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e-Portfolios: innovative practice in higher education

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SAT: e-Portfolios: innovative practice in higher education (Laila Burton)

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Laila Burton

12 January 2016

Graduates are entering a competitive and continuously evolving graduate labour market with unprecedented levels of student loan debt, which is understandably making prospective students more mindful of whether they will see a return on their investment. Higher education is undoubtedly going to be a more significant financial commitment for many students if the Government raises tuition fees further in line with the Teaching Excellence Framework, as proposed in its green paper on higher education published in November 2015 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015, p.13). Consequently, students are increasingly looking for qualifications that will enhance their employability in order to secure a graduate job and it is incumbent on universities to support students in this endeavour (Browne, 2010). Employability has been on the higher education policy landscape for some time and it is emphasised in the Government's green paper on higher education.

Since the 1997 Dearing Report recommended universities develop their approaches to personal development planning (PDP) there has been increasing use of e-portfolios to help students articulate their employability skills (Pegg *et al.*, 2012, p.28). A survey carried out in 2014 highlighted that 78% of universities now have a centrally supported e-portfolio tool (UCISA, 2014, p.28). Despite this increasing prevalence of e-portfolios a study commissioned by Jisc suggests that universities need to use technology more effectively to support employability (Chatterton and Rebbeck, 2015, p.2).

There are a range of e-portfolio tools that universities currently use with students, from commercial software like PebblePad, to open source tools such as Mahara and WordPress. It has been predicted that as students become more digitally confident they will want access to a wide range of e-portfolio tools that they can tailor to their own individual needs (Norman, 2015). However, if universities fail to provide a common e-portfolio platform it could result in an unsupportable provision that is confusing for students. So how do universities achieve a balance between meeting students' individual needs and providing a feasible solution for all?

This session will explore these issues and share the outputs from this project, which explored innovative approaches to using open source e-portfolio tools across the higher education sector. The aims of the session are to:

- ▶ explore the employability agenda in the higher education policy landscape;
- ▶ provide insight into the role of e-portfolios as a tool for enhancing students'

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employability in higher education;

- ▶ describe some of the key e-portfolio tools used in higher education;
- ▶ highlight case studies of innovative practice in implementing open source e-portfolio tools;
- ▶ consider some of the issues that need to be taken into account when considering the implementation of an e-portfolio tool.

After the session participants should have an overview of e-portfolio tools, be familiar with some examples of innovative practice and be aware of some of the current issues surrounding the implementation of e-portfolios in higher education.

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[Anita Houghton](#)

9:49am 16 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila

I have worked with a couple of e-portfolio systems in FE for assessment of accredited work-based learning programmes. One great (simple to use) and one that sings and dances and is everything which is “needed in OFSTED terms”, but is so hard to use I find it a hindrance. Both are commercial packages.

Are the samples you have been looking at, got the potential to link into what they have achieved before HE e.g. in FE? Will it be transferable across HE institutions also, for example a student may study a first degree at one institution and a Masters at another – can it go with them?

I can see similarities between your project and Nicki Berry's. RARPA, from my experience is an adult community learning term which I associate with non accredited provision which is often below level two. One of the aims of community learning, short term is to engage people in education, long term to make people more employable. (I am however, no expert on adult community learning other than observing it within a previous organisation). So, I view yours and Nikki's issue quite similar but for different audiences.

Anita.



[Nicki Berry](#)

12:02pm 16 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

We use RARPA for both accredited and non-accredited provision. For both, we use portfolios as part of the final stage of the RARPA process - bringing together evidence of achievement. Rightly or wrongly, we don't think about the value of the portfolio (electronic or otherwise) as something that learners might want to use later, for employment or study applications. This is something that your abstract has made me think about.

Are there any Open Source ePortfolio platforms that students can use independently of an institution or provider, so that they can build it up themselves and give future employers or institutions read-access to?



[Maxine Armstrong](#)

3:57pm 22 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila, we use Blackboard as the VLE at my university, but do not have a specific eportfolio component. Some programmes have worked around this by using Campus Pack journals. But they are not very well suited to the task. Another problem is that when students leave they no longer have access to them and they are not transferable. So I

would be very interested to see how other institutions implement them and what tools they use.



[Laila Burton](#)

9:01pm 24 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for all the comments, suggestions and questions - it's given me lots of food for thought.

An issue with many of the tools I have looked at is problems with transferability after a student graduates. One of the tools that seems to address this is WordPress, a flexible open source e-portfolio platform that students can continue to use after they graduate. It also allows them to pull in their previous learning and development from their work and study, which is particularly important for my University. Despite WordPress being referred to widely in recent literature on technology for employability in HE there is a surprising lack of case studies of its use in the UK. I'm uncovering some examples of innovative practice in the UK and US though.

I came across an interesting article by Janet Strivens

(<http://www.joomag.com/magazine/rapport/0727239001439797282?short>) when I first started this project, in which she described three types of portfolio:

- ▶ Type A is used when students need to capture their experiences in narrative format (often referred to as a 'showcasing e-portfolio') and is common in North America;
- ▶ Type B is often used in vocational courses to demonstrate competencies and how these have developed, normally using proformas or frameworks;
- ▶ Type C is similar to Type B, but is solely focused on capturing achievement (i.e. digital badges), rather than the process the learner goes through.

WordPress seems to be well suited to the Type A e-portfolios and would be particularly relevant in my context. I would be interested to know if any of the e-portfolios you're aware of/ involved in align with the three types Janet Strivens describes.



[Chris Gray](#)

8:16pm 26 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Laila

I've used one formal proprietary e-portfolio system before, which was very comprehensive, yet was more of a learner management tool rather than a user friendly student e-portfolio tool in which learners could intuitively upload evidence and manage their own portfolio.

I'm interested to hear your findings on open source e-portfolios, in particular their ease of accessibility.

Would control of the e-portfolio be managed by an organisation or the learner who would give sharing rights permissions to others as required?

I think that having an open source portable e-portfolio tool could certainly help learners on the start of their lifelong learning journey in the promotion of best / good practice by having a place to keep their reflective thoughts as part of their CPD. If people are used to this way

of keeping evidence early on then this becomes sort of second nature to them and can be significantly beneficial in enhancing their employability.

You mention about Wordpress and was wondering if maybe this complemented with maybe a dropbox account, or other social type accounts, for hosting large sharable files, or files that a person doesn't want to openly share, might form the basis of a flexible open eportfolio system.



[Laila Burton](#)

9:36pm 27 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for sharing your thoughts on this Chris - I've been focusing on open source tools that learners can use to develop their e-portfolios early in their studies and continue after they graduate, choosing when to share it and with whom. One of my previous roles was as an accessibility advisor, so I tend to think about accessibility when looking at different software. The resources I've come across suggest WordPress is very accessible, but to be honest I haven't tested it out myself. I hadn't got as far as thinking about how the e-portfolio material could be shared and assessed, but with WordPress I didn't think there was a need for a file sharing platform like dropbox. That's something I need to look into though.

Our has used WordPress with students on project work before, so I can find out from colleagues how accessible it is. The other tool I've come across is Kloodle, which wasn't mentioned in recent research reports but seems to be increasingly used by education providers.

Thanks again,
Laila



[Elizabeth Frost](#)

5:37pm 31 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

I agree with you Chris, it would be fascinating for students to carry an e-portfolio throughout the whole of their educational lives, from primary all the way through to HE. The user would be able to chart their learning and employers could see value added, rather than just fixating on results. Some learners have had quite a rocky road through education but have achieved a great deal that doesn't just rely on paper qualifications.

Wouldn't that be exciting?



[Elizabeth Frost](#)

5:46pm 31 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila

I have just had a quick look at Kloodle and it looks like a good tool for what you are trying to achieve. Lots of advise there too on different topics.

Have you come across this link? <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/full-guide/e-portfolios> Might be helpful.



[Laila Burton](#)

9:42pm 1 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Thanks Elizabeth - it's a great idea isn't it? I love the idea that students could archive old material and look back over it to see how far they have come! I'm particularly keen on tools that students have control over, so that they can tailor it to their personal development needs and preferences. This is so important for us, as we have such a diverse student body.

The Jisc guide you mentioned has been really useful and I'm interviewing colleagues from Jisc later this week as part of my study, as some of the universities doing exciting things aren't featured as case studies in their toolkit and recent research.

Thanks,
Laila



[Maxine Armstrong](#)

4:54pm 11 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila,

E-portfolios have become quite a hot topic in my university recently. As I have previously mentioned we currently do not have an institutional tool that students can use that links with the VLE (Blackboard). Different programmes have employed different resources to try and meet their student's needs. There is talk of investing in a resource that is accessible to students after they leave, particularly for the art students. So far, I have not been involved in these talks but I am very interested to see what happens.

I can see that you have already been asked about transferability. What happens to the e-portfolios when students leave in your case studies? Are they able to 'take it with them' or does it become inaccessible?

Are universities able to provide a single resource that suits different disciplines? I am thinking of the difference between our fine-artists and pharmacists, their portfolios have very different structures, content and uses. I recognise the three types of portfolio that Janet Striven's described.

Our Commons online space uses WordPress and our art, fashion and media students are using it for an e-portfolio. I am not aware of any specific plug-ins that they use. I know that other programmes use PebblePad. I have not come across Kloodle, so will need to take a look when I get a bit of spare time!

I am looking forward to your presentation on Saturday and hearing more about the tools available and the case studies.

Best wishes, Maxine

[Dr Simon Ball](#)



2:44pm 12 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

There was a superb portfolio product that came out of the Specialist Colleges network, I think originally designed by the RIX Centre. It was designed to be very simple to use (designed actually for people with a variety of disabilities including learning difficulties) and one of the key features was that it was web-based and so could follow the student throughout their learning journey, from specialist to mainstream, college to university, or whatever. It was entirely student controlled and so acted as a kind of 'showcase' of whatever they wanted to add to it, and it accepted text documents, images (so scans of certificates, for example) and video files.

I'm not sure what happened to the tool, I know there was a big rollout across FE, especially in Scotland, and I'm pretty sure it was open source too.

I presented a paper on it which I can share with you if required - however I think the full version is here: http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-14097-6_106#page-1

The home page for the project is <http://rixresearch.org/project-archive-pages/in-folio-introduction/> Since Jisc TechDis closed down I'm not sure of the status of it anymore, but if you contact Lisa Featherstone at Jisc she will know as she managed the whole thing at TechDis.

Best wishes

Simon



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

11:27am 14 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila

Here is a summary of the questions/comments from your presentation - please respond as you wish:

- ▶ In your experience do students recognise the reasoning and benefits behind using PDPs?
- ▶ How do you train new tutors in the need for/use of the ePortfolio?
- ▶ are these plans related to professional accreditation
- ▶ Do students make the connection (at later stages) between their self-presentation, esp professional digital presentation and the development of an e-portfolio?
- ▶ does it support 'badging' from open resources feeding into them
- ▶ How about using eg. LinkedIn?
- ▶ how limiting is the text only approach to personalisation?
- ▶ I'm involved in a e-portfolio within a module that has mandatory template which the students resist using until the submission point - images and hyperlinks are allowed though which increased student engagement
- ▶ Yes, I would be concerned too about the potential for mess. I would think that tools such as WordPress and Mahara, which are quite well-established, would still be around. Might be best to stick with the long-term ones?
- ▶ I recently attended a session about students and personal branding towards

employment. I think the 'suite of tools' would be great for that.

- ▶ many people are using linkedIN as an informal portfolio
- ▶ Great example of being a networked practitioner in reaching out for research
- ▶ b-portfolios? Blogs? Sounds very open.
- ▶ Brinne Nelson has written on using LinkedIN as a social document space - ref to follow on cloudworks
- ▶ alt.ac.uk had a discussion on e-portfolios in their mailing list
- ▶ mystuff - was used at the OU but it was a disaster - suspect this was issues around over secure approach.
- ▶ Whosis the target audience for the vodcasts?
- ▶ We found that for staff buy-in they needed to see example portfolios in order to 'see' how it works. Student's bought into using Mahara relatively quickly.
- ▶ Do you think some (older) students could feel excluded by having to use eportfolios? Some of mine would find it a challenge, I think.
- ▶ Perhaps not just choice of tools but even whether to use a tool
- ▶ One programme at my institution mapped assignments to graduate attributes. They felt that by doing so, students were able 'see' that connection between PDP and their studies.
- ▶ I'm interested in badged courses and e-portfoliios, and this gave me a real insight.
- ▶ Using e-portfolio is a good way to enhance digital skills within students.
- ▶ Some kind of visual indicator would be good - as in LinkedIn when you build your profile and can see your status progressing towards 'AllStar'
- ▶ Very useful to have one common online system when you had to write references 4 years after they had left (so you could remember who they were too).
- ▶ Was that Cloodle? Kloodle? That you mentioned.



[Laila Burton](#)

10:44pm 16 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for posting these Simon and to everyone who commented or asked questions. It's given me lots of food for thought! Here are my thoughts on the questions, but I would love to hear other views.

▶ **In your experience do students recognise the reasoning and benefits behind using PDPs?**

When I first got involved in employability projects about a decade ago many universities said that their students only engaged in employability and PDP if it was credit bearing. Even though employability is a priority for students I think it will still be a challenge engaging students if it's not embedded into the teaching, learning and assessment.

▶ **How do you train new tutors in the need for/use of the ePortfolio?**

As the tool we used on our PDP website was optional and very simple it didn't warrant training, but if an e-portfolio tool is developed and PDP embedded into assessment then training will be a key consideration.

▶ **Are these plans related to professional accreditation?**

The Faculty I was based in doesn't have vocational qualifications, but other faculties' qualifications do have professional accreditation and if any e-portfolio tool was going to be used across the university that would need to be taken into

account. When I interviewed Jisc they highlighted that it may be necessary to continue having bespoke e-portfolios for accreditation purposes, but the aim is for a single e-portfolio platform to meet the requirements for the majority of students.

▶ **Do students make the connection (at later stages) between their self-presentation, esp professional digital presentation and the development of an e-portfolio?**

If PDP is embedded into learning, teaching and assessment and e-portfolios support this then it should help students to reflect on, articulate and showcase their skills. Our current PDP tool doesn't make those connections between articulating and showcasing employability skills explicit, but I think tools like Mahara and PebblePad do by enabling students to create e-CVs.

▶ **Does it support 'badging' from open resources feeding into them?**

I think it depends on the platform, but I understand that Mahara has a plugin that can be used to display open badges. PebblePad can also display open badges. The OU is looking at the potential for open badges to be displayed on different platforms, like LinkedIn, so it would be another way for these to be captured.

▶ **How about using eg. LinkedIn?**

Someone commented in the conference discussion that many people are using LinkedIn as an informal portfolio. With LinkedIn the student's profile has to be shared (I think) with their contacts, which not all learners will feel comfortable doing. Platforms like Wordpress, Mahara and PebblePad allow students to control what they share and with whom.

▶ **How limiting is the text only approach to personalisation?**

If 'text only' refers to the PDP tools currently used then its limitations include not being able to import different digital artefacts (video, images, podcasts etc.) or showcase their transferable skills in different ways (i.e. create an e-CV). During the discussion in the conference chat pane someone flagged that being able to add these digital artefacts increased student engagement.

It think it's also more challenging to personalise the tools from the University's perspective, as it doesn't give the same scope for branding.

▶ **I recently attended a session about students and personal branding towards employment. I think the 'suite of tools' would be great for that.**

For digitally confident students I think this is ideal, but in my context we still have a long way to go!

▶ **b-portfolios? Blogs? Sounds very open.**

One of the tools recommended for blog portfolios is WordPress and I think students would have the autonomy to keep drafts private and publish if they wish.

▶ **Who is the target audience for the vodcasts?**

The vodcasts would be shared with colleagues interested in exploring e-portfolio options. I don't think the report I'm writing would capture the richness of the e-portfolio tools that the universities have developed and the innovative approaches they have taken, so the vodcasts will bring this to life. Colleagues seem keen on this idea.

▶ **Do you think some (older) students could feel excluded by having to use eportfolios? Some of mine would find it a challenge, I think.**

I wonder if that would depend on the platform and its accessibility/ usability. The feedback we had to the PDP website suggested that some mature students already had extensive experience of PDP, so they felt they didn't need help reflecting on and articulating their skills. One of the case studies I'm looking at flagged that some students needed training and support using the e-portfolio system, so training may help those students who need it.



▶ **Some kind of visual indicator would be good - as in LinkedIn when you build your profile and can see your status progressing towards 'AllStar'**

I like the idea of having a visual indicators and I think the e-CV is probably a very good indicator of how the student has engaged in their PDP.

▶ Was that Cloodle? Kloodle? That you mentioned.

Kloodle is a social network for students, teachers and employers, which some FE colleges are using to enhance students' employability skills. I didn't come across any examples of HE providers using it, but at an online event there was interest from other universities in exploring its use. (<https://pages.kloodle.com/>)



[Kulvir Bahra](#)

11:07am 1 September 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Laila,

Hope all is well, thanks for your feedback on my module presentation.

How is your idea progressing now?

Many thanks,

Kulvir



[alex martin](#)

7:24am 2 March 2017 [Permalink](#)

I agree with this article, that education is becoming so expensive. the most unfortunate thing is that students spend a lot of their time and finances in education only to come into reality that education does not guarantee employment or a return on investment. I work with [an essay typer](#) and i have realized that studying and getting a good job are not directly related. Governments should create jobs so that students can get a reprieve.



[paper back](#)

9:56pm 19 March 2017 [Permalink](#)

Great article and highly enlightening. Lots of Knowledge in there too. Thanks

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[Mark Moon](#)

1:00pm 21 March 2017 [Permalink](#)

Life is continuously getting difficult. Gone are the days when graduates were guaranteed of getting nice jobs immediately after completing their studies. It is also a sad phenomenon that despite the uncertainties in the job market, the cost of getting education has really sky-rocketed. I always tell my students at [essay typers](#) to work hard in class but also open

up their eyes to the world of entrepreneurship

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