Case Study 6

Transferring e-Portfolios between Institutions

Context 3- Transferring between HE institutions

Summary

The use of an e-portfolio that is neither compulsory nor supported by the tutor involved in assessing the work produced in the e-portfolio will lead to very low take-up and use of e-portfolios. No students completed their portfolio in electronic format.

Transferring data from one institution to another that is using a different portfolio system was not possible in this case study. Students were able to extract all the data from their e-portfolio (in PebblePAD) in the form of a website but importing this into the Bodington VLE was not an easy task.

Institutions

University of Bradford, University of Leeds.

Institutional context

The University of Bradford's Clinical Sciences degree offers students in the foundation or 1st year the opportunity to progress onto the medical degree (MBChB) at the University of Leeds. Most students on the Clinical Sciences course have aspirations to go into medicine but their current backgrounds and qualifications would preclude them getting a place on a medical degree directly. Those students who performed best in their foundation year on the Clinical Sciences course would have the option to transfer to the first year of the MBChB at the University of Leeds.

Challenges

It seems increasingly likely that health professionals will encounter an e-portfolio at some time in their professional life for their personal and professional development.

Being able to transfer data in an e-portfolio between institutions will be one of the key success factors in determining its portability and usefulness in lifelong learning. However, the successful and embedded practice at Bradford based on a paper portfolio presents a challenge to changing to an online portfolio and a strong case must be presented to highlight the additional benefits offered.

Established practice

The current student portfolio is part of an assessed module and is one component of the module assessment. This portfolio would then be taken with students on transfer to Leeds Medical School and built upon in their subsequent studies. Current practice involves producing a paper portfolio which has to be physically transferred between institutions and limits the access that staff have to the students learning.

The content and assessed requirements of the portfolios at Bradford and Leeds are not exactly the same but have similar elements.

Learner activity

Learners undertake a module where they have to complete a personal development portfolio with the aims of:

- Keeping a record of their personal and professional achievement.

- Reflecting on their development of key skills

- Using the portfolio to help plan and reflect upon personal and professional development as learners embarked upon their life long learning journey.

This could be done using an e-portfolio, possibly more efficiently and effectively than using a paper portfolio.

Pedagogical / technical approach

Learners were given access to the web based flash application PebblePAD e-portfolio tool (http://www.pebblelearning.co.uk) developed at the University of Wolverhampton to help them record evidence and compile their portfolio. The use of the e-portfolio is optional. In total 18 learners expressed a wish to use the e-portfolio out of 75 students enrolled on the foundation year of the course.

Of the 57 students who did not want to use the e-portfolio, 25 answered a question on their reason for not using the e-portfolio. The top three reasons for not volunteering were: lack of time (10 students), No access to Internet at home (4) and lack of IT skills (4). Students only put down one reason which could mean that those with no Internet access at home could also lack IT skills. Those who did volunteer were mainly interested to see if it could make the recording process easier (1) and to try out something new (1).

The students' portfolios were part of an assessed module on personal and professional development. The tutor wanted to assess the work as a paper based portfolio because she was not comfortable assessing the work electronically.

The data in the e-portfolio would then be transferred to the University of Leeds Bodington VLE upon student transfer.

Intended outcome(s)

Portfolios are widely recognised as an important learning and assessment method in medical education. Leeds Medical School have been running a number of e-portfolio pilots in different areas. Nationally, the training of Pre-registration House Officers (PRHOs, see case study 4) will require an e-portfolio from late 2006.

The pilot will look at the issues of using an e-portfolio for an assessed professional development module in the medical context.

We also intend to test interoperability of student data from one e-portfolio (PebblePAD used at the University of Bradford) to another (Bodington logbook at the University of Leeds) when a student transferred between institutions.

Evaluation – data collection

Eighteen learners were initially involved in using the e-portfolio, although evidence suggests that very few of those (less than 5) have used the e-portfolio to record their development. The module tutor did not want to use the e-portfolio. The tutor was uncomfortable with ICT and felt that learning to use the system would be an additional burden in terms of the time needed to learn it.

The evaluation is designed to cover the full cycle of the module. We evaluated the pilot cohort using an online questionnaire and student interviews.

The pre-questionnaire was designed to collect data about previous experience of portfolio work and the learner's initial impression of the e-portfolio. For example, was it easy to use? What could be changed? Two students completed the questionnaire.

The student interviews were semi-structured interviews aimed at allowing the students to give a detailed account of how they had used the e-portfolio and the issues that arose. For example, what they found useful about it? What was less useful and needed changing? How they felt about using the e-portfolio in their module? What they thought would need to be done in the future? Two students volunteered to be interviewed.

The e-learning advantage

The potential advantage is that work the students produce at one institution can easily be transferred to their new institution. Staff can easily access the student's portfolio from any internet connected location without having to carry very bulky folders around. This will give staff an opportunity to access parts of a student's portfolio whilst the student is able to work on it at the same time.

The potential advantage to students is a portfolio that can go with them and be updated and modified on their lifelong learning and professional development journey.

It has been noted by students who have previously transferred to the University of Leeds from the University of Bradford Clinical Science course that they would have liked easy access to their work from Bradford.

Key points for effective practice

Interoperability is still a challenge. Exporting the entire portfolio from PebblePAD to Bodington was not possible. PebblePAD exports as xml and this could not be put into Bodington in any meaningful way. It is possible to transfer webfolios from PebblePAD to Bodington. Webfolios are exported as web pages and it was possible to upload these into the Bodington logbook. However, the web pages would remain static and the portfolio could not be modified or updated in Bodington. This

represents an improvement on the situation at the beginning of the project (just over one year ago) where even transferring a static webfolio was not possible.

Technical issues unrelated to interoperability have surfaced. These relate mainly to authentication of users across institution boundaries using LDAP (Lightweight Directory Access Protocol). The e-portfolio was hosted at the University of Wolverhampton and they used LDAP to authenticate the students' identities on the Bradford LDAP server. Setting this up correctly in the first place proved problematic and the installation of a new firewall at Bradford temporarily left student unable to access the e-portfolio. These issues, which prevent access and reduce usability, can seriously impact on user motivation and subsequent use of e-portfolios. A standard single sign-on capability that is accepted as standard by all institutions should be able to provide a better solution and would have institutional IT support. At the moment users have to login separately to the e-portfolio compared to say their VLE or their email.

Student IT skills may not be sufficient and the addition of an electronic tool adds to the learning needs of the student. Training and support for students will be important.

Students may not have previously completed Personal Development type activities before entering University. An e-portfolio is capable of providing support for these activities if embedded in the module or course.

Take up of new technology needs staff champions who have both the IT skills and the motivation in e-learning to try the new technology and assess the additional benefits in practice.

The practicalities, of how e-portfolios are to be assessed by staff, need careful consideration. Portfolios, by their very nature, tend to be long documents and tutors note that they like to be able to flick between pages when assessing them. Tutors note that initially it seems to take longer to assess an e-portfolio than a paper based one although with practice and familiarity it does seem to get easier and quicker. We were unable to explore the differences in providing feedback via a paper portfolio compared to an online portfolio.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are a number of ways to achieve interoperability. The method available to us was to transfer data from one e-portfolio into another. The option being investigated by the JISC e-learning framework reference model (http://www.elframework.org/refmodels/epll/) offers an alternative, in that the data can reside in the original e-portfolio but can be drawn out by whatever system is currently in use.

IT skills of both students and staff may present a significant barrier. As an example, one student had hardly ever used a computer before. The student felt that the addition of using the e-portfolio was just too big a barrier to overcome and would not be able to volunteer.

Case Study 6: HE to HE

Electronic assessment of large pieces of written work such as portfolios presents a real barrier for staff who are used to being able to flick through and annotate straight onto paper. At its most basic level, electronic assessment limits the locations where staff can do the assessment.

Resistance to change is always a barrier particularly where existing practice is successful and no big driver exists to move away from existing practice. The additional benefits of such technology would need to be clearly stated and demonstrated.

It would appear that making the e-portfolio optional, especially as part of assessed courses, will not help take up of new technology. Students are acutely aware of the importance of assessment and do not like to feel that they may be at a perceived disadvantage (real or otherwise) because the way they are preparing their work differs from what other students are doing. No student completed or submitted their portfolio in electronic format. The two most enthusiastic students had reverted to other methods of compiling their portfolio by February 2006.

Issue

Issue	Date	Author	Change
V4	29 July 2006	Neil Currant	Update after final evaluation activities
V4.01	12 Sept 2006	Carol Higgison	Critical review of Case Study