

making the case

Encouraging student careers reflection, planning and engagement through online portfolio (webfolio) building.

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Theme(s)

Learning: Reflection, Graduate Attributes, Employability

The background context

This initiative has been developed within the University of Sussex, a research focused university with academically able students studying across the Humanities and Sciences on undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses of study. The lead group within the university has been the Careers and Employability Centre who have developed the initiative over a four year period.

The initiative has looked to develop strategies to support and encourage student reflection and portfolio building in an effort to support careers choice and effective transition to destinations beyond university.

Why PebblePad?

- Enables students to create reflective portfolios/webfolios which they can review with careers staff and choose to use with recruiters in a secure manner.
- Promotes careers related aspects of self-reflection and analysis in a social networking environment.

The purpose

Purpose for students

- Using webfolios to identify, market, and translate skills and abilities to recruiters beyond university.
- Using webfolios to record, reflect upon, and thus identify, skills gaps and opportunities.
- Encouraging the take-up of new activities for ongoing portfolio development.

Purpose for the university

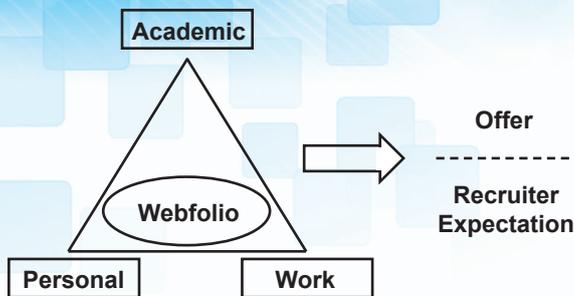
- Promote Personal Development Planning (PDP) and a life-wide approach to student employability.
- Encourage and enable processes for students to record and gain recognition for the breadth of their activities at university.
- Provide a consistent, reliable tool for PDP and webfolios
- Constructively add to students' employability, engaging with fast moving developments in social networking.

Our Model and Underpinning Theory

Within the Sussex Plus Initiative we have looked to build upon a range of historic and contemporary theory from reflective learning and careers guidance and employability. This has evolved into a core model at the heart of Sussex Plus where we have aimed to provide a framework to enable students to map the key nodes of influence in their personal portfolios of skills and experience.

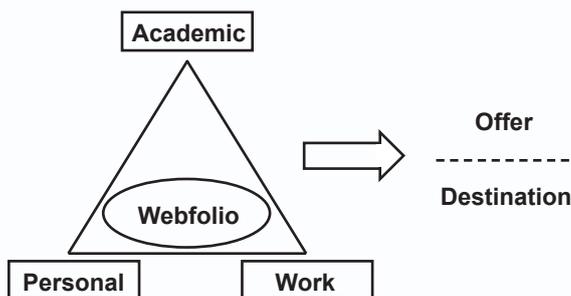
The portfolio/webfolio can be seen as a vehicle to undertake reflective learning, where we encourage the student to either:

1. Translate their experiences in relation to the expectations of the potential recruiter, where there is a clear careers goal.



OR

2. Use their portfolio of experience as an aid to identifying potential destinations, where there is an unclear careers goal.



A range of theoretical roots underpin this model, including the "Trait and Factor" concepts of Parsons (1909), focusing on individuals identifying:

1. A clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, and limitations;
2. A thorough knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; and
3. True reasoning on the relations of these two groups of acts.

(Parsons, 1909, p.5)

In viewing this process as a construct we have endeavoured to provide a strong scaffolding element to the concept of developing an understanding of self. By writing about themselves and presenting themselves to others, whether it be careers advisers, academics, friends or potential recruiters etc, students develop their personal narrative. This development of personal narrative provides the opportunity for the student to 'construct their identity' (Bujold, 2004), which is fundamental in the process of careers exploration and actualization.

The key nodes of influence we have identified in Personal, Academic and Work provide a framework for the student to reflect upon their personal portfolio of experiences and thus provide a scaffold for producing a reflective webfolio. This to some extent reflects processes in the work of Redmond (2010), which set about producing a possible formula for Employability.

$$E = Q + WE + S \times C$$

E = Employability
 Q = Qualifications
 WE = Work Experience
 S = Strategies
 C = Contacts

We have in a similar way set about producing a formulaic model for the construction of webfolio based narratives in relation to careers expectations and destinations.

Within our concept of nodes of influence we also consider ideas from the application of chaos theory in careers guidance (Bright & Pryor, 2005) in terms of considering attractors. Here we provide a focus point for students considering attractors in relation to Personal, Academic and Work related experiences and encourage students to look for overall learning and meaning in translating their portfolios into offers.

We particularly wish to engender an environment and process through which we can encourage students to develop meaning through reflection considering the work of Moon (1999, p 23):

We reflect in order to:

- Consider the process of our own learning – a process of metacognition
- Critically review something - our own behaviour, that of others or the product of behaviour (e.g. an essay, book, painting etc.)
- Build theory from observations: we draw theory from generalisations - sometimes in practical situations, sometimes in thoughts or a mixture of the two
- Engage in personal or self development
- Make decisions or resolve uncertainty ...
- Empower or emancipate ourselves as individuals (and then it is close to self-development) or to empower/emancipate ourselves within the context of our social groups.

Essential to this process is also the concept of 'critical thinking' and epistemology through 'metacritique' identified by Barnett (1997).

Process Facilitation and Monitoring

The key processes through Sussex Plus and PebblePad are:

- Engaging with students through a variety of marketing, online promotion and 1:1 as well as group activities. Through these activities we highlight the concepts of reflective portfolio building, using our model as a scaffolding framework, see below:
- Encouraging students to then create their own reflective webfolios.
- Subsequently to share their webfolios with Careers and Employability Centre staff for feedback. This feedback and monitoring takes the form of short written comments, focusing on the content and design of the students' webfolios, as well as their suitability for careers purposes. Comments are returned to the student via PebblePad.
- Additional monitoring of the overall usage of Sussex Plus/PebblePad at a strategic management level is undertaken centrally on a monthly statistical basis.
- These activities are focused on encouraging students to use their webfolios as a tool both for their personal reflection, but also for pitching processes with potential employers or other interested parties.

The approach

Key Stake holders

- University Students
- The University Careers and Employability Centre

Other Players

- Student Union
- Academics
- Employers

Methodologies

There was no standing methodology at the start of the project and our strategy has been to review developments in education and industry, looking at good practice in reflective learning, PDP and CPD, as well as employability and increasingly social media and networking. We have then developed a strategy and methodology suitable for our institution. This has required an ongoing iterative process where the initiative continues to evolve.

Timeline

- **Late 2007** - Project started with exploration of alternate methodologies for constructing a PDP system within the university.
- **Early 2008 - Early 2009** - A review of possible methodologies and technologies was undertaken as there was no standing methodology in the university. A number of paper based and electronic options were reviewed.
- **Mid 2008** - At an early stage the original agenda was mixed with a second line agenda looking at encouraging student extra-curricular and work experience potentially through accreditation in response to Burgess and HEAR.
- **Early 2009** - Focused on clear business requirements for the purchase of an off the shelf system. A key element of the methodology was identified as a need to use electronic submission of students' portfolios and a number of systems were looked at with PebblePad being shown to be the most mature and effective system at the time.
- **Mid 2009** - PebblePad was chosen as the preferred system to be used as the central hub for the Sussex Plus Initiative
- **Late 2009** - Bedding in of the Pebble Pad/Sussex Plus System working towards initial pilots.
- **Early 2010** - A manager for the project was recruited. Development of the process and support materials as well as marketing for the initiative was undertaken including website links and publicity branding.
- **Mid 2010** - Initial pilots of the Sussex Plus system.
- **Mid 2010 – Mid 2011** - Ongoing pilot and refinements of the Sussex Plus initiative and supporting systems and publicity.
- **Academic year 2011-12** - Mainstream use of the Sussex Plus initiative

Current and Ongoing Development projects

We are working on:

- The use of webfolios alongside LinkedIn and other Social Media.
- Developing pitching exercises where students complete webfolios and then pitch them face-to-face to employers, who provide feedback.

- Developing webfolio feedback for students from university alumni.

The result

We have rolled out the Sussex Plus initiative across the university and are seeing increasing numbers of students engaging with the resource. To date, over the period from roll out in Mid 2010 to Jan 2012, over 2500 students have registered and used the Sussex Plus/PebblePad system. We currently have over 800 active users in the system.

In addition to these active users who are making a proactive choice to engage with our resource, we have presented our materials across the university in an active marketing campaign. We thus feel that some of the key messages concerning proactive portfolio building and self reflection are likely to have touched a far greater number of students, though it is not possible to provide clear numbers for this.

The impact

We have developed a system that allows students to reflect upon their broad activities whilst at university and construct functional electronic webfolios.

Possibly the greatest impact the initiative has had is in providing a focus point, methodology and language for the Careers and Employability Centre and the university more generally to promote and talk about the need for students to construct broad portfolios of evidence as part of their time at university and for their transition to next steps. This is becoming increasingly important as a result of the growing use of a social media presence for careers networking purposes.

Our evidence for this can be seen in:

- The uptake of student registrations and outcomes from the initiative.
- Our ability to actively respond to the ongoing escalation in requirements within graduate applications and competency based recruitment.

Lessons learnt

What did we learn?

- IT solutions are a powerful tool, but not a total solution.
- You need to refine and evolve your systems - you need to do it quickly and keep doing it.
- Marketing and promotion of the system needs to be ongoing.
- Considerable adaptations to the methodology, to suit specific departments such as Product Design, Media and Business Studies, have increased student participation.
- "Pitching Your Webfolio" student presentations to employers have proved successful learning opportunities for undergraduate and taught masters students.

What would we do differently / What others can learn?

- Look for as clear a definition of the desired outcomes as possible, and as early as possible.
- Undertake effective student research and testing.
- Engage wider staff at an earlier point to develop better buy in from the start.

What barriers did we face?

Early difficulties were encountered in areas such as:

- Student and staff buy in.
- Technology usability issues and providing suitable support for students through individual, group, print, and online media formats.
- Strategic choices such as choosing to focus or not on asset functions; or a more tailored and tightly defined approach to the webfolio tool.
- Marketing strategies, between wholesale student wide marketing v special projects and specific groups or something more mixed.

Each of these issues can be and have been progressively addressed.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- PebblePad has provided us with an off the shelf backbone to allow us to develop a methodology and wider system that is aimed at helping develop students' employability.
- PebblePad has sought to develop and update their systems to evolve the usability for students and institutions.

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