

The practicability of ePortfolio for Lifelong Learning

“...this is a really important point, we will have to re-engineer the data so that wherever you are in the education system the individual learner can demonstrate to another institution, an employer, or to a parent, what they have done, how they are succeeding and who they are. (Michael Stevenson head of DfES Technical Group January 2006 http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story_id=2166552)

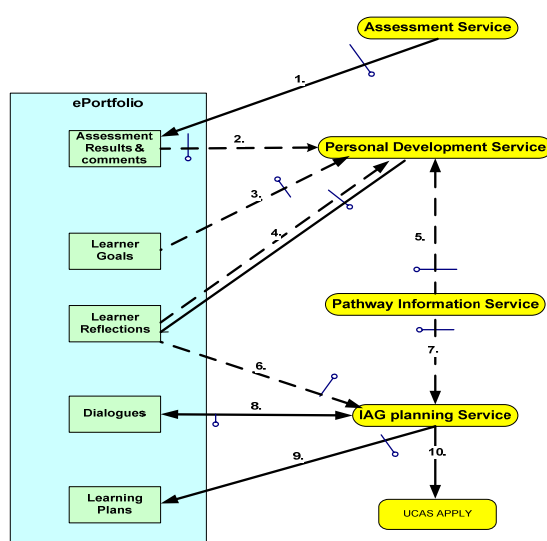
“E-portfolios....are personal online spaces for students to access services and store work. They will become ever more useful as learners grow up and start moving between different types of learning and different institutions.” (Secretary of State for Education, January 2006)

There is broad consensus in the UK about the potential of ePortfolio to improve learning and establish lifelong learning **but is ePortfolio for lifelong learning practicable?** If so, ePortfolio could deliver key parts of the eLearning Strategy, such as personalised learning.

The eFramework offers a way of reducing a complex problem to simpler terms in which it becomes capable of resolution. This allows the complex processes using an ePortfolio to be broken down into strings of components. It also allows the monolithic specifications currently required to pass information between systems to be broken down into lightweight interfaces.

In March 2005 JISC funded a Reference Model of ePortfolio in terms of the eFramework. The working definition is that: - “ePortfolio is best defined in terms of the services making use of it”. This goes with the grain of many practitioners who see the process of using ePortfolio as often being more important than the product itself.

The University of Nottingham has supported the development of a “passport” of information that students can take with them from school to college and into university. In schools and colleges the development and execution of “Individual Learning Plans” are a key part of the process of preparing a student for the transition to college, university or work. An abstract model of the process was developed expressed as a flow of “services”.



An assessment service (1) notifies a student of a result through his ePortfolio. A personal development service (2) recovers the information the student needs to understand the significance of the result, for example in terms of his goals (4) and holds the student’s reflection on its importance. At this point a student is very likely to talk things through with his friends: the Reference Model has been useful in identifying such gaps. The student makes some of his reflection available to an advisor and negotiates a plan, in this instance to apply to university.

This flow helped with another problem. JISC had hoped to produce a Reference Model of PDP but this was not thought practicable. By breaking out a PDP process into distinct service domains it became possible to scope the web services required for each domain and therefore for the process. The abstract model could be instantiated in many ways. Web services and service domains within this planning process could be reconfigured for another purpose, for example private reflection not leading to a plan.

In other words the model reduces a problem to simpler terms without constraining practice. Rather, it increases options; for example specialised versions of a service domain or web service can readily be substituted to meet accessibility needs or preferences.

Although Nottingham has proved that information can be exchanged from an ePortfolio in one episode of learning to another, the use of monolithic specifications such as IMS LIP is complex, therefore costly and probably impractical within current resources. The same interfaces between the ePortfolio and each service in this eFramework flow could pass information into the ePortfolio for the next episode of learning, reduce complexity and hence cost. More probably a service in an episode of learning might look back to the last ePortfolio. The eFramework makes ePortfolio for lifelong learning practicable.

The next step is to provide a demonstration of the ePortfolio working with the XRCI Reference Model to demonstrate the viability of the approach for a key part of the UCAS application to HE process and in this way open the way to large scale pilots and full implementations.

More information is available through:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/epreferencemodel/>

This includes a fuller version of this paper at www.nottingham.ac.uk/epreferencemodel/keydocuments; there is also a blog at www.nottingham.ac.uk/eportfolio, to be reflected on the eFramework site.

More information will be provided in early May focussing on how the services described here apply to Further Education

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