

Nottingham work in progress paper:

ePortfolios for transition and integration – collaborative work in progress in Nottingham’s schools, colleges and universities

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Abstract

ePortfolio at the University of Nottingham has a strong regional dimension and contributes significantly to national UK thinking through its ePortfolio Reference Model work, drawing together cross-sector practice with developments in technology, research and policy. The Nottingham Passport, a key partner in standards-based interoperability, introducing ePortfolios for college admissions at age 16 across the Greater Nottingham area, highlights conflicting ePortfolio priorities: technical advances, pedagogic possibilities and administrative drivers.

6 key words

region, interoperability, transition, schools, universities, policy

1. Background

Work between city schools and colleges and the University of Nottingham, towards a regional commitment to ePortfolios, began in 2000 with the 'Making the Links' project sponsored by the UK government Department for Education and Employment – the 2002 report on the Nottingham work exploring links between schools and higher education (HE) is available at http://www.internet-pars.ac.uk/PAR_docs/Appendix_A.doc. Out of this grew the collaboration between the University of Nottingham ePARs system - <http://winster.nottingham.ac.uk/epars/shared/htm/about.asp> - and the new initiative for 14-19-year-old students in City schools, the City of Nottingham Passport - <http://www.cityofnottinghampassport.com>. This collaboration continues to develop and has at its heart a commitment to demonstrate the effective role ePortfolios can play in the drive to widen participation in higher education in the UK - to attract, support, motivate and retain students from non-traditional backgrounds, so that they continue to take up training and/or further study after the end of post-compulsory education, first in further education (FE) and then in higher education (HE). The broadening of the definition of individual achievement which can be promoted by the use of ePortfolios is a key element in the new environment which is being created in Nottingham, within which students recognise their potential and take more responsibility for their own learning and development. At the same time, ePortfolios promise a richer information resource for institutions receiving new students and a valuable tool to improve student/course matches, induction, retention and further progression. This work is underpinned by technical pilots for the exchange of information – both between eportfolio systems and between administrative databases - within the region and also with national organisations, as demonstrated by Nottingham and NuVentive for the Cambridge *plugfest* preceding the 2005 Efel ePortfolio Conference.

2. Context

The Nottingham-based work has influenced the development of *Harnessing Technology*, the 2005 government eLearning Strategy for England. JISC, the UK body responsible for supporting IT developments in colleges and universities, has funded the development of a specification and then a reference model of ePortfolio for Lifelong Learning by the Nottingham team; and the Department for Education for England commissioned a report.

Since Nottingham's presentation at the 2004 ElfeL ePortfolio conference, four significant new initiatives have been started.

A. Work is well underway on a new JISC regional eLearning project, RIPPLL (www.nottingham.ac.uk/rippll) – *Regional Interoperability Project for Progression through Lifelong Learning*. This aims to support progression to HE for widening participation by making interoperable all the major existing electronic systems for study-based Progress Files which are in use in the Nottingham area. Technological know-how is being shared to enable all institutions to use the UK LeaP interoperability standards. Thus Nottingham Trent University now joins the University of Nottingham in linking its evolving ePortfolio functionality directly to the Nottingham Passport system in schools and colleges, thereby providing direct transition into FE and HE for the full range of widening participation students in the Greater Nottingham area.

The same project is developing understanding of further transition processes between study and employment (in both directions) and considering connections with issues of graduate retention in the region.

The consortium growing up around the University of Nottingham work now includes:

- The University of Nottingham and the Nottingham Trent University
- City of Nottingham Local Education Authority (Nottingham Passport)
- Ufi/**learn**direct East Midlands (responsible for people outside formal education)
- FE Colleges representing the Greater Nottingham 14-19 Strategy Group: Broxtowe College, New College Nottingham, South Notts College and West Notts College
- Nottinghamshire Connexions (information, advice and guidance service)
- Training providers
- Employers, including Rolls-Royce, Toyota, Siemens

B. At the same time the University of Nottingham is leading a second JISC project for the JISC/DEST web services eFramework. The aim of this is to develop a Reference Model of ePortfolio (<http://www.elframework.org/refmodels/epll>). The two central tasks are:

- to map existing ePortfolio developments into a landscape of lifelong and life-wide learning and investigate user needs across the piece
- to identify the basic web services which, in the form of a variety of aggregations, could meet those user needs.

Please see Figure 1 overleaf for an overview of this project.

C. The project to identify landscapes of life-wide learning will be greatly enhanced by the work of the University of Nottingham's third new initiative, the Centre for Excellence in Integrative Learning, recently funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England for five years (2005-2010), under the CETLs programme. Alongside a range of other Integrative Learning projects in the Business School and History, as well as further subjects across the academic spectrum of the University, this Centre will pilot a range of ePortfolio solutions involving both pedagogic and technological developments. The aim will be to explore the synergies between eportfolios and holistic approaches to learning, the resources required to draw together skills development in study and in employment and to support learners in integrating the full range of their learning from diverse sources during specific episodes of their lives.

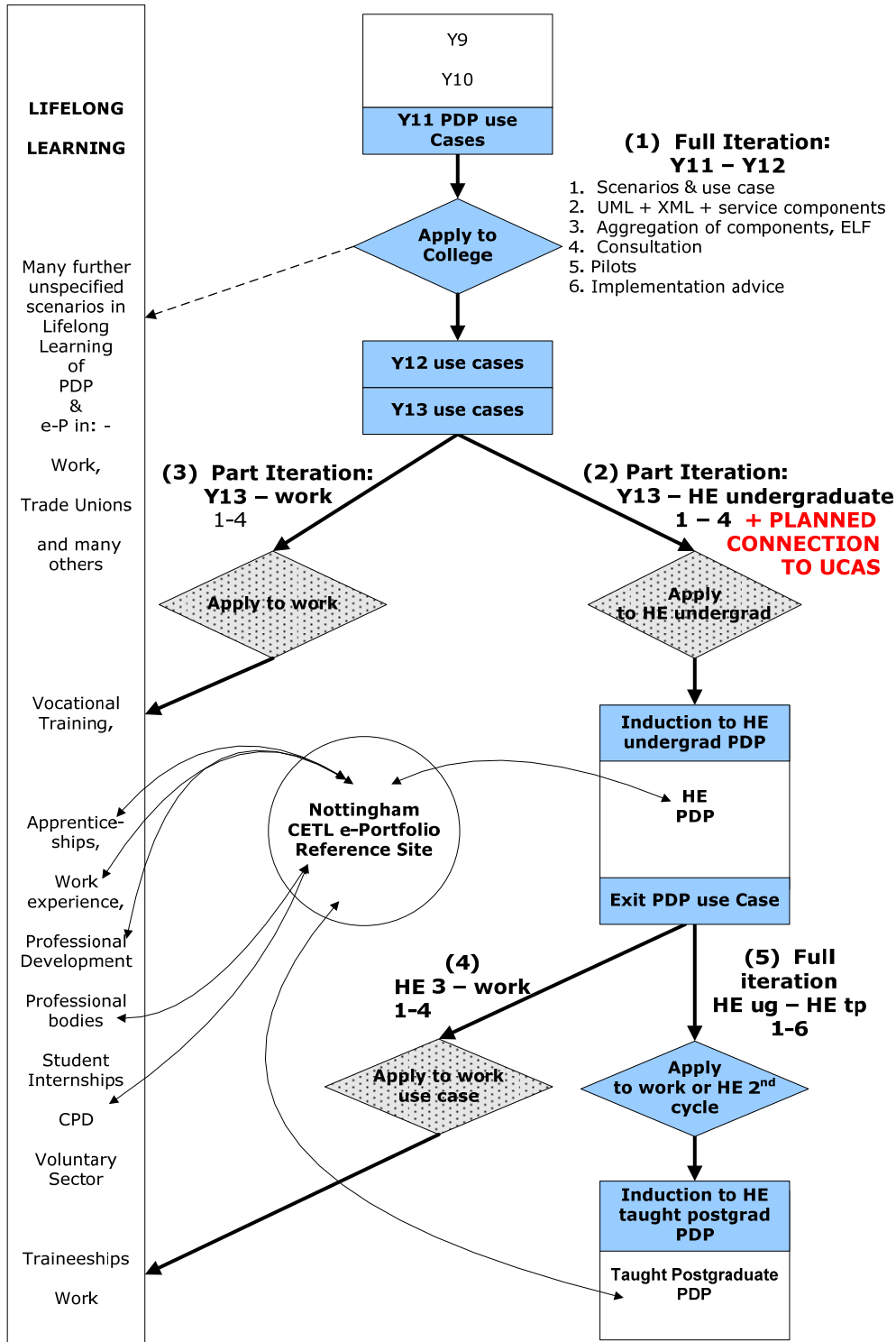
D. The University's fourth initiative is a new International Centre for ePortfolio Development, bringing pedagogic initiatives for staff and students, institutional implementations and advancing interoperability technologies together with a research base and capability, in order to inform the development of future policy. Major themes which will be investigated through the Centre's programme include:

- Specifications for web services for eportfolios – complementing our existing work on eportfolios for transition with work on personal development portfolio services
- The conflicting demands between Institutionally-based provision and personalisation for effective implementation of eportfolios for lifelong learning
- Synergies between scenarios of practice and scenarios of policy
- Individualised and collaborative learning with eportfolios, and the place of informal, mobile technologies within a national strategy

Ministries, practitioners and technologists interested in joint work with the Centre should contact angela.smallwood@nottingham.ac.uk

Figure 1: Nottingham JISC ePortfolio Reference Model diagram

The Nottingham JISC ePortfolio Reference Model project, together with the five-year programme of the University's CETL for Integrative Learning and International Centre for ePortfolio Development will provide reference implementations with a view to scoping and specifying a range of web services which will begin to deliver ePortfolios for life-wide, as well as lifelong, learning



3. eportfolios for transitions – linking them to PDP to raise aspirations, encourage ownership of learning and support student progression

The first phase of the Nottingham JISC ePortfolio work has concentrated on ePortfolios for transition. While the developmental value of ePortfolios within episodes of learning or training (the personal development planning – PDP – element) is strongly supported by the Nottingham team, recent work has demonstrated the usefulness of transition points (applications for further study or employment) in focusing and clarifying the purposes and content of PDP systems for new users. Transitions are also crucial in policy terms for regional bodies. The endorsement of the Nottingham Passport by all of the county's further education colleges (for students aged 16-19 and other learners) has been secured because of its usefulness at the point of transition from secondary into further education.

3.1 Moving towards a regional policy for transition at 16

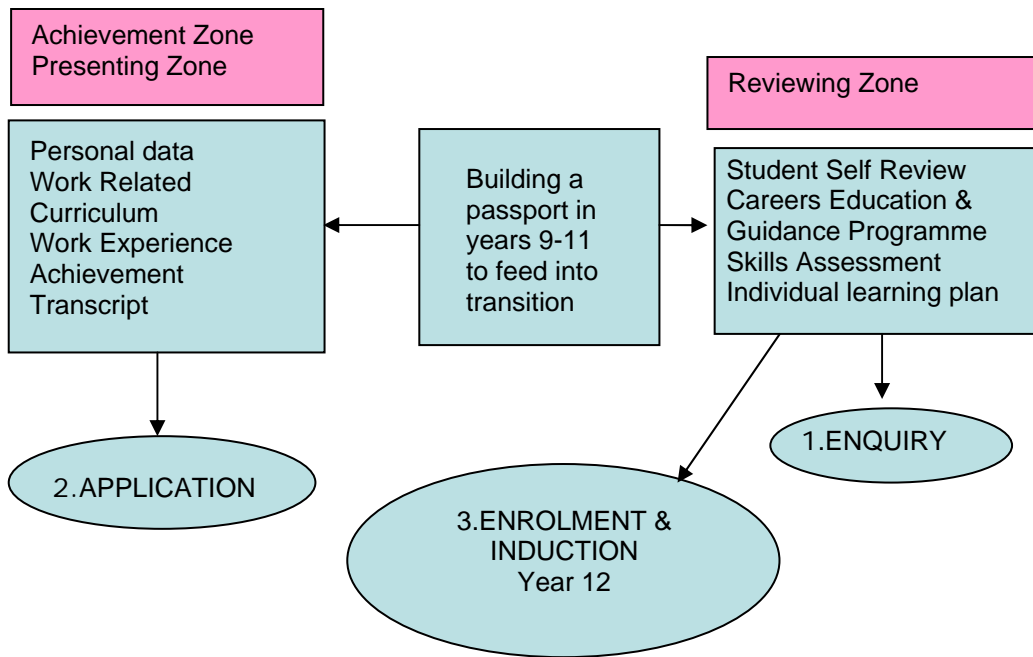
The 14-19 Greater Nottingham Strategy Group is a collaborative group of senior managers representing all bodies in the locality with an interest in 14-19 education. These include schools, further education colleges, higher education institutions, training providers, regional government bodies and the information and guidance service. A key element of the 14-19 strategy relates to transition at 14, 16 and beyond. The transition policy centres on the needs of the individual student in terms of appropriate progression and enhanced induction and retention. Whilst the student is at the core of this development, institutions have their own reasons for wanting better transition processes, including the ability to collect more detailed data about incoming students at an earlier date. Tensions continue to exist around transition especially where there is potential competition for students. In the city of Nottingham this is partly alleviated by the fact that the majority of schools are 11-16 institutions, but this situation is due to change and is not replicated in the suburban areas. There is a fine balance to be maintained between the push from the schools and the pull of the colleges where the demands may conflict.

At the centre of the strategy sits an e-Portfolio. Originally developed as an electronic progress file, the City of Nottingham Passport has had 3,500 students log on in just over two years. The Passport has been updated to include an electronic application form as an interim measure until a new, more interactive e-Portfolio – PassPortFolio – is ready. The existing Passport is primarily used within the city but is making inroads into the county. The new site should reach a far greater audience.

The Strategy depends upon the endorsement of all partners and so far the following set of commitments has been agreed:

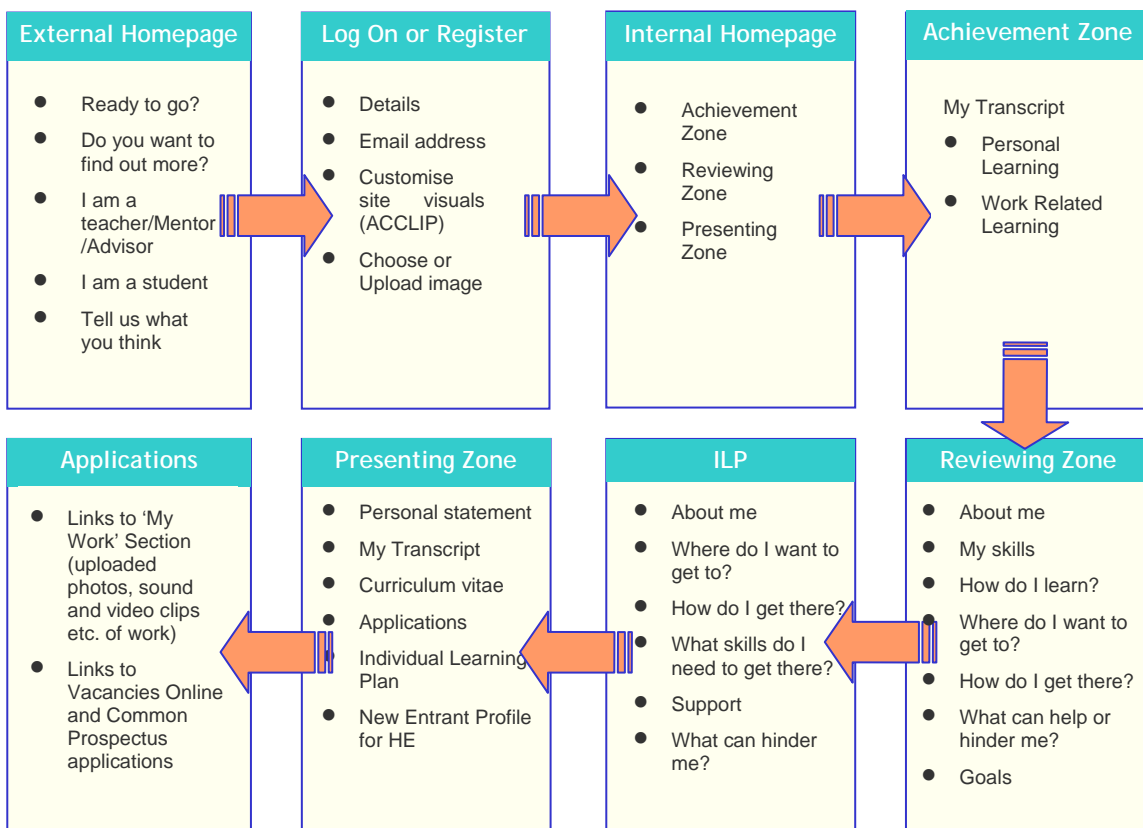
- All institutions provide access and encouragement for students to maintain an e-Portfolio on the Passport website
- FE Colleges and training providers view the Passport as a central aspect of both application and induction and create a designated email facility to receive a common electronic application (Note: A major aspect of the RIPPLL project, introduced above, is to look at and facilitate the transfer of some of this data into a college's management information systems using UK Leap)
- The Passport is an agreed set of outcomes based on an ongoing process. This process should be embedded in the school curriculum and results in a comprehensive individual learning plan
- The Connexions service and local education authorities promote the Passport as a central tool for Information and Guidance
- Local universities' central data management systems will accept an incoming student's New Entrant Profile webform directly from the PassPortFolio passed directly into their portal once a place on a course has been confirmed

The transition process between key stage 4 and FE offers three discreet but related phases when students will use their e-portfolios to support the admissions process. These phases are enquiry, application and induction. They call upon data from different areas of the e-portfolio, as illustrated in the diagram on the next page.



The PassPortFolio is owned by the individual user and offers three distinct but interlocking zones: Achievement, Reviewing and Presenting. Other users such as teachers and advisers can access the work of their students, but only where they are allowed access by the student.

PASSPORTFOLIO SITE MAP



Where an e-portfolio ceases to be a service for an individual user and a major driving force for using it is to make applications, there is a danger of losing that original purpose. The development of the individual learning plan is clearly a reflective process which utilises a range of enabling services. Its outcome, however, has a far more public audience as part of a transition process. Equally some of the data included in the individual learning plan could be incorporated into an institution's MIS systems. Use cases have clearly demonstrated that there is a need to link a range of systems together. The hard data to be found in an application can help establish student profiles on a college's systems. A college will also need to access other systems which can verify elements of that transferred data. Whilst our project is in part grappling with the technical difficulties of interoperability, it is also attempting to balance the demands of all its partners. These demands can challenge the original pedagogic vision of an e-portfolio as a tool for empowering students.

The potential for utilising the agreements arising from Greater Nottingham's partnership of schools and colleges extends beyond admissions into tracking and monitoring students. In one sense this could be seen as another challenge to the integrity of a private e-portfolio, but it offers the opportunity to pass data back down the transition chain, thus enabling iterative evaluations to be used to refine and enhance the evolving admissions process.

4. Issues

Many issues remain to be dealt with:

- Accessing training providers and employers is difficult unless they are part of a regional network.
- The question of multiple applications is real and arguments still occur about how and whether these should be monitored centrally and if so by whom? Colleges and training providers would welcome this information but the applicant might not.
- The ability to include multimedia examples of good work as part of the application raise the expectation in the learner that these will be utilised in the decision making process. Showing FE colleges and training providers that an electronic application process is more than an electronic application form is crucial to the value given to the e-portfolio. However, the impact in terms of the extra staff time required to be given over to an e-portfolio-based approach to admissions and induction is considerable, if the broader educational purpose, beyond the mere transfer of data, is to be achieved. An application that evolves from an e-portfolio is of significant importance to the personalisation of learning. It ensures that the transition acquires meaning and purpose within the individual's personal and career development. This synergy between admissions and an assisted personal development programme could further support social inclusion as long as the admissions process recognised the outcomes of such a programme.

The nature of the education system in the United Kingdom means that local and regional initiatives will always be influenced by national policy. Often they are ahead of that policy and this project is one such example. One national change which would enhance the Nottingham experience would be the creation of a unique student number which followed the learner through all phases of their education. The Nottingham project has lifelong learning at its heart and can influence national policy makers but needs them to take the lead on creating a workable infrastructure which would facilitate the realisation of the aims behind the Passport.

5. Useful URLs for reference

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy/>

<http://www.cityofnottinghampassport.com>

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/e-portfolio/>

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/rippll/>

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/epreferencemodel/>