Harnessing ePortfolio to support and enhance the first year student experience.

Professor Sally Kift
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QUT, Australia
Overview

- Relevant snapshots of national and international research on the First Year Experience (FYE)
  - What counts for a positive and engaging FYE?

- How might we harness ePortfolio in aid of early student learning, success and retention?
  - ePortfolio as a transition and retention intervention
Student success [and retention] starts in the FY [early]

• Greatest student attrition occurs in the FY
  – Around double that of second year
  • For all years, 1994-2002, FY attrition rate was >20%
  • 2nd year attrition was 10-11%.

AND

– What about the ones that don’t even get counted?
  • From offer to acceptance to main census date?

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What counts for FY success

- Preparedness
- Finances
- Peers: learning ‘profoundly a social experience’;
- Expectations: mismatch; ‘how things work around here’;
- Student support: coordinated and ‘just-in-time’ & ‘just-for-me’;

- Program choice/ certainty
- Staff: contact with staff & teaching quality
- Course design: Clear, coherent, responsive, flexible, relevant, engaging, achievable, & motivating;
- Assessment: relevant, consistent & integrated;
- Feedback: early, prompt & constructive.

(Eg: Krause et al, 2005; Scott, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008)
(Diverse, ill-formed) expectations about…

(Both) individual roles, responsibilities & commitments and university experience (James, 2002) re-

• Quality (value for money; student as client);
• Personal significance (is this the right program for me?);
• Day-to-day experiences: eg, re
  – Learning environments (cf, less personal contact with staff; fast pace; different engagements (tutes, lects, pracs, labs));
  – Nature of learning (independent & not teacher-directed; lack of explicit connections; cognitive hierarchy; less individual feedback)
• Long term goals (employability, careers, graduate outcomes)
• Hygiene factors (ease of access; amenities; facilities; etc)
Expectations’ mismatch in dynamic sector

- Changing patterns of student engagement: student identity not primary; struggle to balance work-study-life
  - Expectations of choice, flexibility and modularity.

- Mass higher education: **diversity** as defining characteristic
  - Diversity in preparedness, ability & educational background
  - Diversity re cultural capital (eg first in family)
  - Internationalisation adding to diversity
  - Bradley – set to increase

- Generational characteristics (eg Gen Y cf Gen X and baby-boomers) – expect seamlessness of our processes

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In Aust – 28% students consider discontinuing studies in FY (CSHE, 2005)
Top reasons cited:
- Emotional health (52%)
- Want to change course (42%)
- Financial concerns (38%)
- Fear of failure (36%)

In UK – 29% students consider discontinuing studies in FY (HEA, 2006)

http://www.freewebs.com/horseloversveen/the-far-side-comic.jpg
What influenced yr decision to withdraw?
(could select more than one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Discontinuing</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your course of study</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional culture &amp; facilities</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation/loneliness</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal issues</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your employment situation</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your finances</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other factors</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons Provided for Discontinuing Program Enrolment by Withdrawal Year
## Breakdown of ‘other’ factors

### Major ‘other’ factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course issues</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer to anor Uni</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-study demands</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University readiness</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept/seek FT work</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The rest

- Program no longer available
- Moved within Qld/interstate
- Problems with enrolment process
- Change course/ major
- No credit for previous study
- Family issues
- Discontinue to focus on Grade 12
- Location of campus/Brisbane
- Overseas travel
- External course issues
- Financial issues
- Health issues
- Staff attitudes/ treatment by staff
- Timetable issues

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Not ready/ wrong program

Krause et al 2005:
• Third of school-leavers believe they were not ready to choose a university course during their final year of school.

• ‘Wrong choice of programme’ first among seven key factors in undergraduate non-completion in the UK
How can this be so?

- *Which University?* (1999): students generally not well-informed about right program for them –

  Broadly speaking, our findings show that some applicants, an alarming proportion, are not in a good position to judge the appropriateness of programs for them or to judge the quality of courses overall….

  Applicants [sic] explanations of the reasoning behind their decisions often convincingly demonstrate that tertiary decision-making is not always a logical, informed process

  - Have only ‘vague ideas’ about specific aspects of experience ahead, yet have considerable confidence that it ‘will be right for them’ (Chapter 12)
Kift ALTC Senior Fellowship: A premise...

It is within the first year curriculum that students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging.

Which has lead to the articulation of a research-based 'transition pedagogy' –

a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts.

Kift & Nelson (2005)

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Six (6) First Year Curriculum Principles

[Concurrent with good teaching and good support]

- Transition
- Diversity
- Design
- Engagement
- Assessment
- Evaluation and Monitoring

A curriculum that does serious transition and retention work.

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What does it all mean in the (AeP2) context?

- Attend to diversity in preparedness and cultural capital
- Manage / (re)shape entering expectations
- Mediate program and career choice uncertainty
  - Exploration of career possibilities
- Establish (& reiterate) program relevance to employability
- Enact engaging pedagogies to harness early motivation and enthusiasm
- Deliver seamless in-class and online interactions
- Exploit benefits of co-curricula activities and other opportunities to build workforce capacities
ePortfolio to the rescue!
What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (1)

Attend to entering diversity in preparedness

- Students self-assess their entering knowledge, skills and attitudes against discipline expectations – with follow-up development opportunities
- Opportunity to self-assess and reflect on the diversity of their personal traits and dispositions: e.g. –
  - learning preference (e.g. VARK);
  - personality type (e.g. Myers-Briggs);
  - preferred team role (e.g. Belbin);
  - own cultural “grab bag” (e.g. cultural competence self assessment).
- Embed reflective exercises to mediate/ (re)shape expectations

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E.G.
Assessing skills, Building skills, Action plan

Self-assessment Worksheet

Introduction:
This worksheet enables you to rate your competency in a number of defined skill areas. There are two sets of skill areas:

- 10 QUT Student Portfolio Skill Areas;
- 10 Faculty of Law Skill Areas (these correspond directly to the 10 Student Portfolio skill areas, but contain information specific to faculty expectations of graduates).

You can choose to rate yourself against either one of these sets of skill areas.

The QUT Student Portfolio skill areas are displayed in the first section of this worksheet, while the Faculty of Law skill areas are displayed in subsequent sections. You can access the Faculty of Law skill area corresponding to a particular Student Portfolio skill area by clicking on the 'View law-specific skill areas' link for that skill area (see links in first table).

Instructions:

To work through the skill areas, read each of the descriptions provided and think about how you would rate yourself compared to your friends or peers. Using the 9-point scale provided, mark the point that indicates the extent to which you think you are competent at each skill. A rating of 9 indicates very high competency, while a rating of 1 indicates little or no competency. Make some notes next to each rating about the reasons why you chose that rating. When you have rated yourself in all of the skill areas, select 3 strong skill areas that you wish to develop further, and 3 weaker skill areas that you need to build up. Set a date to do a follow-up assessment.

Self-assessment against QUT Student Portfolio Skill Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUT STUDENT PORTFOLIO SKILL AREAS</th>
<th>INITIAL RANKING</th>
<th>Date: _________</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
<th>FOLLOW-UP RANKING</th>
<th>Date: _________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening, speaking, writing, understanding, presenting, reading editing, negotiating, interpersonal relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View law-specific skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (2)

Make connections explicit – value prior experience

- Harness constructivist approaches for FY transition to ensure connections are made between prior experiences and tertiary study: eg
  - QUT ePortfolio categorises experiences as any (and all) of
    - Academic
    - Work
    - Community
    - Personal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>A reflective comment about events or activities which you actively participated in at university, or at work, or in the community, or in your personal life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (3)

Attend to any program/career choice uncertainty

- Embedded early opportunities to revisit/confirm program and career choice
  - Normalise any uncertainty where it exists
  - Explore (early) what it is to be a XYZ professional; and what that (discipline) professionalism entails

- Also harnesses early motivation to engage with discipline learning – students expect career relevance
  - For example –
Six Career Development Modules at QUT

- Developed to underpin current curriculum and assist students to:
  - make sound course and career choices;
  - make successful transitions to life as a student; life at University; and post University
  - make connections between their course of study and where it might lead; and
  - further develop career pathways.

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QUT Career Development Modules

University Preparation
(for students prior to QUT)
- Defining Myself (Self Understanding 1)
- Course Exploration & Decision Making
- Awareness of Influences
- Assessing Readiness for Study
- Introducing the Student ePortfolio

Career Preparation
(for first year students)
- Defining Myself (Self Understanding 1)
- Thriving at University
- Choosing Majors/Electives
- Defining My Opportunities (Career Research & World of Work)
- Using the Student ePortfolio

(McAlpine et al, 2009: At pp 95-98 of

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What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (4)

Explicit recognition of employability skills’ attainment

• Make explicit the connections between program learning and attainment of desirable employability skills (as a subset of graduate attributes)
  – Evidences program relevance (which students crave)
    • Hopes and fears
  – Routinely build-in ePortfolio population and reflection
  – Why we have mapped discipline specific GAs to ePortfolio employability skills
    • Esp for double degree students
Skills areas into which students’ experiences may be organised – with mapping to Law specific skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>View Specific Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Listening, speaking, writing, understanding, presenting, reading, editing, interpersonal relations.</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Initiating, contributing, cooperating, negotiating, supporting, allocating to strengths, outcomes.</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving / Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Identifying issues, gathering evidence, reasoning analysis, evaluating options, finding solutions.</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Management / Life-long Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical / Professional / Research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing / Organising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social / Ethical Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity / Design</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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E.G.
Law specific skills for communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portfolio Skill Area</th>
<th>Skills of Law Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clearly and accurately communicating, both orally and in writing, through listening, non-verbal communication, speaking, presenting, reading, writing, editing, drafting, negotiating, interviewing, advocacy, mootings and report writing; using appropriate language for a variety of contexts; interpersonal interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Oral communication (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Written Communication (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Oral presentation (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advocacy (Communication)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviewing (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mooting (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Negotiating (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Drafting (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Report Writing (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interpersonal interaction (Relational)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://qutvirtual.qut.edu.au/portal/pls/portal/sp_maint_experience_p.show_faculty_skills?p_arg_names=sp_skill_area_id&p_arg_values=1&p_arg_names=p_sp_cohort_id&p_arg_values=5#1

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What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (5)

ePortfolio is (an) engaging (pedagogy)

- **AUSSE** (ACER, 2008): Engaging = challenging, active, interactive, collaborative, staff-student, enriching, supportive, WIL.
- Delivers on the ideal of seamless in-class and online interactions
- Utilised to manage transition proactively through curriculum: E.G.
  - Via managed reflections
  - As another indicator of involvement (or not)
- Brings distance students into the learning community in another way
- Provides reason and context for co-curr engagement
  - Series of co-curricula presentations by the discipline’s researchers, industry representatives and alumni could be offered and students required to attend X number to reflect on later via ePortfolio

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What are the ePortfolio opportunities? (6)

To develop other critical early tertiary literacies

• In and of itself fosters independent learning skills
• Fosters creativity – E.G.
  – Through making connections to generate new learnings
  – By reflecting on the application of theory to practice (sustainable and realistic authentic learning in FY)
• ‘Assessment’ literacies
• Engages the affective domain
• Builds reflective capacity in FY – v valuable

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Structured reflection on learning – an important beginning skill

Reflecting on learning

use the STAR L acronym to organise your thoughts

STAR L stands for Situation, Task, Action, Result and lessons Learnt. STAR L can help you to structure your reflections about an experience in such a way that the meaning and outcome of the experience can be clearly identified and communicated to others.

- **Situation** - The situation is the context in which the experience occurred.

  In our example, the experience took place at the Queensland University of Technology within the context of a team project. This project was undertaken as part of a management subject (MGB222). The team had six members, two of whom were mature-age students.

- **Task** - The task is what was actually required of you in the situation.

  If an experience occurred during a project at uni, the associated task might have been related to organisation (e.g. managing project documentation), teamwork (e.g. ensuring that each team member was aware of their responsibilities), or communication (e.g. delivering a presentation as part of the project). In our example, the task was to...
In conclusion

- ePortfolio is an important transition and retention intervention
- Powerful tool that can be used proactively to manage commencing student transition
  - For both academic & social engagement;
  - To increase chances of student success.
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