

E-Portfolios with Illustrative Case Studies (EPICS) project EPICs Workpackage 5: Discovery Workshop report

A report from the
Newcastle Centre for Social and Business Informatics (SBI)

<http://www.campus.ncl.ac.uk/unbs/sbi>

A constituent centre of the **Institute for Policy and Practice**

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ipp>

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

NE1 7RU



Summary

Introduction

This document is a deliverable from the JISC funded Regional E-Learning EPICs project: for more information see <http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/EPICS>

The document represents the final report from Workpackage 5 Regional Governance project discovery workshop which took place on July 26th, at the Research Beehive, Newcastle University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The workshop was facilitated by members of the Centre for Social and Business Informatics (SBI) part of the Institute of Policy and Practice, Newcastle University.

Key points arising from the workshop sessions

In the morning session the groups were asked to consider whys, whos and whats of e-portfolios. There was a strong sense that an inclusive view of what an e-portfolio was and could be was the most useful but that e-portfolios (the object) made most sense in the context of a wider process which was generally labelled as Personal Development Planning and Employability. Other key issues included the ability to support both a learner-centred 'Process' (Personal Development) version and also support the generation of suitable 'Products' (a Record Achievement, for example) version of e-portfolio.

In the afternoon session, the workshop was oriented more towards exploring what a suitable governance structure for a regional e-portfolio/PDP process might look like. The groups were asked to consider the discussion in terms of '5 Ps' which included: principles (What are we in it for?) policies (What do we want to happen?) processes (How do we plan to achieve it?) practices (How do we go about achieving it?); politics (How do we align all the stakeholders?). The discussion became focussed on the Policies (institutional roles, responsibilities, inter-institutional relationships and legal requirements) and Practice (issues of theoretical meaning for educationalists; practical meaning for students; and involvement of academics).

Recommendations

The key recommendations to arise from the workshop were:

- The need to establish a "process and practice" forum/group to explore the broader issues involved in PDP/e-portfolio activities at a regional level.
- The need to gain appropriate engagement of institutional policy-makers (e.g. PVCs and Registrars) in the project/the wider problem and the need to identify a suitable forum and possible resources for such involvement.
- The need to establish and share a sound information base in terms of published policies and processes, and supporting technologies, actually being used in the region.

Contents

Summary	2
Contents	3
Introduction.....	4
What were the aims of the workshop?.....	4
Structure of the workshop	4
Who participated?	5
The views from practice/academic development.....	6
Understanding the current context	6
What is an e-portfolio?.....	6
For whose purposes?.....	7
Why e-portfolios?	8
Why ‘move’ e-portfolios around?.....	9
Towards an understanding of the characteristics of the ‘solution’	10
Recommendations.....	12
Appendix A - Workshop Agenda	13
Appendix B - Invite to the workshop and list of participants	14

Introduction

This document represents the final report from the EPICs Workpackage 5 e-portfolio project discovery workshop which took place on July 26th, at the Research Beehive, Newcastle University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

What were the aims of the workshop?

The workshop was intended to be dynamic and interactive, broadly aiming to ‘discover’ the issues of development and implementation of information sharing e-portfolios in the North East with the intention that this would inform the development and governance requirements for a regional e-portfolio(s).

The aims of the workshop were to:

- find out what e-portfolio/PDP and related developments are going on in the North East
- explore the practice and management requirements for an e-portfolio(s) (and other related initiatives e.g. PDP systems) at a regional level (see footnote)
- identify the legal powers and responsibilities requirements for the implementation of information sharing e-portfolios
- identify potential drivers and barriers to e-portfolios within and between FE/HE institutions
- identify the technical drivers, barriers in the technical implementation of regional e-portfolio systems
- reach a proposed outline consensus of the way forward for regional e-portfolios in the North East

Structure of the workshop

The workshop was facilitated by members of the Centre for Social and Business Informatics (SBI) part of the Institute of Policy and Practice, Newcastle University (Rob Wilson, James Cornford and Susan Baines). The workshop also received presentations from Lawrence Taylor (Northumbria University – Project Manager) and Jamie Thompson (Northumbria University – Academic Development/PDP facilitator). The main parts of the day were structured into two breakout sessions followed by plenary sessions (see Appendix A).

Who participated?

The workshop had twenty participants from the FE and HE sector ranging across all the HE institutions in the region and with representatives from three FE colleges (other FE colleges were represented in part by the JISC funded OWL project). The majority of participants had some role in /interest in academic practice development. There were a smaller group of participants who could be broadly described as technical (see Appendix B for invitation and list of attendees). This mix was a key factor in the directions the discussions took during the breakout sessions.

The views from practice/academic development (morning session)

Understanding the current context

Setting the scene a number of comments both from the presenters and the floor described a range of work going on in the region (e.g the ASPIRE project), within the JISC e-learning programme and more widely – a comment from one of presenters was that everyone in the programme was “*struggling to some extent*”. A recent e-portfolio event in Nottingham had emphasised that an e-portfolio “*needs to be ‘life-wide’ as well as life-long – to embrace all sorts of experience*” and that “*we needed to build an IT system that is not like any other IT system, [it has to be] non-proprietary and non-deterministic*”.

The breakout sessions in the morning focussed on the broad questions of whats, whys and hows of e-portfolios. The participants were split into three groups – two looking from the perspective of two local institutions with established existing relationships (City of Sunderland College/Sunderland University and Stockton Riverside College and Teesside University). The remaining group was made up participants from Northumbria, Durham and Newcastle Universities.

What is an e-portfolio?

The ‘what’ became a discussion about the emerging sense that in EPICs there appeared to be a received over-emphasis on ‘technical’ solutions to underdefined understanding of the challenges. There was a strong sense of a cultural divide, not necessarily hostile but often leading to misunderstandings, between the technology developers and implementers and those primarily concerned with teaching, learning and assessment or admissions, progression and careers. One view was that “*we don’t want techies driving the system.*” Another participant, who had come with a technical colleague, referred to having “*brought the cultural conflict with me*”. These issues were developed through a discussion in one group about what the ‘E’ in e-portfolio stood for, could or should stand for. Specific suggestions included: Educational, Experience, Engagement, Evidence and Endeavour as well as Electronic.

In all the groups this led to a discussion about what was in ‘bounds’ for an e-portfolio and the relationships with other developments such as lifelong learning, PDP, progression pathways and transcript information. These relationships affected the ways in which participants talked about the ‘shape’ of a portfolio – was it a ‘bucket to put your stuff in’, or more akin to a ‘box in the attic’ which one would search through? Or was it a series of ‘structured questions’ linked, for example, to employability skills to encourage reflective behaviour? One breakout group saw the portfolio as being, potentially, a tool to support the journey from ‘cradle to grave’, at times acting as a compass to orient and aid decision making, at others more as ‘bag’ in which to keep ‘stuff’, and at yet other points in time perhaps as a ‘passport’ for the traveller.

For whose purposes?

The question of ‘whose purposes’ should drive the process of e-portfolio development received a unanimous response from all the groups – the focus should be ‘learners’ and their needs. However, this notion was usefully unpacked in one group in reflecting the variety of ways in which a ‘learner-focus’ could be framed (thus the learner could be seen as a (skilled) ‘user’ of a technology, a skilled practitioner in personal development planning, a ‘client’ of a group of professionals, a ‘customer’ of a service, as a current or potential worker or employee of a firm or organisation, a student of a subject, a life-long-learner or someone seeking accreditation or a right of passage. The implication is that we need unpack what we mean by ‘the learner’ and how we ‘frame’ that individual in any discussion.

Another point raised concerns the diversity of attitudes towards portfolios and PDP-type processes. There were some discussions about whether students recognised the utility and point of e-portfolio attitudes ranging from the “*here’s my portfolio where do I plug it in*” to “*it was rubbish at school. Do I have to do it here?*” Some students were seen as naturally more reflective than others and so did not need as much explicit Personal Development Planning; others did not see the point of portfolios at all. The degree to which students accepted PDP/portfolio practices appeared to depend on time and context – a successful pilot of PDP was reported in the context of students using it to support placement reflection/diaries.

The learner centred consensus evolved into a longer discussion about the different stakeholders and the roles they might play in the use and facilitation of e-portfolios from teachers to lecturers to employers. A non-exclusive list of potential stakeholders, excluding the learner, included:

Educational Institutions

- Nurseries
- Schools
- Colleges
- Universities

Government Educational Agencies

- HEFCE et al
- QAA
- Etc.

Private training providers

Employers (current and potential)

Sponsors of students (e.g., industrial sponsors)

Government Departments and Agencies

- DFES
- DTI
- DWP
- Home Office
- Learning and Skills Councils
- Prison Service

Peer Group Members

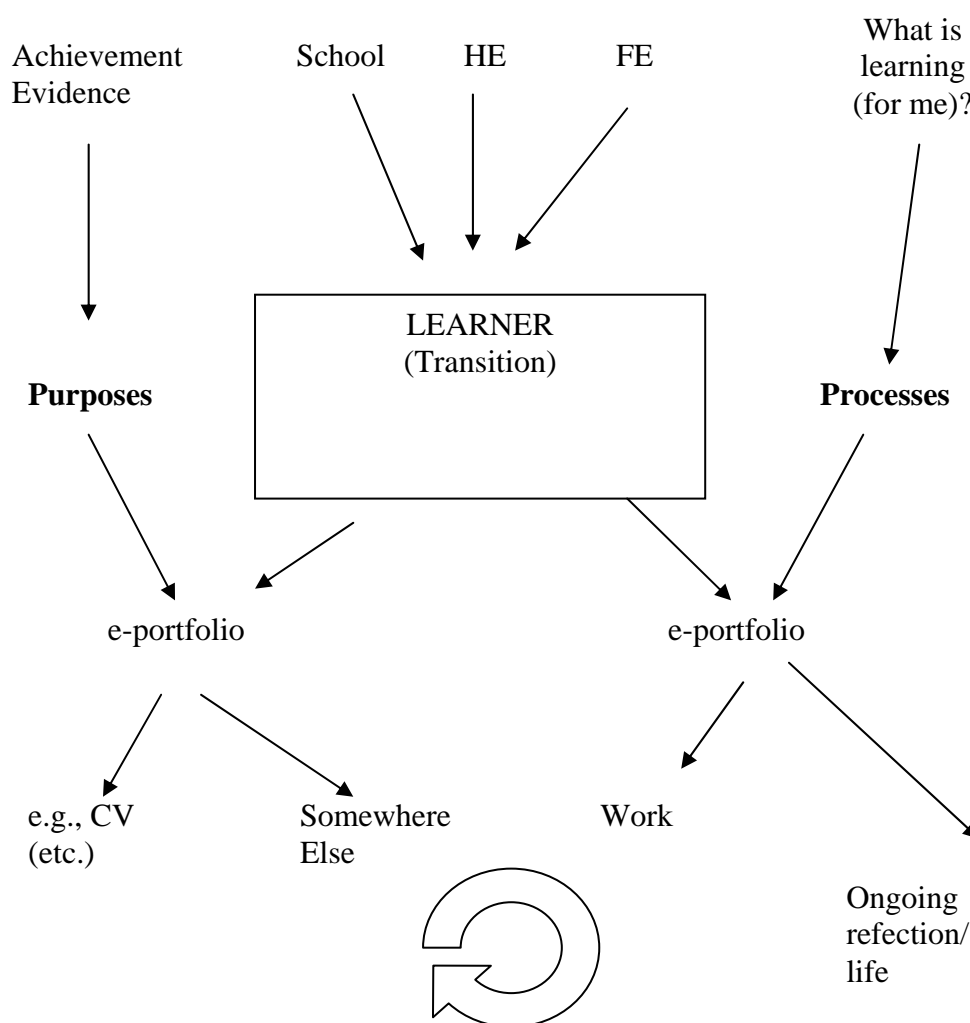
Family members

IT and communications hardware, software and services providers

Within education institutions there is a diversity of stakeholders in addition to the learners themselves. Teaching staff, administrative staff, and IT staff all have interests in the development of e-portfolios. It was generally thought that engagement from at least some of these players was important to the legitimisation of e-portfolio and subsequent uptake by students.

Why e-portfolios?

The ‘whys’ re-opened discussions around the elements of what it could be and one group in particular began to distinguish between the ‘purpose’ and the ‘process’ view. The purpose view emphasised the ‘dead’ information or output which included evidence of achievement in the form of transcript information/CVs/applications. The other view emphasised the ‘*meta cognitive stuff*’ aimed at producing reflective learners/graduates. This was thought to be the ‘important’ stuff and for a significant minority THE reason they had attended the workshop. Tensions were related between these two views characterised as “*authenticated evidence vs all that ‘touchy feely rubbish’*”. For one group these two things were not necessarily separate and could be represented in a learner centred e-portfolio represented below:



Why ‘move’ e-portfolios around?

Comments about moving information between institutions were initially received with some scepticism with participants asking “*what would you want to do that for?*” and “*it doesn’t make sense for our students who don’t move into the region?*” While the project had been established as one about exploring the problems of transferring portfolios between colleges and universities in the region, two important issues were raised. Firstly the regional focus was questioned given that all institutions recruit widely both from within and beyond the region and the ‘regional’ status of the project was questioned. Was it a regional project simply as a convenient test-bed, but without any enduring regional focus? Or was the regional focus intended to be enduring? IN either case, it was suggested, for at least two of the Universities (Newcastle and Durham) the choice of partners did not make much sense as few students progress from local colleges of FE (or indeed from colleges of FE at all). This lack of regular interaction suggested other problems – as one participant put it “*there would need to be a similar understanding about what these things meant,*” an understanding that, by implication was not there on the day.

As the discussion went on however some began to see some sense in terms of supporting progression within educational institutions, between such institutions and between the worlds of education and work. There was an increasing acceptance that “*all portfolios are to do with interpretations and definitions*” and “*the point to produce reflexive practitioners, not e-portfolios*”. Ultimately this ‘life wide’ and lifelong education was seen as “*not just about information, it’s about me it’s about identity.*”

Towards an understanding of the characteristics of the 'solution' (afternoon session)

In the afternoon session, the workshop was oriented more towards exploring what a suitable governance structure for a regional e-portfolio/PDP process might look like. The discussion was framed by five “Ps” which have been found useful in addressing governance issues in similar multi-agency situations: principles, policies, processes, practices and politics. These were briefly outlined and discussed, with the focus on the second, third and fourth, as follows.

Principles

This was introduced as the question of “why we should do it”. Discussion was short as this was substantially covered in the morning session but a couple of key points emerged

- Compliance - meeting targets or commitments set by regulators (e.g., QAA) or funding agencies (there was a general consensus that this was an important driver for many of the institutions)
- It is the right thing to do for students – will improve their learning experience (some scepticism)

Policy

This was introduced as broad statements about “what should happen” (including targets). A range of points were raised including the following

- The drivers are different for different institutions – and for different players within institutions (including different schools or even different courses). Policies need to be sensitive to these differences.
- For some institutions the focus of policy is on PDP/portfolios as a mechanism for internal progression management, while others saw portfolios as also being important in inter-institutional transitions (e.g., from FE to HE or from Education to Work).
- The main challenge (for some) is how the HE/FE interface can be managed (and this appeared central to EPICS). But for HE partners that attract students from all over the country and the world (the 2 ‘old’ universities) the issue of transferability between local institutions is much less significant. With small numbers of students moving from FE to at least some of the HE providers in the region, this aspect of EPICS was baffling for some.
- A number of contributors argued for thinking about PDP/e-portfolio policy in the wider context of delivery and marketing of e-learning – business models for providers may change.
- A Range of legal issues – confidentiality, who owns a student’s record and who has a right to see it, for example, were raised. At Durham this is not an issue for the PDP/portfolio process - it is deemed the student’s property and is not compulsory and not assessed. But if e-portfolios are a course requirement, assessed by internal and external examiners, how public are they?
- In general, there was much uncertainty about how various institutional policies impacted on the development of PDP/e-portfolios. In some cases, there was a lack of clarity about what institutional policy actually was and who made it.

There was a general agreement that “policy makers” were not well represented in the workshop and that they would need to be consulted and brought into the project. It wasn’t clear, however, what the right forum for doing this would be.

Process

This was introduced as the “set of standard operating procedures, and associated technologies, laid down to translate policy into practice”. Here the debate focused on the technologies but quickly moved forward to issues of practice

Practice

This was introduced as the actual practical business of undertaking PDP/e-portfolio work with learners. The main points to emerge were as follows:

- Educationalists who believe in the pedagogic value of e-portfolios feel isolated and unsupported – from their perspective the difficulty of engaging institutions’ IT departments in the EPICS project has been deeply frustrating – a lost opportunity.
- There are major issues involved in getting some types of students to actually undertake portfolio work. In general they will do it if it is compulsory and part of their assessment. At Durham PDPs are available but not compulsory. Most students “don’t see the point – 18 year olds with 4 As don’t think they need to reflect -they know where they are going”. Some mature students value it because they are usually re-accessing their lives.
- Getting academic staff on-board can be very difficult - their attitude depends to some extent on academic discipline – some subjects – especially applied ones - have a tradition of reflective learning but more traditional ones do not. Academic staff in traditional disciplines will resist taking time out from subject teaching for PDP/portfolio work.

Politics

This was not directly discussed. However, there was some enthusiasm for establishing a forum for PDP/e-portfolio practitioners (bridging the process and practice communities) to maintain contact and information sharing and acting as a reference group for the EPICS project (although with a wider remit than EPICs alone).

Recommendations

The key recommendations to arise from the workshop were.

- The need to establish a “process and practice” forum/group to explore the broader issues involved in PDP/e-portfolio activities at a regional level.
- The need to gain involvement of institutional policy-makers (e.g. PVCs and Registrars) in the project and the need to identify a suitable forum and possible resources for such involvement.
- The need to establish and share a sound information base in terms of published policies and processes, and supporting technologies, actually being used in the region.

Appendix A - Workshop Agenda

Regional FE/HE E-portfolio (EPICs)

Discovery Workshop

10.00 - 15.30 26th July 2005

Venue: Research Beehive, University of Newcastle
see <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/travel/maps/>

Coffee and registration

Overview of the workshop

Introduction to the EPICs project and current progress

E-portfolios: A view from the coal face

Introduction to the Breakout – The What's, Why's and How's of e-portfolios

Breakout sessions

Plenary

Lunch

Re-cap and Introduction to the afternoon session

Introduction to the Breakout – Taking a regional e-portfolio forward

Breakout sessions

Coffee and Plenary session

Summing up: next steps and way forward

Practice Reference group for e-portfolios and electronic support for
delivering PDP

End

Appendix B - Invite to the workshop and list of participants

You are invited to a workshop about the development and implementation of information sharing e-portfolios in the North East. You will be either an academic development practitioner, an institutional policy maker or a member of an institutions technical services working in FE/HE in the North East region. You have been identified by a colleague as being potentially interested in seeking to explore the development of e-portfolios/PDPs.

This work is being undertaken in the context of the JISC Regional E-learning programme and funded by the EPICs project (E-portfolio progression pathways with illustrative case studies)

For background information on the EPICs project see <http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/EPICS>

What are the aims of the workshop?

The aims of the workshop are to:

- *find out what e-portfolio/PDP and related developments are going on in the North East
- *explore the practice and management requirements for an e-portfolio(s) (and other related initiatives e.g. PDP systems) at a regional level
- *identify the legal powers and responsibilities requirements for the implementation of information sharing e-portfolios
- *identify potential drivers and barriers to e-portfolios within and between FE/HE institutions
- *identify the technical drivers, barriers in the technical implementation of regional e-portfolio systems
- *reach a proposed outline consensus of the way forward for regional e-portfolios in the North East

What do I need to do?

If you are interested in attending please register for the workshop by replying to Rob.Wilson@ncl.ac.uk and you will receive more information about the workshop. Note travel expenses will be covered by the project.

If you feel that you are not the right person from your institution to attend this workshop then please pass the invitation on to a relevant colleague. If you would like further information about this workshop please contact me via e-mail on Rob.Wilson@ncl.ac.uk or on the phone number in the signature file at the bottom of this message.

List of workshop participants

Rob Wilson	University of Newcastle
Sue Baines	University of Newcastle
James Cornford	University of Newcastle
Paul Horner	University of Newcastle
Simon Cotterill	University of Newcastle
Paul Hopkins	University of Newcastle
Sue Gill	University of Newcastle
Lawrence Taylor	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Jamie Thompson	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Horacio Ayestaran	City of Sunderland College
Doreen Shannon	City of Sunderland College
Moira Thirlaway	City of Sunderland College
Brenda Robson	City of Sunderland College
Susan Walker	City of Sunderland College
Diane Nutt	University of Teesside
Rick Smith	Stockton Riverside FE College
Beatrice Ollerenshaw	Durham University
Gail Thompson	University of Sunderland
Dave Webster	University of Sunderland
Judith Kuit	University of Sunderland
David Conway	University of Sunderland
Keith Sewell	University of Sunderland