



# Expansion, experience and excellence: Meeting the demand from academics wanting to use PebblePad

## *Stage 2 of University of Derby's Implementation of PebblePad*

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A case study from PebblePad's 2018 'The Enterprise Endeavour' conference

## The Context

The University of Derby has a growing reputation for teaching and research excellence and has strong industry links. This is evidenced through being awarded Gold by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in the first Teaching Excellence framework, putting it in the top 20% of all providers in the UK. HEFCE highlighted the University's engagement with employers, personalised learning, engagement of students, outstanding resources and its culture of excellent teaching, as particular strengths (University of Derby, 2017). The University has also won the Teaching and Learning Strategy of the Year Award at the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Awards (THELMA) (University of Derby, 2018).

Technology Enhanced Learning is part of the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. This is a central team within the University of Derby; however the Learning Technologists are aligned to each College. Recent successes of the Technology Enhanced Learning team are being shortlisted and highly commended by the Association of Learning Technology for the Technology Enhanced Learning Team of the Year Award and winning the European Blackboard Catalyst Award for Teaching and Learning for the University's Digital Practice Baseline (University of Derby, 20182).

In 2016 – 2017 the University of Derby revived its use of PebblePad and was the first UK University to begin using PebblePad V5, with a planned three-year staged implementation. The first stage of implementation was with a small, select group of academics from different Colleges using PebblePad in a variety of ways. The aim was to initially explore how PebblePad could meet the varying needs of the academic programmes. The scope of the second stage of implementation was to build on the successes of stage one and further enhance teaching and learning through varying uses of eportfolios across the University.

Alongside this, the Technology Enhanced Learning team developed a new strategy that included Digital Practice programme baselines as a framework for academic programme teams to benchmark practice and support enhancements to the student digital learning experience. It drew upon newly developed internal strategies, the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Assessment and Feedback Strategy (University of Derby, 20172), and strategic approaches in the sector, in particular the work of JISC & NUS (2015). The new strategy referred to digital practice rather than specific tools and technologies, aiming to provide programme teams with the capacity and freedom to develop authentic and relevant digitally enhanced curriculum.

Interest in PebblePad grew via word of mouth and direct examples of how it had enabled academic staff to enhance the student experience. There has been further demand as academics have realised the ways in which they can meet the goals of the strategies and enhance the students' digital learning experience in more than one strand of the digital baselines.

## The Problem

The demand from academics wanting to use PebblePad grew quicker than anticipated. By the start of the second stage of implementation we had a waiting list of academics who wanted to use PebblePad to enhance teaching and learning. Growth across the institution had increased from 250 users to up to 5,000 users in less than two years.

This presented a number of challenges:

- The number of licenses allocated for the second stage of implementation was not going to be sufficient and we needed to gain Senior Management support to increase the number of licenses available for academics and their students.
- Ensuring that curriculum development was still the focus when scaling up the use of PebblePad across the University. Careful consideration and consultation with academic staff regarding why and how PebblePad would be used still needed to take place, but at a larger scale.
- During stage one, one Learning Technologist and one Technology Support Officer led the implementation and gained the experience of the system. All Learning Technologists within the team had basic training in how to use PebblePad, and received information about the details and progress of the implementation. However, with growing demand further training was needed for all Learning Technologists in the team, so that they were confident in supporting and training staff in the Colleges they were aligned to.
- Continuing to support stage one early adopters and maintaining the enthusiasm and momentum in their use and their sharing of experiences. Most had trialed PebblePad with first year students and now wanted to continue use with the original first year cohorts (now in second year) and introduce it to the new first years, thereby doubling the number of students using PebblePad and requiring support.

- Identified the need to be able to manage 'peak times' with increased queries and calls for support from staff. These times were at the beginning of semester when academics were creating eportfolios and introducing eportfolios to students, and at the end of semester when academics were marking and giving feedback to students on their eportfolios.

## The Approach

We planned a three-year, staged implementation beginning with a small number of licenses, with the plan of expanding on this successful foundation and learning from these initial experiences. This facilitated a ground-up approach where consultation took place with academics to understand what they needed from an eportfolio system.

Our focus throughout was on curriculum development; exploring how PebblePad could be used to enhance learning and teaching and suggesting alternative learning technologies to academics if needed. This approach resulted in a core group of early adopters who are advocates of PebblePad, and who readily share their experience with others. This created the momentum and demand from other academics.

To meet and manage this demand a number of steps were taken. The plan for stage two was reviewed and revised, taking into consideration how our team would support this increased use and what the key milestones for stage two would be.

To secure the number of licences now needed for stage two of implementation, a report was written for the relevant committee, providing a rationale for the need for an internal eportfolio system, together with staff endorsements and feedback from students. We also included a comparison of PebblePad with other systems used for eportfolios against criteria that showed the strengths and limitations of each system. Through this process, approval for an increase in license numbers was received.

In order to be successful in scaling up in stage two of implementation, all Learning Technologists needed to be able to lead and support the use of PebblePad within the Colleges they were aligned to. The Learning Technologist and Learning Technology Support Officer who lead the initial implementation of PebblePad shared their knowledge through a series of training sessions. This included working through scenarios and discussing how to support academics to plan, set up and manage the use of PebblePad.

It was essential that the quality of use of PebblePad to enhance teaching and learning was maintained through stage two of implementation. Documentation was created that detailed key questions and considerations that academics new to PebblePad needed to address about why and how they planned to introduce eportfolios into their academic programmes. These questions were discussed in the first meeting between the academic and the Learning Technologist.

Job roles of stakeholders have been defined and liaison has taken place with the IT Services helpdesk so that they can act as the first line of support for students and support staff. To aid this, frequently asked questions with answers have been written by Technology Enhanced Learning and shared with the IT Service helpdesk. The help guides and support materials have also been updated, with slides to support academics in delivering student inductions. Students have also supported one another, and in some instances Student Digital Champions have taken the lead in running drop in sessions for their peers.

New and broader uses of PebblePad are also starting to be explored, for example developing a 'careers' portfolio, and supporting Personal Academic Tutoring.

## The Results

The increased demand from academics wanting to use PebblePad was met and we now have a central, internal eportfolio system that is valued by academic staff. There is continued new interest and engagement in the use of PebblePad, and the early adopters from stage one continue to use PebblePad with their students.

Taking a staged, ground-up approach to implementation has ensured that PebblePad has been used to support the learning outcomes of academic programmes, and that the quality of use of PebblePad has been maintained during this scaling up period.

PebblePad is being used for varying reasons across Colleges and disciplines and these examples of use also provide evidence of how academic programmes are meeting the requirements of the Digital Practice Baseline Strategy, the Assessment and Feedback Strategy, and the Teaching and Learning Strategy.

The introduction of eportfolios into academic programme areas has given academics the opportunity to review and evaluate their current practice and consider ways to further improve their practice. It has also facilitated the sharing of good practice between colleagues across disciplines within the University. This good practice has also been shared with the wider Higher Education community.

## Lessons Learnt

Spending the time with staff at initial stages to find out what their needs were, and using PebblePad for varied reasons, paid dividends for us. This enabled us to scale up from strong foundations.

The timing of introducing PebblePad to students is important. If possible, making sure it is introduced to students in the first year and used throughout their programme.

Before introducing eportfolios to students it is important to consider how confident students are in reflecting and, if necessary, put in place guidance and activities for students on how to reflect.

It is important to involve all staff members who teach on the academic programme. Make it clear to them the reasons why the eportfolio is being used to ensure all staff members are on board with this way of working.

The flexibility of PebblePad gives a number of options for learning design. Reviewing and refining our use of PebblePad is part of the process as we continue to learn from experience and practice in its use.

## Take home messages about 'Scaling up'

- From the start think about all the different ways in which the system can be introduced to staff and how it can enhance the student experience. Use the PebblePad implementation cards and learner journey flow diagram to help with this (<https://community.pebblepad.co.uk/support/solutions/articles/13000030871-implementation-toolkit>).
- Be clear about what the academic programme wants to achieve and how PebblePad will be an enabler. Ask how PebblePad will be used across the programme and not in just one module by one enthusiastic lecturer.
- Be aware of emerging trends from your institution. For instance, any common issues in ways in which workbooks have been designed or the timing of when and how PebblePad is introduced to students.
- Make sure there is a team of people that can support the implementation and the end users, who are well trained in how the system works. This should be supplemented by online resources that are contextual to your set up that will guide staff and students.

## References

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