

Case Study

Developing an eportfolio pedagogy for small and medium sized enterprises

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The background context

This case study describes a project led by the Institute for Learning Enhancement in conjunction with 5 pilot schools, support departments, and the business development unit. As a Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded project within the Institutional Innovation stream, synergies with other projects within the phase have been identified and the pedagogy developed to include these, where relevant.

One of its strategic aims is to build the portfolio of higher education (HE) for work-based learners to meet the need in the local economy for HE level skills.

The University of Wolverhampton is a post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI) with strong links in the community and a widening participation agenda. One of its strategic aims is to build the portfolio of higher education (HE) for work-based learners to meet the need in the local economy for HE level skills. In the Wolverhampton area there is a higher than average proportion of the population qualified to level 2 or 3 (equivalent to pre-entry or entry level for HE, respectively). In line with Leitch (2006), and to offset the anticipated decline in full-time student numbers, the university has set up a subsidiary company to build links with local employers and to gather intelligence on learning

needs. Around 73% of those employed in the private sector locally, are located within small to medium sized enterprises (SME, i.e. with fewer than 250 employees), (CFE, 2009), making this a significant market group.

The university is recognised as a leading expert in the innovative use of eportfolios; a Higher Education Academy (HEA) Pathfinder project on the use of eportfolios has recently been completed and the university is part of a collaborative project run by the Centre for Recording Achievement on the implementation of eportfolios for the employer engagement agenda (HE5P). Learners in the target market are likely

to have left school with few academic qualifications, have been working for a number of years in manual / technical employment and have limited confidence in the use of information technology (IT). Thus the initial target level of study for the project is HE year 1, i.e. level 4. In addition, potential learners are not able to access current provision (full-time / part-time courses) and will have limited time each week to study. The pedagogy developed needs to take all the above into account as well as the different and varied learning needs of employer and learner and also provide a cost-effective, sustainable and scalable learning opportunity.

The current practice

The University of Wolverhampton has been using eportfolios since 2005 and has built its capacity in this through a strategic oversight led by the Institute for Learning Enhancement. Networks of Technology Supported Learning Coordinators, champions and eportfolio mentors have enabled widespread use of the eportfolio tools within the curriculum, predominately full-time on-campus provision. There is also expertise in the use of eportfolios for mentoring students in practice placements and for portfolio building for summative assessment.

However, the majority of engagement with learners off-campus is via bespoke Continu-



ing Professional Development (CPD) courses, which are usually non-credit bearing and designed as “one-off” provision.

The challenge

The university needs to have a sustainable, scalable and cost-effective provision for learners in the workplace and to develop a pedagogy that will allow negotiated and bespoke learning, will enable the learners to gain credit for prior formal and informal learning, will provide scaffolding to support the learner in HE, and has a flexible assessment framework that is adaptable to the varied learning experiences the target market will want.

The pedagogy must allow learners to “build” their learning through a variety of opportunities, for instance, gain credit for prior learning, employer-based training, informal learning, taught courses, ‘new’ learning. It must take into account the learners’ potential low level of IT literacy, anticipated lack of confidence in IT applications and potential low expectations regarding ability

to succeed in HE. In addition, the learner will be work-based and will not attend any face-to-face sessions so all learning, support, guidance etc must be available on-line and the learning and tutor support must be available asynchronously to allow access at a time to suit the learner, not the institution.

The university undertook a survey of its CPD provision and identified a disparate approach to external clients. The survey recommended that a more collaborative and strategic approach be developed to avoid duplication and wasted effort and to build the capacity to provide HE level learning, and CPD, to the local business community.

The university set up a business development company through which a more coherent ap-

proach to employer engagement could be provided. Monies from the JISC Institutional Innovation Programme are being used to develop an eportfolio based pedagogy to enable the planned employer engagement with work-based learners. There are a number of other strategic reasons to develop this pedagogy; these include the new professional studies programme, where learners can design their own award, as well as new “shell” modules and accreditation of employer-based training.

The approach

The eportfolio based pedagogy is being developed using an action research methodology. Five schools were identified to participate in the work based on their current subject portfolios and their willingness to engage with work-based learners. ePortfolio champions were identified in each of the five schools and invited to mentor an academic subject led within their own school. The mentors have all been involved in the HEA Pathfinder project so have recent knowledge and understanding of curriculum design within an eportfolio environment.

A series of three retreats supplemented by short workshops are being used to share experiences and learning across the pilot projects and to work collaboratively on setting targets and outputs for each phase of the project. The core project team includes the university co-ordinator of work-based learning (the Project Manager), an eportfolio expert, the head of blended learning, the deputy head of quality and academic standards and the director of IT services. The project steering group includes the Pro-vice Chancellor, PVC (Academic) as chair, the head of the new business development company, an employer and an external evaluator. The project team and steering group provide cross-representation of all key stakeholders.

“ The business development company undertakes market research to identify commonalities in learning needs of local SMEs through interviews that result in a performance needs analysis. ”



The results of this market research are then developed by the academic subject lead into a validated 5 credit unit, equivalent to 50 hours of study.

The pilots are being staggered so that learning from one can inform the development of the subsequent pilots. A set of practice guidelines are being written outlining, inter alia, design of eportfolio templates, types of activities for learners including development of critical reflection and formats for formative assessment. In parallel with the design of the eportfolio quality assurance and systems processes are being developed to enable the learner to complete 5 credit units and build these into modules and awards at a later date.

The issues

There have been three key issues that the project has had to address:

Firstly, a need to ensure that all involved have the same understandings about the pedagogy and the systems and processes development required to enable that pedagogy to be realised. Key to the project's success is the learning, and associated HE credits, it will enable beyond the initial pilot unit.

Secondly, the locus of control needs to be with the core curriculum development team to maintain an overview of the developments and to ensure that all participants are benefitting from the learning achieved through the action research being undertaken. It is important that the learning is not happening in small 'silos' otherwise any output may not be fit for purpose. It may not take into account all aspects of the research undertaken because what is being learned in one silo may not be shared with the others.

Thirdly, but perhaps most importantly is the issue of time, and different deadline needs for different partners in the project. External deadlines set the agenda for the first pilot and potentially impacted on its effectiveness, however, in meeting a tight timeframe, important lessons were learnt that have fed into the research.



The result

The first cohort of learners, working in the construction industry, has completed the first pilot unit, Enhancing Communication Skills, and this is currently being evaluated. Based on the experiences of this unit and from interim evaluations from the learners the second pilot, Management and Behaviour with learners who are managers in organisations, has been developed and design of the third, Employability Law, is almost complete.

“ We have developed guidelines for the design of a webfolio template through which the learners access learning materials and activities. ”

The activities were embedded within webfolio pages in the first pilot. These are now scaffolded within 'blogs' as this allows much quicker and easier access to the learners. In addition, the use of a blog means that each comment entered by the learner becomes a unique asset that can later be built into a summative assessment, if the learner chooses. There are three modes of blog within each unit: activity blogs, personal blogs and a collaborative group blog. The tutor is able to enter into a dialogue with individual students, or the group.

Guidelines for accessing PebblePad, downloading the webfolio template and posting it to a gateway have been written and are accessed by new learners via a public URL. This guidance includes how to register for an IT account and an introduction to the unit from the unit tutor. All of which make it more accessible and should help avoid difficulties in accessing the learning materials.

The first pilot relied primarily on digital paper. Subsequent units will have minimum use of text and make use of electronic resources that the resource librarians can assist in sourcing for the academic tutors. Furthermore, PowerPoint slide shows, talking heads and pod-casts as well as links to existing external resources such as YouTube are used to cater for a range of learning styles and preferences. The learners are asked to evaluate each unit at the mid and end point via online questionnaires within the "Surveyor" software.

The learning

An eportfolio provides an effective tool to make HE level learning accessible to learners in the work place as well as providing a framework in which to build additional learning experiences and to articulate other formal and informal learning. Clear guidelines on good / best practice and expectations are needed in advance to avoid misunderstandings and timelines need to be agreed.

It is unlikely that initial ideas will result in a finished solution so an action research approach with staggered pilots allows ideas to be developed and refined before a final output can be achieved. The university has invested significantly in building a community of practice with eportfolios. Accessing this community via the mentoring aspects of the project is an appropriate use of the intellectual capital of the organisation and further extends the community.

Issues that have been encountered in the pilot units developed to date include:

- difficulties in getting distance learners into PebblePad: we have redesigned the help videos and guidance as well as telephoned students to talk through the instructions;
- confusion with copying from and posting to gateways: we have contracted Pebble Learning to develop an auto-publish function;
- conflict between a business model looking to reduce tutor intervention and a pedagogic model that requires tutor intervention to support learner transition into HE.

In brief

- A scaffolded eportfolio can provide a learning medium for work-based learners.
- An eportfolio can allow work-based learners to build their learning into a coherent award.
- Ensure you provide clear guidance and support for developers and learners.
- Make use of the existing intellectual capital to build capacity and the community of practice.

References

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