

Using The E-portfolio: The Student's Perspective.

Case Study 3: Preparation for UCAS Application to Medicine and Other Healthcare Courses

Context 1: Transition From Further To Higher Education

Summary

This case study describes the application of e-portfolios to support a widening participation project designed to encourage students from local colleges of further education and 6th forms to apply to medicine and other health-related subjects. Students in participating institutions were offered an on-line careers education module to support their decision-making process and their applications to medical and health-related courses. This resulted in a targeted and focussed personal statement for their [UCAS](#) application. There are, however, no UCAS credits applied to the completion of the module.

The project started in late June 2005 for an HE admissions deadline of October 2005 for medicine, and January 2006 for all other health-related subjects. A second cohort of students began using the e-portfolio between February and May 2006 for application to medicine and dentistry in October 2006 and other health-related courses in January 2007. Use of the e-portfolio was voluntary.

Institutional Context

In June 2005 4 local colleges identified students to participate in the pilot phase of the project. All of these colleges offer a range of courses from Foundation Level to AS/A2. All of the colleges are committed to Widening Participation and all of the students were identified using Widening Participation criteria ¹. Between February and May 2006 5 institutions were invited to identify students using the same criteria (cohort 2).

- Young people from neighbourhoods with lower than average HE participation
- People from lower socio-economic groups
- People living in deprived geographical areas, including deprived rural and coastal areas
- People whose family have no experience of HE (either their parents or siblings), and young people in care
- Minority ethnic groups or sub-groups that are under-represented in HE,

¹ Aimhigher: guidance notes for integration: HEFCE January 2004/08 LSC circular 04/01

in certain subjects and in certain types of institution

- Groups that are currently under-represented in certain subject areas (for example, women in engineering), or in certain types of institution
- Disabled people. We would expect all activities to be inclusive of disabled people.

Ensuring that students make informed and realistic career choices is the responsibility of individual educational institutions and the government-funded [Connexions Service](#). This support is traditionally delivered via a careers education programme through the college tutorial system and supplemented by the offer of an individual careers guidance interview. Careers provision between FE institutions and Sixth Form Colleges is not uniform and not all students make use of their entitlement. In the recently DfES commissioned 'End to End review of Careers Guidance and Education' (2005) (<http://dev.cegnet.co.uk/resource/content/files/704.doc>) it was noted that

"there is still a risk that not all young people who would benefit from advice are receiving it...[partially] due to ... a lack of clarity regarding the respective role of schools and the Connexions Service in providing careers advice to young people." They also noted that *"... many schools, colleges and work-based learning providers do not have a co-ordinated CEG (Careers Education and Guidance) delivery programme"* and that *"in general terms ... careers education is often restricted to those courses where it is required by the examination board or awarding body. This usually takes the form of work experience or a work-based project."*

All of the Colleges participating in the project deliver their Careers Education and Guidance through the college tutorial system and through individual appointments with the colleges' careers advisers. The structure of careers education can vary between colleges and 6th Forms: Some institutions rely on subject tutors to deliver this part of the curriculum; some employ their own guidance staff and have a dedicated area for careers support; others may rely entirely on the support of the Connexions Service. All of the colleges involved in cohort 1 employ their own guidance staff. In cohort 2 some of the 6th forms rely on support from teaching staff, learning mentors and connexions staff.

The Challenge and Established Practice

Students wishing to apply to medicine or healthcare-related courses are faced with three key disadvantages:

- They are not being a priority group for the [Connexions Service](#);
- Careers provision within colleges is not being delivered to a uniform standard of quality; and
- They are applying for courses in an extremely competitive subject area within a very complex system.

Competition for nursing and midwifery courses ranges from 2 applicants per place at the Universities of York and Staffordshire to 27 applicants per place

at Bristol University and the University of West of England. Competition for places on medical courses ranges from 5 applicants per place at Cambridge University to 20 applicants per place at Cardiff University. At the University of Leeds there are 10 applicants for every place. On average, nationally, there are 9 applications for every place in medicine or nursing and midwifery. (Heap.B Degree Course Offers 2006, Trotman 2006)

These factors led the University of Leeds Medical School, in conjunction with its City and Regional Office, to develop and deliver an online careers education programme to encourage and support those school and FE students who would not normally receive specific support to enable them to successfully apply for a career in medicine or health-related area. Participating students did not have to apply to Leeds University in order to take part.

Learner Activity

Cohort 1

The initial module consisted of a series of exercises enabling students:

- To consider a university education:
- To evaluate their skills in relation to the courses they wished to apply for and provide the opportunity to audit their own skills and explore activities to bridge any gaps
- To carry out a course specific activity (Healthcare students compared different careers in healthcare and medical students composed an argument for and against euthanasia) to broaden their understanding of their chosen career field.

There was also the facility for students to reflect on activities and learning-outcomes from careers related events they attended.

Under-graduate mentors and the project officer posted feedback on these activities and the students published reflective comments

By utilising these entries students were able to complete a UCAS personal statement on which they also received feedback from a medical undergraduate (medicine) and the project officer (Health-related courses)

Cohort 2

The e-portfolio was further developed at the end of 2005, building on feedback received from users.

There are now 7 generic sections to complete:

- An introduction to critical reflection and its importance in medicine and healthcare courses
- Reasons for and against university
- Skills audit and those required for chosen course

- University finance and information on bursaries
- Deciding which courses and universities to choose
- How to record work experience
- How to apply, deadlines and back-up plans

Students then choose an exercise related to their chosen course to enhance their knowledge and consider what may be expected of them at an interview. There are subject-specific exercises for medicine, nursing and midwifery, dentistry, physiotherapy, optometry and speech and language therapy. The e-portfolio is again complete when students have put together their UCAS personal statement.

It was noted that in one college students formed an 'off-line' community and to facilitate this further a message board was added to the e-portfolio tool to enable students from different colleges to communicate with each.

Students in cohort 2 do not have an individual mentor assigned to them but have the facility to ask a mentor a question about any aspect of university life, courses and the application process. The reply is then posted back into their e-portfolio.

All students receive feedback from the project officer who is a qualified careers adviser. Those interested in medicine will receive feedback on their subject-specific entries and personal statement from an under-graduate medical mentor

The e-portfolio is also updated with information from the national news relating to medical and health developments as well as issues arising in the NHS.

The new e-portfolio also contains a section for tutors to use. The contents are identical to those in the students e-portfolio with the addition of suggested lesson plans, cross referenced with the DfES suggested outcomes for Careers Education post 16².

Pedagogical/Technical Approach

The e-portfolio logbook was designed within the Leeds University open source VLE, Bodington. An example of the e-portfolio can be found here <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/medicine/meu/elp/screenshot.html>.

Students will be able to use the e-portfolio at home or at school/college and complete exercises by uploading documents to their e-portfolio or by making basic entries in to the e-portfolio tool.

Students can grant access to others to view their e-portfolio including friends and tutors in their institutions.

² Careers Education and Guidance in England: A National framework: DfES 2003

The e-portfolio is designed to encourage social constructivist learning enabling users to share ideas and thoughts. This concept has been expanded in cohort 2 by the use of a message board.

Intended Outcomes

By completing the e-portfolio students will have fulfilled some of the learning outcomes outlined in the DfES requirements for Careers Education post 16. These include:

- Undertake a range of assessments to confirm medium and longer term goals and update career and learning targets
- Take action to develop further the knowledge and skills they need to progress and identify and take advantage of opportunities for adding to their experiences and achievements
- Make critical use of a range of information sources to explain how careers are changing
- Obtain careers information relevant to personal needs and process it effectively
- Describe different routes through to their career goals and the similarities and differences between higher education and employment with training
- Make good use of opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding of destinations relevant to personal career plans
- Justify and evaluate the range of opportunities they are considering including HE, training, employment or starting their own business.
- Take charge of their own career planning and management, evaluate previous transitions and use the outcomes when considering the future
- Evaluate and improve personal criteria for comparing different options and make critical use of all available information, advice and guidance
- Consider the possible implications of changes in learning and work for their own career goals and plans including financial options _critically reviewing current ideas about the importance of lifelong learning and employability skills
- Follow application procedures correctly and use a range of self-presentation techniques that are fit for purpose
- Present themselves well at selection interviews and demonstrate enterprise, negotiation, networking and self-marketing skills to an appropriate level

- Obtain and manage sources of financial support researching sources of financial support.

Additionally through using the e-portfolio we aim to provide:

- Information, advice and guidance on all career areas in this field, to enable students to make informed and realistic decisions about their futures.
- An emphasis on reflection to enable students to think about a university education in a realistic manner as well as improve their skills of reflection and critical thinking.
- Contact with an undergraduate medical student (potential Medical students) and a careers adviser (Health Care).
- An increase in students' confidence in their own abilities and in their knowledge of the UCAS application system.
- Targeted support to widen participation.
- An introduction to students of the concept of an e-portfolio, now being used widely by universities to support Personal Development Planning (PDP) and in the NHS to support trainee doctors and other professionals during their first years of on-the job training and formal appraisal.

The e-Learning Advantage

Initially 49 volunteers participated in the pilot, with support from the colleges' careers advisers. By September of 2005 two colleges had withdrawn from the project. Twenty-two students remained from 2 colleges. Two students withdrew from the project: One left college and another decided that a career in this field was not for them. Thirteen began using the e-portfolio tool and submitting exercises for feedback. By November 2005 9 students had completed the e-portfolio.

The impact of the e-portfolio was evaluated using online questionnaires and fact-to-face focus groups. E-portfolio users and careers guidance staff were asked a series of questions designed to measure:

- The ease of use of the e-portfolio tool,
- The increase in knowledge of the application procedure and specific subject areas involved and
- The impact of the e-portfolio within the Careers Education and Guidance Curriculum.
- The relevance of the materials within the e-portfolio.

Seven students completed two online questionnaires: One in September 2005, measuring the ease of use of the e-portfolio and another in January 2006, measuring increases in knowledge both of the careers they had applied for and the university application process. Three of the students were interested in nursing/midwifery, and 4 were interested in medicine. Three members of the careers guidance staff completed an email questionnaire.

A structured focus group took place in December 2005 with 3 of the medical students and 2 of the Nursing/Midwifery students.

Attempts were also made to interview careers advisers and key staff in the institutions which had withdrawn. One agreed to be interviewed.

Comments from students who did not complete the e-portfolio were collected through informal discussions with 4 of these students.

From the second cohort of students 55 have completed an on-line pre-user questionnaire to measure their initial views of the e-portfolio and its perceived usefulness.

Non-users views-Careers Advisers

The launch of the e-portfolio had been affected in 2 of the colleges by problems with caching and firewalls. Once logged on to the system users were able to view each others log-books. This resulted in a loss of confidence in the system. This loss of confidence, however, emanated from the careers advisers and key staff supporting the students in these institutions rather than from the students themselves.

One of the institutions was offered an additional training session on the system, with lunch, at the university. One of the students attended. He stated that none of the other students involved in the project had been informed about the event.

In the other institution an interview was arranged with the careers adviser involved in supporting the project. In addition to the technical problems with the e-portfolio tool the careers adviser also felt:

- The support student received from the institution to make applications to medicine and healthcare was sufficient.
- The students had already completed some of the exercises on choosing universities and considering this path as an option, doing this again in the e-portfolio would be pointless repetition

Non-users views-students

The students who did not complete the e-portfolio, from all the colleges, felt:

- The support they received in college was sufficient
- They did not want to repeat exercises they had already completed in college

- They believed they knew a sufficient amount about applying to medicine and healthcare.
- The e-portfolio was extra work and would take up too much of their time.

Student's Perspectives

All of the students who responded to the online questionnaire (n=7) felt that the technical training on the use of the e-portfolio was adequate and that they understood the aims of the project.

All of the student respondents found the 'skills' exercise the most useful aspect of the e-portfolio and stated that this gave them a good understanding of what they needed to put into their UCAS personal statements. It also highlighted to them what was required e.g. relevant work/caring experience.

The 'Useful Websites', 'Filling in your Personal Statement' and 'Choosing a University and Course' were also highlighted as useful sections of the e-portfolios, with six of the students citing these sections.

The section entitled 'Useful Publications' was considered to be the least useful aspect of the e-portfolio followed by 'Considering Applying to University'. Students commented that this was constantly reinforced by the college and by the time the e-portfolio project began in July they had attended many sessions on this subject.

Six of the students felt that the most useful aspect of the e-portfolio was contact with an undergraduate mentor and the feedback that they received on their completed exercises and UCAS Personal Statement. They felt that this gave them a link to a 'real' person in an HE environment and they particularly valued the fact that the mentors had been through the application process and had been successful.

Fifty percent of the students stated that the college careers adviser was the biggest influence in helping them to put together their UCAS personal statements. Another 50% stated that their tutor had been the biggest influence in this process. The e-portfolio was listed by all students as the third biggest source of assistance in this process.

Increased Knowledge?

Six of the students felt that, as a direct result of using the e-portfolio, they knew more about the careers available in the Medicine and Healthcare field followed by five respondents who felt that the e-portfolio had increased their awareness of the skills required. Only one student felt it had increased their knowledge about the processes involved in applying to university.

Three of the potential medical students (n=4) felt that they knew more about medical ethics as a result of using the e-portfolio.

All of the students stated that they knew more about the careers available to them in the medical and healthcare field and the skills they would need to utilise in these fields as a result of using the e-portfolio tool.

Cohort 2

14.5% (n=55) of the new cohort have had some experience of compiling a portfolio in the past. 66.7% of these users found this experience to be useful. One user, who did not find this experience useful, stated that this was because it 'was not for educational/qualification purposes'

When asked how they thought the e-portfolio could help them, the majority 91.8%, thought it would help them to put together an application for university. They also thought that the e-portfolio would help them to learn more about the courses (75.5%) and careers (83.7%) they wanted to do. Fewer students, 51%, felt it would help them to organise their learning more effectively and introduce them to a new way of learning.

Eighty-one percent of students know which course they want to study and 88% felt comfortable using the e-portfolio.

Users have also been asked to rate their skills and knowledge in key areas such as: Applying to university, knowledge about their chosen careers; how good they feel they are at using computers, reflecting on past situations and keeping a learning diary. These results will be compared with answers supplied from students at the end of the e-portfolio exercise. Some comments made by students after a few weeks of using the e-portfolio tool include:

"So far when using the e-portfolio I have thought about decisions more and I question more things."

"Very helpful introduces to new ways of thinking."

"It makes you more motivated and you look forward to applying to the course you want, so you feel more confident!"

"It really helps me know more about the career I want to do in the future."

"I find it a little daunting!"

"To be totally honest I'm not really sure how it works and what I'm supposed to be doing....!?"

Careers Adviser Perspective

After the pilot project careers staff in the colleges felt that the students were better prepared for the UCAS application process, particularly the potential medical students.

They felt that, when compared with previous years and with those who did not participate in the pilot, students:

- Displayed a greater realism in their choices and had an increased awareness of what would be expected of them throughout the application process and in their chosen area of study.
- Possessed a greater knowledge of how to formulate and organise their UCAS Personal Statements.
- Were more aware of their own level of commitment to their chosen area
- Were more aware of the need to evidence and achievements and experience beyond their educational life.

The careers staff felt that when college staff provide advice to students about applications the students sometimes take this advice 'with a pinch of salt' but noted that hearing this advice coming from staff and/or students in higher education is more likely to have an impact. It was also noted that the project had given structure to the careers advisers work with these specific groups of students, provided a more formal approach to the process through the activities, as well as providing students with a link to sources of advice and information.

The e-portfolio can provide value to careers education and guidance in the curriculum and is it provides real contact with the world of university and bridges the FE/HE gap.

Key Points for Effective Practice

- E-portfolios cannot be used in isolation. They are most effective when used in conjunction with other services i.e. careers interviews and education. They provide a structure and framework for research and facilitate ideas which can be discussed in more depth through one-to-one contact with a trained career professional.
- **Student induction** on the use of the e-portfolio is an important factor in determining student usage. Not only should this cover the technical aspects of using the e-portfolio but also the ethos of use and the educational and learning benefits that can be derived from using the e-portfolio. Linkages to the use of electronic e-portfolios during undergraduate study and in NHS training also need to be highlighted.
- It must also be made clear to potential participants in future cohorts that ***they are not expected to apply to Leeds University***. The e-portfolio is a tool that can prepare students to apply to any university.
- It is essential to check the ICT facilities of the institutions involved before training occurs, to discuss systems and security issues, eg firewalls, with the relevant ICT Department; and to test the system **before** using with participants.

- Although the students say they found the e-portfolio easy to use there were some difficulties around navigation. Links need to be clearer.
- The use of the e-portfolio was voluntary. The students who completed the exercises were dedicated to their chosen career path. A wider range of results could be derived from the project if the e-portfolio was made compulsory, however, this can only occur with agreement from participating colleges or the wider agreement of universities to recognise the completion of e-portfolios as a tool for application.
- The timing for introducing the e-portfolio also needs to be addressed. Around March/April seems to be the best time for commencing work on the e-portfolio system for this group.
- To avoid replication of work for students, particularly in the 'Considering Applying to University' section, individual negotiation with institutions would ensure that the e-portfolio is configured to fit in with the Careers Education and Guidance curriculum.

Conclusion

It is the content and purpose of the e-portfolio that dictates the level of usage not the technology.

The use of the e-portfolio has been effective in raising students' awareness of the careers available in their chosen areas, the skills they need to develop to apply for these careers, and the types of personal information required in their personal statements. Contact with a mentor greatly contributed to this success.

Students have recognised the skill of reflection and its significance in healthcare and medical careers.

The subject-specific areas of the e-portfolio were seen as the most useful sections. E-portfolios need to be relevant to their users and add value to current systems and curricula (in this case the Careers Education Curriculum).

Three Healthcare students have received offers for midwifery courses, compared to none from last year's cohort.

Three students have received offers for medical degrees. In one college only 2 students out of 9 completed the e-portfolio. One of these students is re-sitting Yr13 again to acquire Chemistry A-level. The other student has been offered a place on a medicine degree. Nobody else from the other initial cohort in this college has been offered a place on a medicine degree.

Seventy-one percent of the students involved in the project have been successful in being offered a place on a medicine or healthcare course. This compares with an average of 11% chance for applicants nationally

All 7 student respondents noted that they felt more confident in applying to their chosen courses and in their own abilities to be successful in these careers.

Students noted that assistance from careers staff in college was the greatest help in putting together their university applications and the e-portfolio is more effective when used in conjunction with this face-to-face service.

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Glossary

UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service http://www.ucas.ac.uk/
Connexions Service	Connexions is for 13-19 year olds, living in England and wanting advice on getting to where they want to be in life. It also provides support up to the age of 25 for young people who have learning difficulties or disabilities (or both). http://www.connexions-direct.com/