E-Portfolio practice in higher education: (something of) the UK experience.

Rob Ward
rob@recordingachievement.org
http://www.recordingachievement.org/
One of the challenges...
A simple structure for a complex field…

• A bit of background.
• Starting with where we came in, the Personal Development Planning agenda in UKHE.
• Over to e-portfolio (in terms of policy, practice and learning).
• Borrowing from the voices of many…
• Hoping for reinforcement not repetition (or incoherence).
The Centre for Recording Achievement (UK)

A cross-sectoral network organisation with institutional and individual members.

Seeks to promote awareness and understanding of the processes associated with Personal Development Planning (review, reflection, planning) as an important element in improving learning and progression throughout the world of education, training and employment.

An Associate Centre of the Higher Education Academy, with a remit to support the implementation of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and e-portfolio across the UKHE sector.
Our vision thing...

1. e-PDP/e-portfolios are the latest in a long line of approaches to supporting people development, through schools, colleges, higher education, appraisal and continuing professional development.

2. The provision of supported opportunities to review, reflect, record, review and plan are ‘core’ to such approaches.
3. For individuals, such processes are intrinsically related to the development of a clearer sense of who they are, where they want to go, and how they might get there in the context of working and learning environments which are characterised by increasing change.

4. For business and professional bodies, such processes can be linked to people development through appraisal and continuing professional development processes.

5. Collectively, harnessing the potential of technology, we can make this vision much more real for many more people.
A Key Policy Framework: the UK HE Progress File

Dearing HE Inquiry : Recommendation 20

‘We recommend that Institutions of Higher Education, over the medium term, develop a Progress File. The File should consist of two elements:

• A Transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies;

• A means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development (Personal Development Planning/Recording).’

National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997
Personal Development Planning

**Defined:** ‘a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development’ [QAA et al 2001].

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

A sector led policy with a system-wide goal – by 2005/06 the Progress File should be developed and operationalised by all HEIs for all HE awards.
The implementation story so far… patchy –

but progressing…
Something of our (PDP) journey… key issues for e-portfolio too (?)

- Practice pre-dates policy, in some cases by several years... institutions have pockets of practice upon which they can build.
- Building strong links to both institutional policies and structures is crucial in ensuring such work is not seen as bolt-on and peripheral.
- Important balance to be struck between the development of institutional policy, which may suggest a common approach, and the importance of 'psychological engagement' by staff and students. The latter emphasises the need for embedding within, and customisation to, the culture and demands of particular programmes and disciplines.
- Staff involvement and support can be highly influential in encouraging student take up.

PDP Institutional Case Studies (2001)
What do we know now… from the ‘Achieving our Goals’ consultation (2005)…

- Policy and conceptual frameworks for PDP are broadly ‘fit for purpose’.
- Links between the Transcript and PDP elements of policy are limited, but potentially more important in the e-environment.
- Developing an evidence base relating to the impact/effects of PDP is an important priority.
- There is an need to connect PDP practice with similar experience pre and post HE.
- The recorded ‘outputs’ from PDP provide material on which students may draw when presenting/representing themselves to others.
- There are a range of development needs including strengthening staff and student motivation, effective networking and links to assessment.
Ten Years on…

Updated National Guidelines on PDP are under development.

Stronger support from student bodies at national level.

Strategies for implementation divide into two broad categories (equally relevant to e-portfolio perhaps):

• embedding PDP into the **academic curriculum**, programme by programme, level by level;
• offering generic opportunities outside the curriculum, most obviously via the **personal/academic tutor** system.

Supplemented by **extracurricular opportunities**, e.g. skills awards.

Can also be combined in a ‘mixed economy’ model.
Moving to(wards) e-portfolio…

• ‘E-portfolios are like the elephant described by six blind men/women: you could hear very different reasons for the enthusiasm from, say, a primary school teacher, a careers guidance specialist and an examiner working for an awarding body (different issues and challenges too). This is because e-portfolio technology encompasses a range of functionality which can be used for different purposes.’
if the software claims to be an e-portfolio...

it will probably have the following features:

• a way of capturing the user’s reflective thoughts and comments;
• a means of storing the user’s digital products;
• a means of organising these, allowing the user to make selections and link items together or to categories such as competences or assessment outcomes (to provide evidence for these);
• the facility to present them to a third party in an organised way.
Recent thinking - working away from systems and towards functionalities…

• …functionalities which enable the user to collect, connect and select material for particular presentations to particular audience(s) (including themselves) (and which are – for us)

• underpinned by processes (reflection, review, recording and planning) which support learning and development by enabling such collection, connection and selection for purpose and audience…
E-portfolio and PDP: different words, congruent interests?
(e-portfolio as a means of supporting graduate development and achievement)…
PDP emphases (Atlay, 2007)

Does this look like it might relate to your world?

Career choice
Transition skills

Self-awareness
Self-efficacy
Motivation
Drive
Achievement orientation

Learning skills modules, management of learning

Careers driven.
Extra curricular or career development module

Supporting career-related module choice
Placements
Work-based learning

Engagement with formative feedback
Reviewing academic progression

Careers driven.
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Reviewing academic progression

Personal

Career

Educational
Why e-portfolio: links to UK Government policy

A means to supporting the achievement of three ends…

• **Personalisation** (for HE - valuing individuals in a near mass system).

• **A more holistic view of individuals**, manifest in the UK Burgess Report and your own ideas about the Graduation Statement, and

• **Raising skill levels > competitiveness in the knowledge economy.**
Implementation drivers in UKHE

- The work of JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee).
- Funding Council (HEFCE) e-learning strategy – emphasises ‘e-based systems of describing learning achievement and personal development planning (PDP)’ within its Joint Implementation Plan.
- Postgraduate Research Training (the Roberts initiative).
- Work-based Learning initiatives (Foundation Degrees, Lifelong Learning Networks).
Why e-portfolio: links to institutional agendas in UK HE

• Admissions.
• Retention and Progression (inclusion).
• Connecting/supporting distributed learners.
• Learning, assessment and attainment.
• Employability and Continuing Development.
What progress…
(From the e-portfolio survey for the Higher Education Academy, 2007).

• 83% of respondents were using some form of electronic tool to support their PDP process.
• Just over half of HEIs surveyed claimed to have an e-portfolio tool or system: nearly all cited as the main purposes for their systems ‘implementing PDP’ and ‘supporting overall development’.
• Interoperability in terms of inter-institutional transfer of PDP data is not yet a high priority.
• Most institutions regard themselves as being at a pilot stage in relation to e-portfolios … very few have committed the resources to run trials of different systems in-house.
Evidence of current practice suggests...

- Many systems remain standalone/self-contained, and ... the flexibility of such systems is valued. Alongside this, however, there is a need for connectivity across systems.

- Limited connection to social software, yet evidence suggests such software offers an important and developing set of tools for communication and presentation which should not be ignored, particularly in the context of policy drivers towards more holistic support for learners.

- Limited connectivity between systems over time, to support lifelong learning.
Stakeholder perspectives …developing practice in respect of the curriculum…

• E-portfolio as *an additional* part of the student experience, with students provided with opportunities to engage in e-portfolio use, and encouraged to undertake this.

• E-portfolio located *in parallel* with the curriculum but with some level of *integration* so that there are explicit links between the two.

• E-portfolio activities are *embedded at certain times* which encourage students to reflect on their progress and development but are not necessarily linked to any one module or unit.

• E-portfolio activities are *embedded in certain modules*. These modules provide the main support for PDP and may serve to link with material studied in other modules.

• E-portfolio activities are *embedded across the curriculum* within a whole curriculum approach where most modules involve activities which are aligned with e-portfolio processes.

• The *curriculum plus* model, where e-portfolio activities are embedded in the curriculum but also serve consciously to integrate activities which occur outside of the curriculum.

• The ‘*curriculum carrier*’ model, providing a common integrative thread where the curriculum starts with the learner in the workplace.
Almost too big a project to contemplate and to pull off?

**Incredulity**

Of the technology
Of the language used
Of cultures (openness, honesty, intent)

**Compatibility**

To keep businesses interested, keep it simple.

**Complexity**

What challenges could e-Portfolios present?

**Costs????**

Are graduates really ready to take control of their careers and learning?
Are they convinced of the benefits?
Are they going to be effectively supported? And by whom?
And for CPD…

‘CPD is a means of undertaking self-managed and career-long professional development.’

‘Recording and reflecting are the real key to successful CPD. The very process of writing helps us to distil experiences, recognise patterns and discern trends. It enables us to remember what has gone before and capture lessons for the future. It also enables us to break down our goals into easy, manageable steps, and plan for the future.’

Christine Williams
Chartered FCIPD
Manager Membership CIPD
Implementation… a bit of proposition testing about portfolio building…

• Many students don’t know what to write/record.
• Students who perceive [the process] as useful are likely to perform better academically.
• Students often take a period of time to recognise “usefulness”.
• Most students value one-to-one interaction with a tutor.
• Most students prefer electronic to paper.
• Portfolios can demonstrate a richer picture of an individual’s qualities and achievements than other forms of assessment.
What do we know about reflection?

Many students don’t know what to write.

Probable variables: previous experience, age/level, subject/discipline, academic v. work-based contexts, individual differences.

What we don’t know so well:

– which strategies are likely to work best with which students
– which students might react badly to high levels of structure
– how best to use non-text-based strategies
– how much any of these strategies affect learning/performance
What do we know: about perceptions of ‘usefulness’?

Students who perceive [the process] as useful are likely to perform better academically.

What we don’t know so well:
– Whether this is a causal link or just a correlation.
– Whether the relationship holds for any aspect of the process of specific aspect(s) – if specific, which?

Students often take a period of time to recognise “usefulness”

What we don’t know so well:
– What kind of experiences ‘trigger’ this perception?
– What variables affect the length of time taken?
What do we know? About the significance of the tutor?

Most students value one-to-one interaction with a tutor.

What we don’t know so well:
- What are the important characteristics of the tutor (mentor/coach)?
- How to judge how much support is optimal.
- How best to move the learner from a high-support to less-supported environment.
What do we know: about the use of technology?

Most students prefer electronic to paper.

What we don’t know so well:

– For those who don’t, what are the key factors?

‘it appears that e-portfolios are initially more empowering for some students than others: whilst some are already using them to develop a positive, holistic view of their progress towards specified goals and their confidence as learners, others appear to have focused more narrowly on their weaknesses and shortcomings.’

*Bufton et al* Using e-portfolios to help students reflect upon and improve their learning: A longitudinal research project.

(PDP-UK Newsletter Issue 12 December 2007)

– Which aspects of technology/functions of a system are most attractive to which students?
What do we know: about portfolios at transition?

Portfolios can demonstrate a richer picture of an individual’s qualities and achievements than other forms of assessment.

What we don’t know so well:

– How (if) employers will use these pictures.
– The effect on staff workloads.
– The relative importance of/difficulty in teaching the principles of collection, connection and selection which will ensure rich pictures become coherent ones.
– The relative importance of the technology in relation to the above.
Some questions now are:

• What makes a good tutor/mentor/coach?

• What influences the acceptance by students and teachers? (critical factor)

• Management
  What is their critical role?

• The medium?
  Paper versus digital. Different software, scalable!!!!

• Managing complexities of research into e-portfolio practice.
  Range of use of practice in institutions: lot of differences.
But we are learning from new contexts…

‘The views of the employers in the project deserve particular attention:

• **Employers are reluctant to engage with e-portfolio systems for both technical and client confidentiality reasons;**

• **Unless the e-portfolio is tied in closely with the professional training regime, employers will be unlikely to take it up as an additional tool for PDP/CPD;**

• **It is recognised that the role of the mentor is crucial and therefore an associated concern is that this role will become more onerous with an e-portfolio system;**
• Employers have valued particular aspects of the portfolio concept such as the shift in responsibility on to the trainee to provide evidence of learning; increased reflection on their strengths and weaknesses; and more focus on planning for future personal development.

• negative (user) comments emphasised issues with the technology or the software applications in use. Participants were also concerned about the time it took e.g. ‘time consuming and more form filling’, ‘too much detail to input’

http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/research/projects/eportfoliosupdate2.html
And reinforcing earlier messages...

- Evidence consistently suggests that ‘human aspects affecting the implementation of e-Portfolios, for example in respect of changes to the teaching and learning paradigm and in institutional change management, have a substantially greater impact than issues of technical implementation’;
‘We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.’

T. S. Eliot

➢ For us, with e-portfolio, and in working with our students...
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