

Executive Summary

What we did

We asked the question “what is the added value for the student learning experience, of electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) as an innovative means of portfolio assessment?”

A literature review of both published and “grey” material informed us of the issues and therefore questions to ask. These were put into a survey of placement units. Additional views were obtained in interviews with key staff in institutions that were engaged in e-portfolio development and/or innovative assessment in placement. We reviewed commonly used packages used to deliver personal development planning (PDP) in institutions. We gave access to one of the more common e-portfolio packages to a group of students and allowed them to develop their own e-portfolios, and conducted a focus group to explore their views on the utility of an e-portfolio product to them.

Why we did it

Our methodological approach was chosen to enable us to get a placement users’ perspective on the added value of e-portfolios because we found that the subject area was sparse

The review of the academic literature was to establish the extent of knowledge of e-portfolio use in assessment in general and in particular in placement. The review of e-portfolio/PDP products gave us insight into the capabilities of these systems. Staff who work in placements are a mixture of academic and administrative staff, and we wanted the views of each, hence the survey and interviews. Since it is students who will be using the e-portfolios we wanted to know if they could use them, and if they thought there was added value in using them, hence the workshop with an e-portfolio product and the focus group.

What we found

E-portfolios are in wide use in UK Higher Education (HE) institutions, but there is little information on their use in placement. Placement units do not seem to be using e-portfolio packages, though there is widespread interest in packages that might support PDP/e-portfolios in placement. Units are considering either e-portfolio products or employing Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to support PDP in placement.

In interviews with sites where an e-portfolio approach has been taken centrally by the institution there is great enthusiasm for the e-portfolio. In each case the use of the e-portfolio has been optional but a large proportion of the university in terms of faculties/schools and students have “bought in” to the e-portfolio. However students who had recently completed a placement, while finding the e-portfolio easy to use, were dubious about its utility in portfolio development in placement.

Our key arguments

In the debate on e-portfolios we feel there has been a focus on the delivery of portfolios more than the content, the medium rather than the message. But the academic literature suggests there are live issues about the role of portfolios in learning and assessment. We advise those placement units who have not recently reviewed what they do, to take a step back and assess the utility of portfolios and e-portfolios in placement learning and assessment. There is a need to consider the purpose(s) of a portfolio and the audience(s) at which it is aiming and its precise role in learning and assessment. In particular, to what extent is the portfolio a dossier of achievement relative to a method of learning? Does development of a portfolio encourage reflective thinking? Does a portfolio help the student to learn how to learn? Does the portfolio accurately record achievements? Are these dimensions where present subject to appropriate types of assessment and other forms of feedback?

Our conclusions and recommendations

There is no pressing pedagogical necessity to introduce an e-portfolio approach for placement and in many disciplines there is no external driver for it and few resources.

If an e-portfolio is to be implemented then a placement unit should look to implementing a system for placement only if it is being supported centrally by their institution. There needs to be training to support the additional learning needed by staff, students and employers. But if a package is used anyway more generally, for example for PDP, there are some advantages to using such a system for placement students.

Alternatively, it is practical to implement electronic placement portfolios using existing VLE systems or common tools (e.g. Microsoft Office). Whichever system is used to support placement students one needs to consider the content and methods of assessment.

Finally, we found significant gaps in the academic and practitioner literature required for a comprehensive answer our research question. We note the need for more and more robust research in this area.