graduation. The paper outlines two main approaches to course implementation: competency development and identity development. By examining these approaches, the paper highlights the importance of a holistic educational framework that prepares students for lifelong learning and professional success. The conclusion reflects on the continued relevance of integrating personal and professional development in higher education curricula and suggests areas for further enhancement.

Keywords: Professional development; career development; student support.

1. Introduction

Allocating space for personal and professional development in the curricula is becoming more important in higher education, equipping students with essential skills for a rapidly changing world. Beyond academic knowledge, soft skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and adaptability are critical for navigating complex careers and societal challenges. By focusing on these aspects, institutions not only prepare students for lifelong learning and employability but also foster resilience, ethical thinking, and active citizenship. This holistic approach ensures that students are better prepared to thrive both professionally and personally.

At Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, guiding students in their personal and professional development is embedded within a dedicated course across all programs. The course serves as a basic form of student support, fully embedded in the curriculum.

The course consists of a series of structured interventions, including individual coaching sessions, group workshops, digital reflection assignments, and portfolio development. Each academic year builds on the previous one, with increasing complexity and autonomy. For instance, in year one, students complete a self-assessment and discuss it with a mentor, while in the final year, they develop a personal development plan aligned with their career goals.

This paper explores how this course has evolved over the years. Additionally, we discuss how individual programs shape the course, as they are granted autonomy to design and implement it in ways that align with their specific contexts. Two main approaches can be observed across our programs. We conclude with some final reflections.

2. History

The scope of the personal and professional development course has evolved significantly over the past decade. The course was first introduced in 2013, primarily targeting first-year students to support their transition into higher education. It was positioned in the first semester or academic year and aimed to help students adjust to academic life by encouraging reflection on their role as learners, increasing motivation, offering remedial support (e.g. for academic language or study skills), and providing tailored academic advice and progress monitoring.

Between 2014 and 2017, several pilot programs explored different formats and intensities. These were monitored through student feedback and performance indicators such as credit acquisition and dropout rates. Based on positive results, the course was gradually extended to second- and third-year students. This extension acknowledged that personal and professional development does not end after the first year but continues throughout the academic journey. In this phase, students are encouraged to reflect on their progress in acquiring discipline-specific competencies and learning outcomes, fostering a deeper understanding of their development within their chosen professional field.

From 2018 onwards, the further development of the course was explicitly guided by the framework of Kariene Mittendorff (2014), which distinguishes three overlapping domains of student development: academic progress, professional development, and career identity. This model offered a conceptual foundation and a shared language for programme teams across disciplines. It helped move the course beyond fragmented interventions towards a coherent, longitudinal learning line in which identity formation and skill development are intertwined.

In 2021, the course was enriched with explicit components related to career guidance and lifelong learning, reflecting broader institutional ambitions to prepare students for sustainable

careers in a rapidly changing labour market. These additions were informed by input from alumni, work-field partners, and educational research. The resulting course structure addresses the evolving needs of students throughout their studies and supports them in developing a sense of ownership over their personal and professional trajectories.

3. Implementation

The three scopes of the personal and professional development course are present in all associate degree and bachelor degree programs. However, the way in which programs shape the course varies significantly. While all programs operate within a shared institutional framework, they were also granted autonomy to translate the course into their own educational context, aligned with their disciplinary focus, pedagogical vision, and student needs.

As a result, two distinct but complementary approaches emerged over time. Some programs chose to focus primarily on the development of concrete competencies needed for academic success, professional performance, and career readiness — what we refer to as the competency-based approach. Other programs placed stronger emphasis on supporting students in exploring their values, motivations, and professional aspirations — which led to the identity-based approach.

The emergence of these two approaches reflects the diversity in how programs interpret personal and professional development. It also highlights the flexibility of the overarching framework, which allows for contextualised implementation while maintaining shared developmental goals.

Below, we elaborate on these two approaches for each of the three scopes of the course.

3.1. Competency-based approach

3.1.1. What are my skills as a student?

Successful students need strong learning competencies, which encompass organizational skills, listening and note-taking skills, study skills, and exam skills (Dijkstra, 2015). These competencies are particularly crucial in the first year to foster academic and social integration, a strong predictor of study success (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Tinto, 1993). However, learning competencies remain important throughout a student's academic career, including in tasks such as writing a bachelor's thesis and presenting a portfolio.

To develop students' academic learning skills, several activities are implemented in the first year. These include interactive workshops on time management and efficient study strategies, peer-assisted learning groups, and guided note-taking during lectures. Students are also invited to complete a digital self-assessment tool that maps their strengths and weaknesses in academic

integration. Based on the results, students set goals in a learning contract which is monitored by their mentor. In later years, activities evolve toward more autonomous learning tasks such as study planning for bachelor's theses and giving peer feedback on academic writing.

3.1.2. What are my skills as a practitioner in profession X?

Students are regularly encouraged to reflect on their progress in acquiring program-specific competencies and professional skills. These reflections are integrated into the curriculum, linked to specific learning activities such as clinical practice for occupational therapy students, management exercises for office managers, and research projects for social work students. To facilitate this reflection, students use a portfolio tool.

Learning activities are supported by structured reflection prompts that help students link practice to theory. For example, during internships in occupational therapy, students reflect on concrete patient interactions using the online portfolio system Medbook, widely used in Flemish higher education, which supports students in tracking their development and gathering evidence across learning domains. In business programs, students analyse their role within team assignments through guided self-evaluations and peer feedback forms. Reflection is often scaffolded through rubrics and one-on-one coaching conversations that guide students in recognising growth and setting personal goals.

3.1.3. What are my skills as a professional?

As students progress in their studies, they become more engaged in career planning. Developing career competencies is crucial for long-term employability. We focus on five key career competencies (Kuijpers, 2006): reflection on qualities, reflection on motivation, work exploration, career control, and networking.

These competencies are emphasized in the final study phase as an extension of internship experiences, helping students in their transition to the job market. They are addressed through targeted interventions. Students participate in career orientation sessions, mock job interviews, and CV writing workshops. They also engage in labour market research where they explore job vacancies and compare these with their own profile. In some programs, students conduct informational interviews with professionals in their field. Networking skills are developed by inviting alumni or professionals for speed mentoring sessions. These activities are designed to strengthen career control and awareness.

3.2. Identity-based approach

3.2.1. Who am I as a student?

This question revolves around discovering one's student identity. Students explore their learning preferences: how, when, and why they learn. They also compare their learning strategies to those of their peers.

Developing a student identity is essential for sustainable, lifelong learning (Ruijters, 2021). Once students understand their learning identity, they can seek appropriate learning contexts. For instance, those who learn best through discussion might benefit from joining an intervision group, while those who prefer research-based learning might gain from attending academic conferences.

To help students explore their student identity, several reflective and interactive methods are used. Early in the curriculum, students create a "learning biography" in which they reflect on their past learning experiences, learning preferences, and habits. This is followed by small-group dialogues where students share their learning stories and discover the diversity of learning identities among peers. Another recurring activity is the learning journal, where students reflect after exams or group assignments on what worked well and what didn't — not only in terms of outcome but also in terms of personal style and motivation.

3.2.2. Who am I as a practitioner in profession X?

This question focuses on professional identity formation. Students explore their motivations for choosing a profession, engage with the professional community, and identify which aspects of the profession energize them. For example, social work students may discover a preference for policy work over direct client engagement.

Understanding one's professional identity is critical, especially in an era where professions are becoming more fluid due to specialization and interdisciplinary influences (Ruijters, 2021). Our course helps students navigate these shifts by offering structured reflection opportunities.

Professional identity formation is supported through creative and reflective assignments that allow students to explore how they see themselves in their future field. In communication programs, for example, students are invited to develop a personal branding portfolio, where they reflect on their core values, communication style, and how they wish to position themselves within the media or corporate landscape. This includes writing a personal mission statement, designing a visual identity, and analysing role models within the field. In healthcare education, such as nursing, students participate in guided discussions about their vision on care and ethics, often based on real clinical scenarios, which helps them articulate what kind of professional they aspire to be. These activities support a deeper understanding of one's evolving role and encourage students to develop a distinctive and authentic professional presence.

3.2.3. Who am I as a professional?

In a rapidly evolving labour market, students must continuously define their career identity. It is not just about acquiring skills but also about understanding how one's professional self fits within broader industry changes, societal challenges and personal aspirations. Our curriculum fosters this awareness through mentorship, practical experiences, and structured reflection, preparing students for adaptive career growth.

To support this, students are encouraged to engage in activities that connect their current development with future possibilities. For instance, in communication programs, they take part in a "career narrative" workshop where they reflect on key learning moments and translate them into a personal story that guides future choices. In healthcare programs, students formulate a "vision of care" statement, describing their role in the future of the profession and how they intend to continue growing through new challenges and further education.

These reflections are often accompanied by future-oriented exercises such as the "future self letter," in which students imagine themselves five years after graduation, highlighting not only career ambitions but also learning goals and values they wish to preserve. The exercise invites students to see themselves as evolving professionals who take ownership of their learning path beyond graduation. In doing so, students begin to internalise lifelong learning not as a policy ambition, but as a personal commitment to staying relevant, inspired, and resilient in their professional journey.

4. Future developments

In the future, we aim to further strengthen the identity-based approach across all programs. Encouraging students to integrate their academic, professional, and career identities can lead to greater confidence and adaptability. As education continues to evolve, institutions must remain proactive in embedding these developmental aspects into their curricula, ensuring that graduates are not only skilled but also self-aware and prepared for lifelong learning.

Beyond fostering competencies and identity development, we also aim to integrate a focus on mental well-being into our work with students. Supporting mental well-being not only enhances academic success but also contributes to long-term career development. This includes building resilience, managing stress, and developing mental health literacy. We consider this focus valuable for students at all stages of their academic journey, from first-year entrants to final-year students preparing for graduation and beyond.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of personal and professional development courses on graduates' careers. Conducting longitudinal studies can provide valuable insights into how these courses influence employability, job satisfaction, and career progression. By

continuously refining our programs based on empirical evidence, we can ensure their sustained relevance and effectiveness.

5. Final reflections

Our three scopes of personal and professional development — academic progress, professional development, and career guidance — address the evolving needs of students throughout their academic journey.

We encourage other higher education institutions to integrate personal and professional development into their curricula, ideally within a dedicated course. To maximize its impact, we recommend allowing program-specific adjustments so that faculties can tailor the course to their own discipline. These adjustments can pertain to the competency level versus the identity level, but also to the scope of the course in terms of number of credit points, the link with other learning outcomes, or the tools and materials used to support reflection and self-regulation.

Additionally, fostering collaboration between faculty, academic advisors, and external partners can enhance students' preparation for the job market. By promoting both competency and identity development, institutions can equip students more effectively for lifelong learning and career growth.

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