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Published

2017

Conference Title

ePortfolio Forum 2017: Owning, supporting and sharing the journey

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

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A Multi-Pronged Approach to the Enterprise-wide Implementation of a Personal Learning Environment

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Abstract

This paper describes the multi-pronged approach Griffith University has been undertaking in its implementation of an enterprise-wide ePortfolio platform (i.e. Personal Learning Environment). At the heart of the multi-faceted approach is a culture of collaboration between academic groups, the central learning and teaching unit, technology services, careers and employment and student success. A key principle guiding this approach has been facilitation of the sharing of ideas and resources from the identification of user requirements, to the integration across courses and programs. Together, four streams of activities have been implemented which include: embedding within the curriculum by academics, enhancing University employability strategies, engaging students through extracurricular connections and embedding into professional activities of staff. This approach is being evaluated, allowing for qualitative and quantitative data collection. The systematic nature of both the implementation and evaluation is providing evidence that will benefit the current implementation and that of other programs.

Keywords: *personal learning environment, institutional, implementation, collaborative, employability*

Introduction

Across the higher education sector there has been a shift in the scope of ePortfolio / personal learning environment (PLE) implementations from a discipline or degree level, to institution-wide (Posey, Plack, Snyder, Dinneen, Feuer, & Wiss, 2015). These platforms now integrate with learning and teaching technology ecosystems to provide easy movement between them and systems such as learning management systems (LMS). The maturation of these technologies make them accessible to more than just the risk-agreeable early adopters.

At Griffith University, three forces joined, making the timing right for an enterprise adoption. First, an institution-wide vehicle was needed to enable the University learning and employability strategies (Griffith, 2012). Second, in the academic groups, a growing number of academics were asking for this type of tool and lastly, ePortfolio /PLE platforms now integrate almost seamlessly with learning management systems. Integral to the implementation of the Griffith PLE, as recommended within good practice literature, was the establishment of guiding values, including collaboration, to enhance the project impact (Slade, Murtin and

Trahar, 2017). With the potential for all staff (~5,000) and students (~50,000) to use the platform, embracing a collaborative approach in all aspects of the implementation is vital. During the journey from selection to implementation, a variety of questions regarding governance, integration, and support emerged. This short paper describes the multi-pronged approach Griffith took to address these questions.

Collaborative Selection Process

Encouraging transformative change across programs and courses was a key consideration in the identification of an ePortfolio platform. To meet the leadership vision and specific ePortfolio needs of the four Academic Groups, i.e. Arts, Education and Law, Griffith Business School, Griffith Health and Griffith Sciences, a five-stage collaborative approach was implemented. These include:

- Stage 1 - Identify Requirements: The submission of “must have” and “desired” features to the Centre for Learning Futures (CLF) by Deans of Learning and Teaching (L&T) aided in ensuring the needs of all academics would be met.
- Stage 2 - Conduct Desktop Audit: Desktop audits were conducted by the Office of Digital Solutions (technical requirements) and the Centre for Learning Futures (L&T requirements) on the three platforms identified by stakeholders along with the tool provided within the Griffith LMS.
- Stage 3 - Write Authentic Scenarios: Five scenarios were developed by teams across the Groups and within the CLF to provide vendors with authentic uses to address within demonstrations. Vendors created video tours of the learning experiences they created to address the scenarios.
- Stage 4 - Solicit Stakeholder Feedback: Seventy stakeholders from across the University provided written feedback on the resources that vendors demonstrated.
- Stage 5 - Recommend to Leadership: Stakeholder feedback combined with the desktop audits indicated clear use cases for the adoption of one of the two platforms. A recommendation to purchase was submitted to leadership.

Providing multiple opportunities for users from across the University to participate in the selection process, led to broad acceptance of the purchased enterprise ePortfolio platform. In addition, the value of collaboration was embraced during the formation of the ePortfolio Working Party: the institution-level governance body for the implementation consisting of representatives from each Academic Group and staff from central units.

Implementation Governance

The University Employability Sub-Committee, which reports to the University Learning and Teaching Committee, tasked the ePortfolio Working Party with providing advice to the Project. Membership included over 30 representatives from across the University, including:

- technical implementation and support staff;
- academic representatives from each Group;
- learning and teaching support staff from central units (e.g. Careers and Employment Services, Student Services and Library) and academic Groups; and
- the core project team facilitating the implementation.

The working party has been critical to the success of the project through providing insights into the use of the PLE to create ePortfolios and other learning resources in each of the Groups; identifying key support challenges; and recommending effective communication strategies to staff and students. The Working Party collaboratively identified the four streams of activity being undertaken throughout the implementation.

Four Prongs of Activity

Members of the working party co-authored the living implementation plan. Central to this plan was the need to optimize the value of the ePortfolio platform in terms of student engagement and economics of scale, by promoting its use by students and staff within and outside of courses and programs (Posey, et al, 2015). To support this aspiration, the following four-pronged approach to the implementation was designed.

Embedding within the curriculum by academics

A key component of the implementation plan was to support academics in embedding the use of the platform within curriculum. A range of strategies were adopted to provide this support, including the creation of an Innovators Program, hands-on workshops and the development of online resources. As articulated by Haines-Wasson, Wakeling and Aldred (2014), in the implementation of technological platforms, both face-to-face and online support resources were critical to success.

The goal was to encourage student-centred design of teaching and learning practices that included reflective, active, collaborative and authentic learning. Student-centred, cross-course and program-level learning activities were developed to support: integrative and/or interdisciplinary interactions, program-level assessment, feedback from multiple providers and collection of program-wide evidence of learning.

Innovators program

An Expression of Interest process called for Program Directors and Course Conveners (including their teaching teams) to become the first round of adopters from the Academic Groups.

The Innovators Program was a collaborative effort between the CLF and Group L&T professionals. Together they provided design and development support as well as hands-on training with the ePortfolio platform. A sense of community among the “trailblazers” has developed as these Innovators and the supporting staff, innovate, experience and iterate together. This manifests as continued participation in both

informal and formal gatherings during which continued training is provided, solutions to challenges are created and resources are shared.

The Innovators Program provided:

- invitational workshops and events;
- co-construction of learning experiences with Educational Designers and Blended Learning Advisors;
- advice and support throughout the teaching period; and
- formal evaluation of the use of the PLE in their teaching.

Staff workshops

A series of four workshops (i.e. Introduction to the PLE, Supporting Reflection, Building and using Activity Sheets for Class-based Learning and Building and using Workbooks for Formative and Summative Assessment) were provided to address various levels of understanding of the PLE functionality (from beginner to advanced). In the first teaching period over 100 people attended the workshops. In Figures 1 and 2 the roles of those attending are shown. The mix of roles supports the collaborative culture valued by the implementation project.

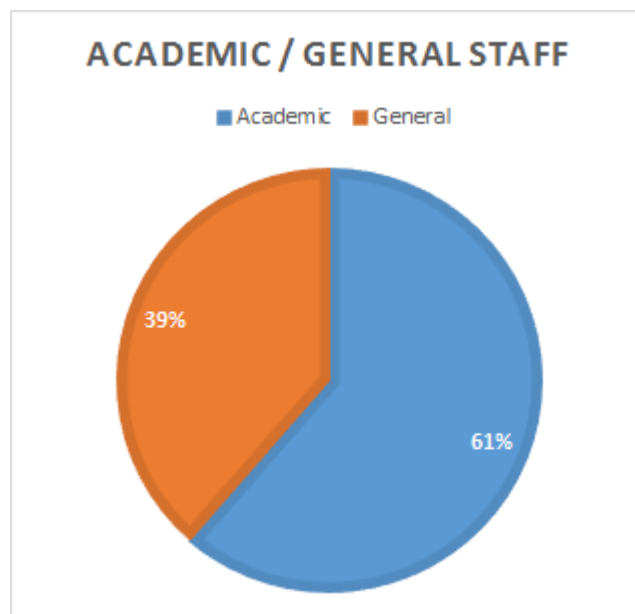


Figure 1: Academic/Non-academic staff attendees of May 2017 workshops

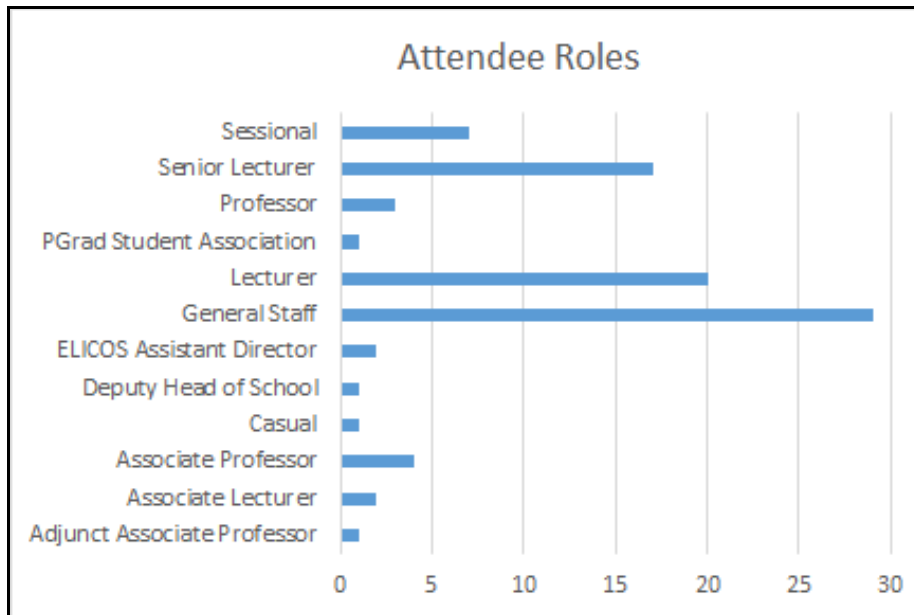


Figure 2: Breakdown of roles of May 2017 workshops attendees

Advanced workshops and online drop-in sessions were run for L&T professionals and other advanced users of the PLE. These focused on collaborative problem-solving, sharing resources and experiences.

Online resources

A support site was developed for Griffith staff and students, providing tip-sheets and videos customised for the Griffith context. These resources were created in priority order informed by feedback garnered from Innovators and L&T support staff.

A separate online space was created for L&T professionals to share use cases, exemplary assets, sample instructional text and videos. This site provided a rich resource for supporting staff across the Groups and central elements. Additionally, staff and students were encouraged to use the platform Learning Centre materials and administrative support pages, owned and updated by the vendor.

Enhancing employability strategies

The institution-wide implementation of the ePortfolio platform provided a vehicle for enhancing many of the University employability initiatives. An illustrative example of this is the adoption of program-level approaches to employability which enable students to track their development over the lifespan of a program. Usually with the aim of resulting in a comprehensive ePortfolio in the final year. Starting in the first year of their program, students can systematically collect evidence of the Griffith Graduate Attributes, transferrable skills, content knowledge and professional standards.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences are considered a key component of a student's learning experience. The PLE can enhance the effectiveness of these experiences by scaffolding the preparation for these experiences; streamlining communication between the academic, student and supervisor; and facilitating feedback and task validation by all parties. The functionality of the mobile

application in capturing timely on-the-job documentation and reflections was a key benefit for students. The University of Edinburgh (The University of Edinburgh, 2016) articulated well the benefit to students for using an ePortfolio is the optimisation of their WIL experiences by the assembling of personal reflections and evidence in one online space.

Engaging students by making extra-curricular connections

The practical side of the implementation team and ePortfolio working party knew that all academics would not be able to implement the use of the PLE right away. To address this, strategies were identified for using it outside of courses. The *About Me* ePortfolio creation challenge (originally called the *Remarkable Me Challenge*) was one strategy identified during a review of implementation strategies from across the sector. Two universities, one in the England (Plymouth University) and one in the United States (Portland State University), identified a similar offering as part of their outreach to students outside of courses. The design of the *About Me* challenge was influenced by good practice strategies highlighted by these institutions. At the end of the first year, a total of three cumulative challenges (one per teaching period) will be offered to expose students to the functionality available within the ePortfolio platform and to support them in developing their sense of professional identity.

Outreach to a variety of student programs, services, organisations, associations and clubs has begun to increase awareness of the *About Me* challenges and ePortfolios in general. To identify opportunities for collaboration in meeting the needs of their membership, the implementation team met with leaders of organisations.

Collaboration with Student Services provided additional opportunities to increase awareness of how students may leverage ePortfolios and the platform outside of their courses. Student-led workshops enabled students to create and curate, an organised electronic ‘evidence base’ of their work. From these curated collections, students are then encouraged to harvest valuable content to create a LinkedIn ‘showcase ePortfolio.’

Embedding the ePortfolio platform into professional activities

While the ePortfolio platform was implemented expressly for student use, it also can serve as a platform to facilitate the professional learning of staff. Providing a flexible and robust suite of functionality, the platform reinforced professional learning practices, integrating reflective practice, professional journey planning and evidencing of capability. It is hypothesised that providing academics with opportunities to engage with the platform, allows them to experience the value and ease with which these types of activities can be implemented. To assist with embedding the ePortfolios into professional practice, a range of strategies can be adopted including: individual professional development planning and reflections or team-based activities to assist in the understanding of others’ skills, strengths and identify opportunities to mentor.

Evaluation of the ePortfolio platform implementation

Evaluation of the implementation is currently ongoing with ethics approval being obtained by the Implementation Team to collect various types of data (i.e. surveys,

interviews and work samples) to inform the evaluation of the ePortfolio implementation. Two sets of student survey questions were approved for ethics, a core set and an optional set that could be used at the discretion of the academic. These questions were developed and refined by members from the working party to ensure that academics using the ePortfolio platform could conduct their discipline-specific research. Ethics approval was also granted for various types of student data which allows the students to opt in to participate, allowing their academics and the research team access to work samples as well as other student data. These data types include enroute data, demographic data and student electronic artefacts submitted in a course. The Implementation Team will conduct focus groups and interviews with students and academics in the future. Finally, qualitative data is being collected from the learning and teaching professionals (i.e. Blended Learning Advisors and Educational Designers) who have collaborated in the implementation and who play a valuable role in supporting academic staff. This data collection will allow for a well-rounded baseline view of the implementation within the University.

Discussion

An implementation of this scope promises to deliver many lessons learned at the University, Group, program and course level. These learnings cover technical, pedagogical and motivational aspects. A few of the key lessons learned are described here. These include:

- Technical - Providing a variety of support channels for students and staff is critical, as they look for assistance in different ways.
- Pedagogical - *'Think programmatically implement incrementally'* is a phrase that has emerged from the implementation. This means start with small 'bite-sized' chunks for the first iteration to build confidence before going bigger.
- Pedagogical - Support from learning and teaching professionals in all Groups is imperative to success.
- Motivational - Provide ample opportunities for innovators and L&T Professionals to share and learn together, and to support and inspire others.
- Motivational - To improve the reach of the extracurricular *About Me* program we learned that it is beneficial to leverage University social media channels, promote the incentives that are offered for participation, ask implementing academics to promote this program, and provide more hands-on information sessions in campus libraries.

Conclusion

As the implementation continues, the University, Academic Groups, academics, ePortfolio Working Party, central units and the Implementation Team will continue to collaborate. Together we continue to build on our experiences by:

- evolving the Innovators Program into a community of practice for sharing implementation ideas and research approaches;
- nurturing enterprise wide collaboration;

- broadening the offering of workshops for academics at varying levels of complexity;
- researching the impact of increased professional use on student exposure to the platform; and
- broadening outreach to more student programs, clubs, organisations and associations.

The intent is for this paper to a valuable contribution to the literature as it describes a well-rounded and multi-pronged university-wide implementation that may assist other institutions with various aspects of their own. The various stages in this implementation and the inclusion of a large number of staff from across the university has assisted with the development of processes necessary to implement across the University.

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Biography

Professor Heidi Blair

Professor Heidi Blair has served as the Deputy Director of the Centre for Learning Futures at Griffith University since October 2015. In her role, she leads projects that support academics in the design, development and implementation of student-centered learning experiences as well as professional learning opportunities. She is passionate about leveraging existing tools and designing new ones to transform the experiences of learners and educators. Having taught from kindergarteners to doctoral students, she has a broad understanding of learning contexts and needs. Heidi has led the development of a multitude of solutions to meet a variety of learning needs. Prior to moving to Australia, Heidi served as the Director of Educational Technology for the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. During this time she led the design, development, and implementation of the Professional Learning Library (PLL) - an online ecosystem in which educators learn and share with one another.

Dr Chris Campbell

Dr Chris Campbell is a lecturer in Learning Innovation at the Centre for Learning Futures, Griffith University. As an emerging research leader, Chris has been involved in numerous grants and projects around emerging and new digital technologies. Her skills in implementing and trialling new technologies are documented in numerous publications where she has conducted research in online tools in educational settings, including LAMS, Second Life and Assistive eXtra Learning Environments as well as research in technology integration, mobile learning and augmented reality. Chris has previously taught pre-service teachers and trialed interactive and emerging technologies in lectures. In 2016, Chris was a Queensland-Smithsonian Fellowship holder where she investigated the Smithsonian Learning Lab and implications for teachers.

Megan Duffy

Megan Duffy is a Project Manager in the Centre for Learning Futures Griffith University. Megan is leading the implementation of PebblePad across the university, and tapping into her experience in large-scale learning systems implementation and change management over her 15 years at educational institutions.