Preston’s College: Introducing ePortfolios in Work Based Learning

Summary

Preston College’s, Learning and Development Manager, Alison Humphreys implemented OneFile, an E-portfolio system, within Work Based Learning (WBL) to provide a cohesive single solution to monitoring and recording learner progress, which improved both management of data and delivered increased efficiency of staff time.

About Preston’s College

Preston’s College has a population of 17,000 and serves Preston and central Lancashire. Students can choose from AS/A-Levels, vocational courses, adult education, professional courses and higher education.

The challenge

Before this project started in August 2012, the WBL departments used a mix of paper and electronic in-house systems, the fragmented use of approaches made tracking learner progress difficult and affected overall management of reporting. In total there were six different ePortfolios plus paper based portfolios being used. This disparity caused problems as assessors coped with different systems for different learners. Staff time was spent carrying out assessment visits that were sometimes unnecessary if learners had yet to complete the work. Assessors had no means to check readiness beforehand – this created inefficiencies.

Management reporting and an overview of learners progress was missing and with an Ofsted inspection due the college recognised the weakness and decided to implement a single ePortfolio solution.

The activity

Alison’s starting point was to form a working group consisting of people with a range of different job roles to identify marketplace solutions. They reviewed the ePortfolios that were already being used as well as new ones and the particular requirements that the solution needed to fulfil, for example, the need for an established, well recommended product which would work across all awarding bodies.
The project needed support from the governors and curriculum management team consisting of all the Business Support Heads, Curriculum Heads, Principals and Vice Principal. Before approving it, they needed to know that the chosen solution:

- would not only meet the immediate challenges but also support future growth
- would provide maximum efficiencies.
- could provide management with clear visibility on learner progress through reports
- would demonstrate return on investment

Alison carried out the following activities to ensure the product met requirements:

- a thorough evaluation of the product
- spoke to other customers to understand the pros and cons of the product and where efficiencies could be made
- checked that the product would provide interoperability with the existing MIS college infrastructure

Having completed the research, a written proposal which illustrated how the chosen system, OneFile, would meet the provider need was presented to the stakeholders for approval. The management team were happy with the proposal that was submitted and recognised that this system would introduce many organisational benefits such as better reporting systems for tracking learner progress and increased efficiencies resulting from fewer assessor visits and better success rates for the learners. The capital spend was agreed.

Alison explains: “The key to it is to gain the buy in from all the management team. You can’t have any managers turning around to either the people who are responsible for curriculum or responsible for assessors saying ‘No, we will continue with the old system or you can use paper until you get used to it’. It is really key that they understand the system, the importance of it and how it will help them and their learners.”

The college decided to roll the ePortfolio out to all curriculum areas within WBL instead of doing a pilot, as each is unique with different challenges and requirements that needed to be solved. Some of these challenges can be seen in the Childcare setting where pictures are unable to be taken as evidence so different assessment methods needed to be used. Within the Pharmacy framework, in some settings, electronic equipment cannot be taken into the area where the observation is taking place. These presented different challenges which were overcome straight away and would not have occurred if we piloted in areas such as Business Administration. The system was rolled out across all sectors and training started in June 2013.

As so many staff had been consulted from the start this helped to get buy in from many of them immediately. Alison approached key members of staff to “champion” the system and assist with cascading training. The remaining managers were convinced of its value after training sessions demonstrated the variety of reporting systems and tools that could help them overcome previous difficulties and to become more efficient.
OneFile did the initial training sessions with the Assistant Heads of departments and Management Team. Alison attended all of these which enabled her to understand the application relevant to each curriculum areas needs and then cascade the training to the assessors and other associated staff members. When rolling the system out to assessors she took into account the different environments they worked in and the types of evidence needed to demonstrate progression and standards. The E-portfolio usage was extended by delivering technology training in tandem. For example, if an assessor was unable to use pictures, she showed them how to take voice recordings on an iPad instead and embed the evidence into the learner record.

Alison explains: “As a college I think that we were behind the times compared to others, now I think that we are at the forefront since doing this mass roll out.”

**The outcomes**

The ePortfolio has helped reduce workloads across the board from Internal Verifiers (IVs) to managers to assessors. Assessors are pleased with the efficiencies that it brings as they no longer have to carry hard copy portfolios around or make unnecessary visits, as they can check learner progress before visiting. Although it is too early as yet to give finite figures on efficiency savings, assessors have now reduced visit times with employers and as the framework progresses are not going out as often as previously. This saves time, mileage and makes visits more purposeful and structured, when they occur, as the assessor knows the up to date learner position before arriving. Induction time is increased because assessors are now checking through every unit and skills scan with the learner correctly. It used to be a tick box exercise with the paper based portfolio. If the induction is not completed correctly it can’t be signed off so this is a huge improvement in quality. A more comprehensive induction to the system saves time across the year for assessors and learners. Learners complete more of their work on time as expectation and outcomes are clear from the offset. This enables workload for assessors to be more evenly spread across the year and for them to be better prepared when in the workplace, with learners.

An assessor says: “I like the fact that you know if a learner has completed tasks on the new system before their next visit, and it also sends out reminders. I have used the mobile app Nomad to observe a few learners. This will encourage use of video and recordings in assessment, and cut down on the need to write every observation.”
Alison says: “Learners have said how brilliant the new ePortfolio is. They are pushing their assessors now. Before it may have taken a few weeks for marked work to get back to them; now they know that when they send it in assessors are notified straight away so there is a much quicker turnaround. That is really positive for learners.”

Some learners do not have the facilities to complete their work electronically but they still use the online portfolio. Their progress and evidence can still be logged.

The employers’ experience has improved as they can log into OneFile and see their apprentices' progress and exactly where they are up to. They can email assessors within the system to get accurate and timely updates. The employers can run reports and see all their learners regardless of location and what progress they are making. Employers can see what support their learners need much more easily which helps them to complete in a timelier manner.

**The impact**

There were costs to buy the technology and licences at the beginning, however the early indications, estimating return on investment, is evidenced through cost savings from benefits and efficiencies the ePortfolio brought in, such as making fewer visits and savings on paper and printing.

Alison reveals: “We will probably recoup the costs that we first spent within two years. We have increased business as we can now reach a wider geographical area because we do not have to send an assessor out so often. Also assessors can see more candidates than they could before too.”

Timely completions and overall success rates have been improved in less than twelve months with more efficiencies predicted once all the paper and other ePortfolios are out of the system. There is a monthly report for each programme area to look at each learner and their progress, enabling any difficulties to be picked up.
immediately. Management, can also have an overview of all curriculum areas at a glance.

An Assessor says: “I have found the ePortfolio useful. For me it can't come a moment too soon. … I am available to provide more support via email. If a learner has not understood their assessment tasks I can respond and talk them through it. Previously it would have waited until the next appointment.”

There are clear trackers so assessors can see how far the learner has progressed, as can be seen in the diagrams below. The IV can see if there is an issue as well so it is easier to offer support to assessors if required.

The new system has helped with providing evidence for Ofsted inspection as well. The College was inspected in November 2013, so it was too early to know the full benefits of implementing the system, although the increased visibility over learner progress was already clear.
Ofsted commented:

- “Apprentices are clear about what they need to do to improve their work.”
- “Assessors use tablet computers well to demonstrate the newly introduced e-portfolios ensuring that learners systematically gather, record and store evidence to claim competence against their qualification.”
- “Staff are becoming more conversant with the newly introduced electronic portfolio and review system.”

Alison tells us: “We achieved a Grade 2 in WBL which we wouldn’t have achieved if it hadn’t have been for having the ePortfolio in place.”

The lessons learned

Alison says: “You need a system to monitor WBL effectively - if you haven’t got an ePortfolio that isn’t possible. You can’t justify to Ofsted that everyone in your organisation knows exactly where they are up to without it.

You just have to have the drive and the determination to do it and don’t give up. It is hard work. If your business case is sufficient including the benefits for Ofsted and the efficiencies it can bring, the college and management team will have to go for it because they can see the benefits.”

Useful links

Jisc RSC Northwest

Preston’s College
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