

Adapting an existing paper portfolio supporting progression into Higher Education

Case Study 2: Access to Leeds Metropolitan University

Context 1: Transition from Further to Higher Education

Institution

Leeds Metropolitan University and two West Yorkshire Further Education Colleges.

Institutional context

Leeds Metropolitan University offers a Progression Module to schools and colleges in West Yorkshire targeted at post 16 students. The module covers a number of different areas including:

- Career planning
- Researching Higher Education
- Budgeting
- Self Presentation

The aim is to help students progress into Higher Education and be better prepared for life beyond school and college.

On successful completion and assessment of the module, students are awarded an additional 30 UCAS points towards their application from the following HE institutions: Leeds Metropolitan University, University of Huddersfield, Trinity and All Saints, University of East London and Buckingham Chilterns University College.

The current paper-based Progression Module is delivered to 16 cohorts in a range of schools and colleges. A total of 646 students are currently registered on the module.

Established practice

Typically, the student has one timetabled lesson a week to cover the learning objectives in the module. This is delivered by a tutor from the school or college supported by paper booklets produced by Leeds Metropolitan University. The module is assessed at the end by a paper-based portfolio of work the students have produced over a year.

Challenges

The existing module is paper-based, and, for IT students in particular, who are used to working electronically this was seen as an inconvenience. Many students simply did not arrive in lessons with any means of working non-electronically (i.e. no pen or paper). It also meant that all the evidence had to be printed out at the end of the module to compile the paper portfolio.

It was also felt that an e-portfolio would allow the module delivery to be expanded into more schools and colleges in a more sustainable way than the paper version. It was also hoped that the e-portfolio would be a useful marketing tool to schools and colleges who are increasingly becoming accustomed to electronic modes of working. (As an example, all 2006 UCAS applications will now be made electronically).

Learner activity

The Progression Module is normally delivered with paper materials and students are required to produce a paper portfolio. This academic year the Progression Module is being piloted with five groups of learners (120 learners) in two colleges using an e-portfolio. The existing paper-based version is still being used with the other cohorts at these two colleges and the other institutions delivering the progression module. The contents of the e-portfolio version of the module had to remain the same as the paper based version to ensure parity between the different modes of delivery. However, in the e-portfolio version all work is submitted electronically via the e-portfolio. Learners will be expected to compile their evidence into a webfolio (a web based presentation) for assessment which will include:

- research learners will need to do on Universities, the courses they offer and the potential career paths available,
- a demonstration of knowledge of the cost of living and how they will budget for themselves,
- self-presentation material such as a CV and a University Application Personal Statement.

Pedagogical / technical approach

The learners in all five groups (as detailed in Table 1) are studying NQF level 3 IT qualifications. These groups were selected by their colleges partly because of their perceived IT abilities and also because the learners were keen to not have to produce a paper based portfolio. Non-IT groups were sought in these colleges but non-IT tutors did not want to participate. Learners were given initial training in using the e-portfolio and given an overview of the tasks which they were to complete. All module documentation was electronic, including an electronic version of the handbook in the e-portfolio. This was subsequently supplemented by an instructions webfolio because the students were not reading the electronic version of the handbook.

All groups of learners have one timetabled session a week with their college tutor to cover the material in the module. The module consists of a number of prescribed activities which must be completed by the learners and the evidence uploaded into their e-portfolio. The final task is to combine all of those pieces of evidence into a webfolio which is then presented for assessment.

The e-portfolio tool used was the web-based flash application PebblePAD developed at the University of Wolverhampton. Learners accessed their portfolios over networked college computers and in some cases at home as well.

Three college tutors were involved. The tutor from college A was very keen to use the e-portfolio and volunteered to pilot the new version. In college B the module leader took the decision to take part in the pilot and the two tutors were asked to deliver the Progression module using the e-portfolio.

| College | Number of groups of students | Subjects being studied by learners | E-portfolio sessions | Supported by |
|---------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| A | 2 | IT | 1 hour per week, timetabled | IT tutor |
| B | 3 | IT | 2 hours per week, timetabled | IT tutor (1 tutor with two groups and one tutor with the third group) |

Table 1: Summary of e-portfolio support sessions

Intended outcome(s)

The Progression module is designed to help widen participation into Higher Education. It encourages learners to research Higher Education choices and be better prepared upon entry to HE. The module also helps develop self-presentation and budgeting skills which will help all learners deal with everyday living. This is useful because not all learners will choose to enter HE.

Evaluation

We evaluated the pilot cohort using a variety of methods:

- Online questionnaire to all students using the e-portfolio (47 students out of 120 completed the questionnaire). This was taken in the first few weeks of their use of the e-portfolio.
- Online questionnaire to all students at the end of the module (17 respondents).
- Online questionnaire to support tutors at the end of the module (4 out of 4 responded).
- Informal interviews with the supporting tutors at each college (3 tutors in total).
- Focus groups with students at the end of the module (15 students involved)
- Critical incident log kept by ELP project officer
- Email records

E-portfolio users were asked a series of questions, for the online questionnaire, designed to measure:

- Their initial impressions of the e-portfolio tool and its ease of use.
- How useful they thought the e-portfolio module would be.
- Their initial thoughts and plans in relation to going to University.
- A self assessment of learning and study skills.

The final online survey was designed to measure broadly similar impressions as the initial survey:

- Their impressions of the e-portfolio tool and its ease of use.
- The frequency and location of use of the e-portfolio.
- How useful they found the e-portfolio module.
- Their revised thoughts and plans in relation to going to University.
- A self assessment of learning and study skills.

The focus groups with students were used to elaborate on this information.

Informal interviews with supporting tutors were mainly based on emerging issues and discussion of how to modify the e-portfolio to make for a better learning experience for learners.

These discussions included:

- How to better integrate the e-portfolio with the requirements of the existing module.
- How learners use the e-portfolio to provide evidence for the module.
- How tutors can best keep track of learner progress and provide formative feedback through the e-portfolio.

The emerging e-learning advantage

Considerable effort and resource are expended each year to produce the paper-based booklets. This has to be planned in advance to meet print run deadlines etc. In comparison, the electronic material can be presented as a webfolio that is easily updated and modified. However, electronic versions of the paper based material did not prove successful which is why the more interactive 'bite-size' webfolio was produced. Learners did not seem to want to read long documents electronically or search through long documents for relevant pieces of information.

Learners are able to share work with their tutors electronically and get feedback electronically. Being able to share assets (65% useful) and get feedback (71% useful) through the e-portfolio were two of the three most useful features of the e-portfolio tool.

"It lets you share files and have a good communication with your tutors and also get the relevant feedback from your tutors." Student

The most useful feature was being able to upload files into the e-portfolio (76% useful).

Not having to keep track and organise their work on paper.

"Being able to sort your work into folders so it's easier to find". Student

The e-portfolio is allowing users to access their work from different locations without the need to carry paper around.

"I can access work from home. Download and view my work and read the comments" Student

Emerging points for effective practice

Support for students and staff is vital for success. Working with e-portfolios often involves new ways of working for teaching staff as well as students. Staff need to develop their own styles and ways of working in this new environment. However, initially staff need a tightly prescribed way of doing things to give them a chance to get used to teaching with the e-portfolio before they can develop their own styles.

Modules using paper-based portfolios are not easily converted to e-portfolios. Careful consideration needs to be taken of all aspects of the module. Piloting the e-portfolio version has allowed us to see how which aspects of the module needed adapting and allowed us to develop different ways of working to take advantage of the technology available. Having 'bite size' web-based chunks of information and blank documents for students to download and fill in was important.

The change from paper-based portfolio to e-portfolio has had a particular impact on how formative and summative feedback is provided and how tutors keep track of student progress. E-portfolio tools based around the personal space learner-centric philosophy may not suit the needs of staff who may prefer institutional spaces with a module-centric focus. The use of electronic feedback is an important issue to consider. Tutors felt that it was often easier to give feedback face to face with students rather than electronically via the e-portfolio system. This was felt particularly for formative feedback. Giving formative feedback on individual pieces of evidence electronically through the e-portfolio to large numbers of students is very laborious.

The normal management process in FE colleges means that teachers/tutors are assigned specific classes/topics to teach. The success in embedding this module and other similar initiatives where the tutors have limited choice about 'buying-in', has a potential impact on their motivation and engagement and the scalability of initiatives like this.

The attitude of staff will influence the attitude of learners to e-portfolios. Staff can be resistant to change in situations where they have not volunteered, have no choice or control and perceive the change top-down.

Preliminary Conclusions and recommendations

The fact that this e-portfolio module was a conversion of an existing paper based portfolio has presented different challenges to implementation than starting an e-portfolio module from scratch (see in comparison, Case Study 1). The module worked in a particular way because it was paper-based. Simply replicating this electronically does not seem to be the best way forward. There is still a place for paper-based support material, especially for tutors.

Late notification of the trial to the two of the tutors resulting in limited time for them to become familiar with the e-portfolio and limited time to prepare.

Having been through the rigours of piloting the e-portfolio module in use with actual learners and tutors has helped its development.

With any new e-learning technology, it seems preferable to have keen volunteers to try it out first. They are less likely to get frustrated with difficulties as you pilot the use of the technology.

Author(s) and date

Neil Currant

7/8/2006