Chapter XXXIII

ePortfolio in the UK: Emerging Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the emergence of ePortfolio systems in the UK and the drivers for their adoption as part of the national agenda for lifelong learning.Beginning with a historical perspective, the chapter highlights UK initiatives that have led higher education institutions toward providing ePortfolio facilities for their students, and highlights why ePortfolios are becoming more popular for supporting learners and learning. The authors aim to provide a context for ePortfolios in the UK, discuss the drivers for change, identify some of the issues faced by institutions, and highlight some of the differences in ePortfolio adoption between the UK and other countries.

INTRODUCTION

EPortfolios are a recent innovation in the UK and, although a number of projects at several UK universities have been funded to investigate the potential of the medium, their use is currently small scale and experimental. This chapter provides a review of activity and looks at the background to ePortfolio including the former use of records of achievement and the process of personal development planning (PDP). Several UK government initiatives are driving higher education (HE) institutions towards the adoption of ePortfolio facilities for students, and the issues surrounding this move are discussed.

Unlike the United States, where ePortfolios are often hosted by commercial companies,
with students paying an annual fee. UK systems are likely to be hosted and paid for by universities or government departments as part of the widening participation and skills for life agenda. Some of the implications for individuals, institutions, and the government are addressed in this chapter.

To support this chapter, a survey of personal development planning and ePortfolio use in the UK was conducted. Responses from 26 institutions were recorded, and although a relatively small number, this does reflect the current position of institutions in the UK. As the movement towards ePortfolio use in the UK has been precipitated by PDP initiatives, the survey looked at both PDP and ePortfolio activity.

BACKGROUND

Although increasingly prevalent in the United States, ePortfolios are a recent innovation in the United Kingdom; the process of recording educational achievement has some history in the UK, most notably with the introduction to secondary education of New Records of Achievements (NRAs) in 1991. In this paper-based system, students were provided with a folder in which they could keep a record of assessed academic progress and activities which had not been officially examined: these could then be shared with prospective employers. The information was in a prescribed format, which was designed to give equality in the employment selection process. The current focus on education for the 14-19 age range (Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Tomlinson, 2004; DfES, 2005) has shifted the traditional educational structures in place in the UK (ages 11-16) towards a post-compulsory learning experience, so enforcing the ideology that learning is a continuum. This has in turn made the NRA obsolete, and they ceased to be available after 2004, replaced with Progress Files. To promote consistency across sectors, Higher Education Progress Files were also introduced following work by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which became known as the Dearing Report. Progress files were defined by Dearing (1997) as “a transcript recording student achievement and provision for the planning of personal development.” The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) defines personal development planning as:

... a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.

The QAA goes on to state:

The primary objective for PDP is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning, helping students:

- become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners;
- understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context;
- improve their general skills for study and career management;
- articulate personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement; and
- encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life. (QAA, 2001)

Pressure to deliver the Progress Files initiative within higher education has come primarily from the government and the QAA. Numerous legislative and consultancy papers, including Burgess (2004) and Tomlinson (2004), have recently heralded the advent of the Progress Files as a major support for individuals within