USING E-PORTFOLIOS TO WIDEN PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS FROM MINORITY ETHNIC AND LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS TO GAIN ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION.

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Background

The UK government is keen to see 50% participation in higher education. Increasingly students are choosing to study at their local Higher Education institution rather then living away from home[1]. The University of Bradford serves a very diverse community (both culturally and economically) and therefore the University increasingly has a role to play in raising the aspirations and prospects for students in Bradford secondary education. A large number of students in Bradford come from family backgrounds where they will be 'first in the family' to participate in HE.

The University runs a Compact Scheme which is the main vehicle for engaging with students aged 16-19 in local schools. The Compact scheme in conjunction with the Enhancing Learner Progression (ELP) project started a module in October 2005 using an e-portfolio to help school students raise aspirations and apply to University.

Objectives

The key aims of the e-portfolio module are to encourage students to study at tertiary level and to aid them in the application process.

A number of activities are undertaken by students in their first year of advanced studies. These activities aim to:

- Raise students' aspirations by helping them recognise success,

- Encourage students to think carefully about their career options and the choices available to them,

- Encourage greater links between students and the University,

- Help students to be better prepared for university application and for their first year of study at University.

Activities

The activities of the module include recording achievements in the e-portfolio to give them a better sense of what they are capable of doing and how much they have achieved. Students are then encouraged to reflect on the learning and skills gained from any work or voluntary experiences they may have undertaken in their e-portfolio. This includes analysing their strengths and weaknesses to produce an action plan. Students are encouraged to research the courses and universities they are interested in a write about the information they have found out and their thoughts on it.

All of this material can then help students put together a personal statement in support of their University application.

As part of the module, students are invited to attend University taster days and master classes and reflect on their experiences at the University in their e-portfolio.

Students

The 65 students involved in the pilot year of the module come from three schools in the Bradford district, 91% of them from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The ethnic backgrounds of the students did not influence the design of the module or the choice of e-portfolio used. The project set out to encourage local students to progress to university and the high proportion of ethnic minority students was a reflection of the local community and not part of the specific remit of the project. The assumption was that we felt that what we were doing should work with any group of students who may be considering university but did not necessarily have a family history of participation in Higher Education. The important aspect was that students would record and reflect on their own experiences and draw out learning that was personal to them. They would bring their own culture into what they put in the e-portfolio. The emphasis was on drawing on as wide a range of experiences as possible and not limiting it to certain aspects which may be culturally biased, such as work experience for ethnic minority females[2].

Literature Review

The e-portfolio is currently very much rooted in the philosophy of lifelong and life wide leaning[3]. Portfolios for learning have a long tradition in many areas such as healthcare and teacher training. Portfolio learning seems to have a number of benefits. Portfolios can encourage reflection[4] and help learners in their personal and professional development[5]. Using portfolios to record achievements can help self-esteem, confidence and build a better sense of self-knowledge[5,6]. Portfolio learning encourages learner autonomy[4] and self-direction[7].

E-portfolios are said to be able to build on all the benefits of portfolio learning and add additional benefits. Claims about e-portfolios include that they bring greater flexibility to portfolio learning as well as greater scope for communication with other which can help build a dialogue into the process[8]. E-portfolios offer the potential for multimedia, multi-sensory and interactive portfolios[9].

Data Collection

The focus of the project was to get an impression of what the students thought about the use of the e-portfolio and to track the changes taking place over the course of their use of the e-portfolio.

A number of techniques were used as summarised in table 1. As well as getting the impression of the students, the tutors they were working with were also interviewed to see if their impression matched up with the students.

Table1 Data collection details

Data collection technique	Approach / population sample
Online Student Survey – Pre / Early Use of e-portfolio	Quantitative and qualitative questions / all users
Online Student Survey – Post Use of e-portfolio	Quantitative and qualitative questions / all users
Online Tutor Survey – Post Use of e-portfolio	Quantitative and qualitative questions / all users
User focus groups – Early use of e-portfolio	Qualitative / sample of users
User focus groups – Post use of e-portfolio	Qualitative / sample of users
Tutor interviews (formal and informal)	Qualitative / all tutors in 6th forms.
Observation of use (students only)	Qualitative / 4-6 one hour sessions of use
Project team critical incident weblogs	Qualitative / project officer

Findings

Portfolio Benefits

A structured approach to thinking about and planning a University application has been beneficial. 75% of students reported that they felt better prepared for applying and going to University and 66% felt that the e-portfolio module will be useful or very useful in helping them apply to University.

The module has also encouraged some students to think about their wider aspirations beyond University, *"It made me aware of the different routes to each career"* Student and *"it has helped me decide a lot about what I want for the future and what I need to do to get there"* Student. Looking at the wider picture of career aspirations has made a small number of students (25%) feel that they are now more likely to go to University partly because they can see that higher education can provide a route into the career of their choice. All of the remaining students (75%) felt that they were as likely to go to University and none thought they were less likely to go to University as a result of using an e-portfolio to think about University. The feeling of tutors that have worked with the students using the e-portfolio also echo the students' thoughts about it being both beneficial for planning and that it can encourage those students who are not sure about their future. It had been able to provide students with more focus.

Students have also been made aware that it is not just about qualifications and the grades you get that are important. The use of an e-portfolio has encouraged them to provide evidence for the skills that they have. They have been able to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and realise what type of evidence can demonstrate their strengths and that they need to plan to address their weaknesses. *"I have been able to identify my strengths and weaknesses and have been able to do things in my spare time like voluntary work"*, Student. The fact that the evidence and skills message was coming from the University helped make the impact of that message stronger because as one tutor put it "they (students) don't really take it as seriously when it comes from us (school)."

This recording of evidence to demonstrate skills has also had an impact on confidence and self-esteem. "…it gives you the chance to get to know yourself better. When you write it down you believe it more," Student and "It gives you confidence," Student. Students are not accustomed to looking at themselves in detail and often do not realise the skills that they have and do not take stock of all their achievements. "It is very useful to me because it enabled me to record my experiences, something I

usually would not do," Student. This can lead to students 'under-selling' themselves in their University application and at interview. Related to this is the fact that students find reflection difficult, primarily because it is not something that they do frequently. Students on the project found it difficult to reflect at first and did not know what to write. However, as the project went along they found it easier to reflect. When talking about reflection students noted that *"you don't (usually) write about yourself so you have to think about it"* and *"it's hard at first but it gets easier"*.

These benefits mentioned so far a very much the types of benefits that can be achieved with any kind of portfolio for learning, such as a paper based portfolio. The project also found a number of benefits that the electronic aspect of the portfolio provided.

E-portfolio benefits

A clear benefit, from the schools perspective, was that the e-portfolio worked to encourage learner autonomy and independence. Although this can be a benefit from paper based portfolios it was felt that the electronic aspect took this much further and students would not have responded as independently with a paper based portfolio.

Part of this independence came from the ability to be able to access from anywhere with Internet access. Students were able to work on it at home (62% and a further 10% in public libraries) and at school. They felt that not having to carry it around with them really helped with this aspect. In a number of the school students attend different campuses and they were able to work on their e-portfolio at all their educational settings and be able to share their work with tutors who were on a different campus.

Finally, some students found that it gave them more confidence in their IT skills. They found the e-portfolio (PebblePAD) easy to use and being able to produce a well presented portfolio that they had constructed themselves gave them a sense of satisfaction.

Other Comments

No significant difference was found in how the e-portfolio was used or in how the students responded to the module between students from different ethnic backgrounds taking part in this e-portfolio module or in similar modules in other parts of the project[10].

At this point in the project students have not yet received offers from Universities so it will be interesting to follow up the students into University to see what impact the e-portfolio module had.

Conclusion

The use of an e-portfolio has allowed the University to provide a structured environment to help students prepare for University and University application. The e-portfolio module has allowed students to have closer contact with the University throughout their advanced studies. The internet based e-portfolio means that students can access their work from home or school. The e-portfolio tool and the e-portfolio module have been of considerable benefit to students and to the University.

The use of an e-portfolio tool is an option that has allowed the University Compact scheme to engage with more students that it had been previously able to do. This will allow the University to pursue its mission of widening participation into higher education.

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