

Leap Ahead Lifelong Learning Network ePortfolio / eSystems strand



ePortfolios and Lifelong Learners **Executive Summary**

Kirstie Coolin, Philip Harley, Angela Smallwood and Stuart Wood

Spring 2010

ePortfolios and lifelong learners: Executive Summary

The full report was commissioned by the Leap Ahead Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) to convey the outcomes of its ePortfolio and eSystems strand, carried out by the University of Nottingham's Centre for International ePortfolio Development (ClePD). It is available at: www.nottingham.ac.uk/eportfolio

Aims of the strand

- To undertake a large-scale exemplification of service-oriented IT provision for lifelong learning.
- To explore the ways in which ePortfolios could assist work-based learners with their learning, progression-planning and transitions, and enhance the benefits available to them through Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) services, building on related, JISC-funded development work carried out by the Centre.
- To develop ePortfolio experience amongst regional partners across a variety of sectors and applications, and to equip partner institutions to take fully-informed decisions about their choices of technology for the future.

What we did

- Ran time-limited trials of institution-free, learner-owned ePortfolio systems with more than 1000 users across a range of courses and learning contexts.
- Enabled practitioners (mainly teachers but also some Information Advice Guidance professionals) in real situations to choose freely and imaginatively from the full range of ePortfolio functionality and run pilots of those tools which they perceived as directly helpful to learners on work-based and vocational courses.
- Built technical capacity across the partnership to support the use of ePortfolios to promote learner progression, through cross-sector and cross-institutional partnerships.
- Developed and shared understanding of some of the issues of securing initial engagement, factors in institutional change and barriers to adopting eLearning solutions.
- Undertook nationally significant exemplification of service oriented IT provision for lifelong learning using the eXchanging Course Related Information (XCRI) standard.

Facts and figures

Between 2007 and 2009, 1140 users took up ePortfolio licences, a total significantly in excess of the target of 1000. Most of the licences were sponsored by Nuventive (iWebfolio) or Pebble Learning (PebblePad), while a small number of users were provided with further bespoke solutions. Representing a wide range of learning contexts, the users were primarily work-based and vocational learners and those following recognised progression routes.

Staff from 15 institutions and organisations were engaged in the scoping of 47 separate pilot proposals. The number of pilots actually taken forward was 36, covering more than 11 different employment sectors, a wide range of student cohorts and many different levels of study, from 14-19 diplomas to masters degrees.

The pilots engaged with learners through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Further Education Colleges (FECs), careers organisations and Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) services, training networks, local authorities and sector skills councils. There was a great range of types of student cohort and levels of study involved in the pilots. Five pilots were chosen as examples for review.

Outcomes

Over all, the LLN's funded and supported activities within this strand offered teachers and practitioners a unique opportunity to innovate within their institutions and organisations and to move practice forward. The work gave rise to many positive perceptions of benefits to learners and teachers and enhanced institutions' e-readiness, promoting greater awareness of learner and practitioner requirements and increased understanding of the potential and usability of a range of ePortfolio tools.

Wider spin-off benefits of the creation of the technical community in particular, which resulted from the eSystems work, include technical infrastructure achievements which are contributing to regional development in a nationally significant way.

Research, project reports and conference presentations have informed national and international developments through engagement with JISC RSC East Midlands and West Midlands, becta, DCSF and the VET sector in Australia.





Answers to key questions

Which ePortfolio processes are most useful for vocational or work-based learners?

The pilots demonstrated that there is value to LLN learners across the whole range of functions available within the ePortfolio systems provided, including but exceeding assessment functions. In some cases pilots generated new functionality. The most commonly used processes were:

- Action planning
- Assessment
- Individual learning plan
- Personal/Professional development planning
- Recognition of prior learning
- Reflective exercise
- Showcasing
- Skills audit

In particular, ePortfolio-based learning provides the structure and focus appropriate for the vocational learner to make progress, by combining goal-setting with the gathering of evidence of capability, and providing support for self-review and career planning processes.

What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the institution-free ePortfolio for LLN learners?

- Being learner-owned, they are appealing to learners, enhancing personalisation and self-directed learning and able to move with the learner between institutions/locations
- They are rapidly deployed for any course, because they make no demands on institutions' IT services – ideal for trialling purposes and gaining experience of ePortfolio-based learning, prior to choosing a longer-term solution
- Externally hosted, they offer reliable continuous access for users, whereas institutional systems are sometimes unavailable

But

- Peripheral to institutions' mainstream provision, their use may conflict with institutional strategy and give rise to issues about cost and sustainability
- Employers involved in funding ePortfolios may wish to exert ownership rights.

Is ePortfolio learning useful in supporting Information Advice and Guidance for vocational learners?

Pilots demonstrated a range of benefits to staff and students in relation to IAG processes managed within colleges. ePortfolio templates were developed successfully by Guideline Careers (the Nottinghamshire adult careers service) for cohorts on a self-employment programme and groups of employees under threat of redundancy.

Ongoing major developments across the East Midlands

Specific continuation activities are going ahead in at least five partner institutions.

Capacity has been built across the partnership, supporting:

- Enhancements of both IT expertise and experience of ePortfolio learning, to inform institutions' decision-making for the next generation of provision.
- Further collaborative work in IT, led by ClePD:
 - Forwarding the achievement of interoperability between FECs, HEIs, area prospectuses and Aimhigher in the East Midlands, allowing learners to locate appropriate courses across area borders and making more accurate courses information available to learners and employers across the East Midlands using XCRI.
 - Investigating the feasibility of a Common Application Process, informing national decision-making by DCSF
 - Advancing the development of ePortfolio interoperability in an employer and HEI-based setting
 - Developing a regional ecosystem of shared services accessible on the internet for learners, learning providers, employers and regional agencies, including new services, starting with Labour Market Information.

The Leap Ahead XCRI project, and associated sister projects, funded concurrently by JISC, and into 2010, by Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network, place the East Midlands at the forefront of national XCRI activity.



Recommendations

- ePortfolio-based learning merits implementation beyond the assessment contexts most commonly associated with vocational courses, given its unique capacity to bring together institution, learner and employer interactively and to provide effective developmental support for a wide range of work-based learning activities for disparate cohorts of learners.
- If the aim is to meet the diversity and mobility needs of lifelong learners, the provision of different, single, ePortfolio systems by institutions individually is not serviceable. Institution-free ePortfolio systems, as trialled in this strand, offer some immediate advantages and can provide useful complementary options alongside institutional systems, where IT strategies allow for the possibility of creating links. Current progress in achieving interoperability between ePortfolio systems may offer a further alternative in the medium term.
- In order to achieve a successful institutional implementation of ePortfolio practice, the ideal scenario involves bringing technical support, pedagogic support and senior management support together. It is also beneficial to have sustained input from an experienced person able to coordinate e-learning at an effective level and to impart specialist understanding of innovative technologies in response to changing curriculum demands. A further general pre-requisite is a working knowledge of Information and Communication Technology/Information Learning Technology (ICT/ILT) among teaching staff.
- ePortfolios work best when embedded into the curriculum from the outset and discussions with awarding bodies directed towards achieving synergy between assessment and ePortfolio-based learning could deliver major benefits for work-based and vocational learners.
- In the development of practice with ePortfolios, the enrichment of learning opportunities and experiences should lead technological innovation, not follow it. At the same time, ePortfolio tools need to be placed within the wider e-learning toolbox (VLEs, assessment tools, web 2.0, virtual worlds, etc – with which ePortfolios can be made interoperable if desired), enabling choice based on suitability for purpose.
- Support should be sought to extend pilots of ePortfolio-based learning into further areas of vocational learning, especially where they would enhance employability; e.g. self-employment courses, Guideline Careers and schools, Recognition/Accreditation of Prior [Experiential] Learning.
- In order to plan appropriate and sustainable technological support for individuals pursuing learning and development across institutional, regional and sector boundaries, and over time, institutions should consider prioritising the following:
 - Flexibility, acknowledging the diversity of learner needs
 - Disaggregated ePortfolio tools (including assessment tools) within a wider toolbox
 - Interoperability.

ePortfolios and Lifelong Learners

Executive Summary

Kirstie Coolin, Philip Harley, Angela Smallwood and Stuart Wood

Spring 2010

 PebblePad


nuventive

Leap Ahead acknowledges the generous sponsorship of Nuventive and PebblePad in providing free ePortfolio licenses for the LLN learners.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/eportfolio
eportfolio-admin@nottingham.ac.uk

ePortfolios
The University of Nottingham's Centre
for International ePortfolio Development


LEAP AHEAD



The University of
Nottingham