Introduction

Individualised Support for Learning through e-Portfolios (ISLE) is a collaborative project which is funded and managed on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The philosophy behind this project is to transform the experience of students through innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Initially, the project was led by Paisley University and the partner institutions included Queen Margaret University, Abertay University, Adam Smith College, Angus College, Ayr College, Bell College of Technology, Dumfries and Galloway College, James Watt College and Motherwell College.

This definition helps to clarify any confusion that may exist over e-portfolios:

an e-portfolio is a product, created by a learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning which have benefits in personal development planning (PDP) and models of learning, teaching and assessment. (Beetham, 2005: 1)

In the same work, Beetham states that there seems to be more understanding, particularly in terms of the benefits that e-portfolios may bring to PDP and models of learning, teaching and assessment. He further suggests,

that behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesising, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. Gray (2008:6)

This reinforces the view that e-portfolios have the potential to promote learning and encourage personal development and digital identity by supporting the learning process, the product of learning and the transition of learners at various stages of the
lifelong and life-wide journey. (Barrett and Carney, 2005; ISLE, 2005; JISC, 2008; Ward and Grant, 2007)

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in the potential of e-portfolios to support more student-centred and personalised forms of learning. This has been encouraged by national strategies for e-learning, the Scottish Funding Council, the QAA, and other initiatives in support of lifelong and personalised learning. The benefits that electronic portfolios may bring to PDP and the benefits gained from these types of models of learning, teaching and assessment were the primary drivers behind QMU’s decision to become an institutional partner in this collaborative project.

**Keywords:** Learning, teaching, assessment, e-portfolio, reflection and planning

**Context**

Although initiatives and national policies can drive forward new ideas, these still need to be implemented at operational level. Initially, the management of the ISLE project e-portfolio was administered by the Centre of Academic Practice (CAP) at QMU which promoted its benefits, encouraged its use, and enabled its effective practice among the various schools. Staff personal development planning led the way in the use of e-portfolios, but this was quickly extended into student assessment and feedback.

I was an early adopter of e-portfolios when they became a voluntary part of the assessment for the Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, and embraced the technology, particularly given the fact that the University and the School of Business, Enterprise and Management were encouraging its use.

While experience has since demonstrated that the use and implementation of e-portfolios is challenging, it has also proven to be extremely rewarding for staff and students. According to Nickelson (2004), e-portfolios may help educators to reflect on course content and teaching methods. Equally the use of e-portfolios in assessment increases student reflection (Van Sickle et al., 2005: 497). Their use also helps students to become more active and take a greater role in assessment and their own learning as a whole (Corwin, 2003; Nickelson, 2004). Thus, one of the most significant reasons for my own use of e-portfolios with students was the fact that these tools can promote more profound methods of learning, teaching and assessment; there was potential to develop e-portfolios further in the Business School at QMU. This chapter discusses my experience of implementing the e-portfolio into a module and the benefits and problems encountered when implementing this technology.

**Discussion**

Students enrolled on the International Hospitality Management Programme at Queen Margaret University are required to complete a Level 5 module (SCQF level 8) called Food and Beverage Project Management. It consists of practical work sessions and
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Theoretical sessions. The aim of the module is to encourage students to demonstrate achievement through collecting evidence, recording their own progress and setting targets, embracing a continuous process of personal development and reflecting on their own learning. The assessment requires students to critically reflect upon their own learning and submit their e-portfolio through the assessment gateway.

The practical experience provides students with the opportunity to work with a kitchen/front of house team and practise and attain essential skills within a professional environment. The rationale behind the experience is to familiarise students with real working environments and to further help them develop and refine their competencies and scope of practice. These practical sessions are an essential learning component for any hospitality degree programme.

While undertaking these practical sessions all students are required to keep updated reflective diaries or records of their learning experience. The first part of the assessment deals with the collection and recording of evidence in the specific kitchen or restaurant management sessions, which encourages students to reflect on and analyse their own learning performance. The second part of the assessment continues the process of personal development by asking students to reflect in their own diaries and then use the lectures, tutorials and literature to reflect on their own learning and find better or different ways of improving their competencies as a manager.

Previously, students were asked to prepare a reflective portfolio on their studies and discuss the key elements of their practical sessions using the lecture/tutorials and literature. However, there were a number of issues highlighted through student feedback. For example, the diary was in paper form and students didn’t always keep up to date, mainly because the diary was forgotten until the actual assessment day approached. Apart from asking students every week to produce their diaries in class, I had no other way of verifying if they were keeping up to date, and it was easy for them to say that they had forgotten to bring their diaries to campus. In addition, students did not seem to understand what was expected of them in terms of reflecting on their work and using the lecture, tutorials and literature to reflect on that learning. It was therefore decided to consider an alternative assessment tool for the Food and Beverage Project Management module which was the e-portfolio.

Despite realising that the learning, teaching and assessment of this module demanded change, I had reservations about eliminating the aim of the module, which was to encourage students to demonstrate that they could critically reflect upon their own learning and wanted to ensure that students understood what they were supposed to be achieving.

The rationale for implementing the e-portfolio as a new assessment tool was to try and achieve these aims by providing students with the appropriate tools that would help them to represent their ‘personal learning journeys’ via electronic media. I wanted to upgrade and modernise an outdated module by combining traditional teaching practices such as reflection on an individuals learning with the use of modern technology to improve the opportunity of success. However, I didn’t want to just use the e-portfolio for the assessment, I wanted to integrate the technology...
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throughout the module. I felt that it had to be reflected in the content and not just be perceived by students as being an extra or additional work.

**Example of an e-portfolio**

The main page of the e-portfolio is similar to the main body of a paper portfolio. From Figure 1 it can be seen that there are different sections within the e-portfolio, but it is quite easy to move around the different sections by simply clicking on the area of your choice. There are various links throughout the sections which are links that direct the reader to blogs/diaries or journal articles that have been referred to in lectures.

![Figure 1: Example of e-portfolio](image)

**Example of e-portfolio tools**

As can be seen from Figure 2 the e-portfolio has a number of tools which can help students design their own activities and to record and reflect on their abilities and achievements. For example, by using the ability tool students can record specific skills and knowledge that they have gained whilst undertaking the *Food and Beverage Project Management* Module. In the meeting section students can also record meetings such as study groups and reflect on who did what and who did not contribute to the group. There is also an action plan tool to help students plan for their future learning.
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Figure 2: Example of available tools

What enabled the practice to work?

One of the most crucial aspects of enabling this activity to work was reflecting on my own learning experience with e-portfolios during my post graduate certificate in teaching in higher education. I was not the most organised or dedicated of students and my engagement with the e-portfolio was embarrassingly poor, as I only attended two of the workshops explaining the practicalities and approaches to using the e-portfolio. I was extremely frustrated and disappointed in myself for not obtaining the best learning experience and for not building up practical skills with the technology. That said, after an abundance of perseverance and once I did manage to master my way around the e-portfolio system I was pleasantly surprised at the results. I had designed my own private learning place, where I could present a range of artefacts (photos, scanned graphics and text) that discuss my professional learning journey since starting the module and teaching in higher education. I was also able to construct a personal ‘profile’ and attach a collation of materials from a variety of both formal and informal electronic sources.

I was a convert and instantly decided that I was going to implement the e-portfolio into one of the hospitality modules. However, I was adamant that my own lapse in engagement would not happen to the hospitality students at Queen Margaret University. Regular communication, activity and support at the beginning, middle and end were built into the programme and were critical for students to become fully engaged with the e-portfolio. Not only that, but I wanted to ensure the continuous use of the e-portfolio, so that by the time of the final assessment students were well equipped to design and attach an appropriate range of artefacts and discuss their learning journey since starting the module. Creating an environment for students to practise reflection and the use of e-portfolio was critical to the students’ success. Practice makes perfect and to this end, a number of guided learning sessions were arranged, along with practical tutorials and a structured learning guide for students to use throughout the module. Students were also encouraged, on a weekly basis, to discuss what was meant by reflection, and we had some exercises and practice sessions in tutorials.
Communication with students had to be clear from the outset, as they needed to be aware of what was required to succeed in the module. This was clarified during an informal induction which introduced students to the e-portfolio tool and discussed the importance of reflective learning. The session also included a demonstration on the different functions such as keeping and storing blogs, attaching a range of artefacts - photos, scanned graphics and journals that would help them develop and design their own e-portfolio. During the session students were provided with the details of fortnightly practical sessions which were to be delivered over a twelve week period. These sessions were to encourage students to engage with the process and help them to start thinking critically about what and how they were studying.

The induction session for the International Hospitality management Programme and more specifically the Food and Beverage Management Module (2009) was also a good opportunity to introduce the course team but I also used induction to inform students of my own mistakes and demonstrate my own e-portfolio. I discussed my own mistakes and admitted that I did not get the best learning experience because I didn’t attend the practical workshops. I declared that because I left the design and submission of my assessment to the last minute it was late in the day when I realised that it was not a simple task. My earlier lack of engagement, and hence knowledge, had made it extremely difficult to find my way around the e-portfolio system.

I encouraged students to practise as much as possible, because moving around the e-portfolio can be complicated and time consuming. It is better to build up experience gradually. I informed students that in hindsight, I was extremely frustrated and disappointed in myself for not building up practical skills with the technology. This declaration did overwhelm the students somewhat, but when I emphasised that we would be going through this process together, as a team, they seemed to relax and become quite enthusiastic about the challenge, particularly when I informed them that they were the first group in the business department to use this activity. I also reminded the students again of the guided learning sessions, practical tutorials and the structured learning guide to use throughout the module.

It was explained to the students that their portfolios should demonstrate what is important about an individual’s learning at particular points in time. For instance, students should discuss and reflect on their learning and achievements, by asking themselves: did I do something exceptionally well, or could I have done something another way, or perhaps even better? The e-portfolio should be providing a rich and well informed picture of an individual’s abilities, aspirations and ambitions during the course of a module. This can be achieved by keeping weekly electronic blogs or diaries.

The aim of the e-portfolio is similar to its paper counterpart, as it is produced at key points in a learning journey. However, e-portfolios have many benefits, including the elimination of physical storage problems and accessibility. Furthermore, tutors can tap into the e-portfolio and it has the capability of allowing tutors to track students, aggregate and disaggregate data, and organise curricula around professional standards more easily than doing these tasks manually. This is of particular relevance to institutions with large numbers of students. Mayer & Latham (2008)
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Figure 3: Example of a Blog

Encouraging students to use blogs to host their weekly diaries and engage with the whole e-portfolio experience was fundamental to the development of their learning. Right from the start it was important that students engage with the e-portfolio to update their diaries on a weekly basis. Practice helps students become more confident with the system, as well as inspiring ownership of e-portfolios. It creates friendly competition with students working and discussing how well their projects are developing. Practice also means that students are not frantically trying to put their e-portfolios together at the last minute and actually take the time to demonstrate reflection, evolution of thought, and professional development.

As mentioned, the e-portfolio software allows designated staff to enter a student’s e-portfolio and check activity and performance. I checked up on students at various times throughout the weeks and sent electronic feedback via the e-portfolio. The e-portfolio is very flexible, not requiring tutors to be with students to check on performance or provide feedback.

Further, establishing respect for each other and for the leadership provided by the tutors was another essential part in establishing an effective e-portfolio environment and enabling the practice to work. Staff knowledge and training, an enthusiastic coordinator to start the process and maintain momentum through the various stages of implementation, are paramount to enhance the student learning experience and allow the activity to work.

Experienced staff who have been through this learning process can inspire trust because they know when to arrange additional sessions for students at various stages throughout the module. As mentioned, we held fortnightly practical sessions,
which allowed me to check on student progress. I also implemented guided learning sessions in the middle and end of the module because I could help students who were not engaging. Furthermore, providing guidance at the end is just as important as the beginning and middle, as students need to learn how to submit their e-portfolio through the gateway.

Incidentally, the individual tasked with implementing the e-portfolio throughout the university was available every Friday for drop-in-sessions. Her valuable experience and patience was crucial to the success of the student; she has invited me to be an, “e-portfolio ambassador” by demonstrating my students’ work to other departments within the university. So, team work, a good induction process, clarity in what is expected from the students, clear time frames for additional sessions and communication are the key to getting students engaged and inspired to create their own e-portfolio and not think of it as additional work. Staff must provide consistent advice and guide the reflective process, and they must also make space in the timetable for guided learning sessions and practical tutorials.

Challenges and lessons learned

There were several challenges arising from the use of and implementing e-portfolio systems that might be of use to tutors intending to embark on the process. Firstly, adequate resources need to be made available to both staff and students which include guided learning sessions, practical tutorials and a structured learning guide. Staff and students need time to learn how to use the system with confidence. I found that designing my own e-portfolio was the best way for me to learn, even though I could have attended more practical classes to make my learning easier. Perhaps, tutors could use the e-portfolio to design their own PDP, thus becoming more familiar with the technology and gaining the skills to help guide their students through the learning. Alternatively, tutors could attend staff training, although I found practice was the easiest method.

Another challenge that became apparent at the beginning of the module was that students tended to write about their wonderful experiences rather than be reflective and honest. Early on, they were either writing to try and inform the tutor that they were not having any problems, or they did not fully understand what was meant by reflection. However, after we had continually discussed the key concept of reflection and ensured that students were clear in their understanding, they became more relaxed, less apprehensive and their work began to improve. In order to reinforce the approach we undertook a few practical examples throughout the module, so that students could get used to being reflective learners.

Probably the most significant feedback from students was that eventually the e-portfolio helped them to become reflective and openly identify and discuss their own learning, challenges and professional practice issues. However, to achieve success it is crucial that tutors have a clear idea of why they want to use e-portfolios and this must be clearly articulated to students. Tutors must also be prepared to invest some time in generating appropriate activities and also be prepared for it to take several attempts for students to understand the meaning of being a reflective learner and grasp the practicalities of using the e-portfolio. I found that showing students an
example of an e-portfolio gave them an idea of what is expected of them and helped motivate them into creating something similar.

As previously mentioned, one of the most crucial aspects of enabling the e-portfolio to work was reflecting on my own learning experience. This helped me to be organised and ensure that I had appropriate systems in place to help students overcome their insecurities about the module. Nevertheless, it did become apparent in the first few weeks of using reflection and the e-portfolio system that students found the task quite daunting.

However, it was refreshing to discover that feedback from the second year international hospitality students strongly supported the usefulness of the guided learning sessions, practical tutorials and a structured learning guide. It was even highlighted on module evaluation forms that one of the main areas of good practice included clear and continuous explanations on how to plan and develop the e-portfolio and the reflective process. Further, the majority of students reported that just having the opportunity to discuss the e-portfolio system with a tutor was most useful and provided a greater insight into the challenges and opportunities of the system. Evaluation forms also stated that, although students found the e-portfolio challenging, they also found it more valuable, interesting and engaging than any other assessment tool.

So, there was a significant amount of positive student feedback regarding the use of e-portfolio as a learning and teaching tool and it has been identified as an innovative type of assessment which has enhanced reflective processes. Granted students felt that it was quite a lot of work and quite a lot to learn, but they also found it challenging and most enjoyable. From my own perspective, it was extremely time-consuming organising the practical sessions and even more time-consuming ensuring that students were equipped with the correct tools in order to undertake the assessments. However, I have noticed a marked improvement in student work from previous years since using the e-portfolio as a reflective learning, teaching and assessment tool.

References


**World Wide Web**


**Biography**

Pauline A Gordon is Programme Leader of International Hospitality Management at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. Her academic interests include: investment appraisals in hospitality businesses and teaching, learning and assessment.