

Beyond the here and now: Professional Staff ePortfolio for sustainability, growth, and professional development

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ABSTRACT

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in response to a number of drivers has applied its expertise in the field of ePortfolios to develop a Professional Staff ePortfolio. From a pilot through to full release, the vision for this tool has been to support staff and supervisors in professional development and skill development, and to sustain the workforce as political, social, and economic factors impact and change the world of work.

This paper will examine the emergence of the Professional Staff ePortfolio at QUT. It will describe the approach to and development of Professional Staff ePortfolio. Further, it will highlight its role in a strategic project where it is utilised as a tool to support people capabilities following a significant change process in Information Technology Services and Integrated Help Services. The initial findings and outcomes of the pilot are highlighted and discussed, as well as future plans.

INTRODUCTION

Portfolios have long been recognised as an effective way in which learners can record, catalogue, retrieve, and showcase their work (Kimball, 2005). More recently, ePortfolios have emerged as innovative and flexible tools that add value to the traditional Portfolio approach by allowing learners to use technology as a vehicle for more sophisticated and diverse use of their information.

At Queensland University of Technology (QUT), ePortfolio has been an important initiative for more than five years. The QUT Student ePortfolio has been an extremely successful project and service, which has been running since 2003. It grew from a desire for the University to provide students with more than their academic transcript. There was a recognition that through ePortfolios the University could do more to assist students to make a fuller the connection to: their learning; the complement of skills they had developed; and the connections between learning experiences and skill development over time (Harper, McCowan, Hauville, Moody & Chorazyczewski, 2007).

There is growing discussion around effective use of ePortfolio with learners through teachers modelling practice (Aalderink & Veugelers, 2007), and much discussion emerged at QUT on the way forward with staff ePortfolio tools as Student ePortfolio use became more prolific. In 2007 the Division of Administrative Services (DAS) and the Division of Technology, Information and Learning Support (TILS) were seeking ways to support Professional Staff within the Divisions to more effectively progress in their careers at QUT. The Division wished for staff to be able to be better equipped for performance review, goal setting and planning, and the recruitment process. With more than four years experience with a tool which was designed to assist in such undertakings, QUT was well positioned to develop a new ePortfolio tool. With these needs as a driver, the Professional Staff ePortfolio (PSeP) project was established.

IMPLEMENTATION AND PILOT

Phase One of the PSeP project involved designing, building, and piloting activities. This was achieved through a multi-disciplinary and collaborative approach, bringing together expertise from Human Resources, Information Technology Services, Careers and Employment and Teaching and Learning Support Services. Whilst examining the requirements for a Professional Staff ePortfolio it became clear that the same principles of structure and design, used in the Student ePortfolio, could be applied. The PSeP tool allows staff to enter experiences against skill areas and settings, add artefacts or examples of work, make selections from their ePortfolio to create different ePortfolio Views, and to release ePortfolio Views for others to see. Staff have full control over the information that they enter into the PSeP. Each staff member has their own ePortfolio and information is only viewable by others when the staff member creates and releases an ePortfolio View.

Under the Student ePortfolio model a skills framework is used against which students enter their experiences. Working closely with the Human Resources Department, a new skills framework aligned with QUT's staff capabilities was developed. This skills framework is described in Table 1.

Table 1

This matrix describes the framework that staff are presented within the PSeP tool. Staff enter experiences against skill areas and settings. The matrix shows how a staff member may theoretically build up evidence against skill areas and settings.

Skill Area and Description	Setting	Education	Work	Community	Personal
Communication Listening, speaking, writing, understanding, presenting, reading, editing, interpersonal relations, influencing, negotiating.			5 experiences	2 experiences	
Teamwork Initiating, contributing, cooperating, collaborating, supporting, outcomes/successes.		1 experience	4 experiences	2 experiences	
Problem Solving / Critical Thinking Identifying issues, gathering evidence, reasoning, analysis, evaluating options, finding solutions (e.g. information search, retrieval, evaluation and management).			3 experiences		1 experience
Self Management / Life-long Learning Being self-aware, adapting to change, valuing life-long learning, balancing life roles, career direction, reflective practice.			3 experiences		2 experiences
Technical / Professional Research, discipline or role specific skills and knowledge (e.g. finance, administration, HR, IT), computer and information literacy.		2 experiences	6 experiences	2 experiences	
Managing / Organising Scheduling, time and workload management, managing resources, making decisions, setting and achieving goals, delegating, workforce planning.			1 experience		2 experiences
Social / Ethical Responsibility Respecting individual and cultural differences, citizenship, ethical behaviour for individuals and organisations.				1 experience	
Leadership Motivating and persuading others, allocating to strengths, taking initiative, dealing with conflict, setting goals.		1 experience	4 experiences		1 experience
Business Focus			2 experiences		

Client service, risk management, knowledge management.				
Change / Innovation Risk taking, trying new things, identifying and creating opportunities and experiences, creative practice.		1 experience	1 experience	1 experience
One Skill Area that can be added by the staff member				

The PSeP tool was built in QUT Virtual, QUT’s intranet, and is located amongst the applications that staff use each day. The project pilot involved release of the tool to staff in both Divisions. However, focussed work occurred with a cohort of staff who nominated for the pilot. An important aspect of Phase One of the project was to pilot the tool and work closely with a group of staff. An action-research model was used to inform the project. Project staff held hands-on workshops and focus groups with the cohort.

PEOPLE CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF EPORTFOLIO

As the PSeP project emerged in 2007 and work towards the pilot began, other drivers for the PSeP were also emerging. The Department of Information Technology Services (ITS) and Department of Integrated Help Services (IHS), in the lead up to a major change process became aware that they could make some significant improvements to retention and progression of staff by developing a People Capability Framework (PCF) (QUT, 2008). The drivers were twofold. In a market where highly skilled IT workers were at a shortage, it was timely to look at strategies outside the traditional recruitment and retention processes. The Departments found that, due to the tripling of IT graduate demand over 12 months while graduate numbers declined (Foresheew, 2005), managers were at times unable to progress staff at a rate that matched their acquisition of valuable skills. With the high demand for skilled IT professionals, staff were sometimes lured away to external organisations who could promote staff at faster rates and offer higher pay. There were also benefits to both the organisation and staff in clearly identifying and communicating, in a transparent manner, the capabilities required in various roles. A framework would allow a model for progression in linked positions, improved professional development planning that aligns with succession planning, and an improved matching of individuals to positions (QUT, 2008).

From the ITS/IHS change management processes, a number of recommendations were given, one of which was to “develop an integrated and holistic framework and development program addressing staff capabilities covering generic workplace skills, technical skills, customer service and service delivery” (Fraser et al., 2007). The PCF was seen as an essential foundation for performance management, career development and succession planning of ITS and IHS staff. PSeP was the obvious vehicle through which staff and supervisors could collect, share and collaborate with regard to evidence of skills and skill development. It provided the link between the PCF and the staff member’s evidence of the expected outcomes.

Using the PSeP staff would be able to collect evidence at the points in time that the experience occurs, which could then be harvested for performance planning and review and job applications. This approach would facilitate staff connecting more easily with their skills and achievements, to be more conscious of their skill development and to develop confidence across a range of skills that includes both technical, discipline specific skills and “soft” skills such as communication and teamwork.

Pilot activities

As part of the PCF project, the ePortfolio Service team began working closely in 2008 with a specific cohort of staff and supervisors, involving group workshops and one on

one training. Staff from a range of technical roles including network engineers, helpdesk, and desktop support were provided with an overview of the PCF and the PSeP. The two hour workshops were designed to achieve a number of objectives:

Allow staff to see the value of ePortfolio as tool to support and make easier their progression to higher levels of the organisation

Allow staff to see that ePortfolio is a staff owned and managed tool

Allow staff to develop their ability to reflect and practice articulating their skills through the use of a framework for reflection.

A detailed explanation of the PCF as it related to the technical roles of the staff was presented with an opportunity for staff to ask questions about the application to their roles. Staff were assisted with both hands on use of the PSeP tool and with reflection on skills using reflection frameworks.

Outcomes and Future Plans

Early evaluation shows positive responses by staff to the use of ePortfolio as an effective tool to collect and share evidence of skills. It has also highlighted some challenges for use of the tool with staff, that are significantly different from use with students, particularly around resource development, ownership and privacy, and design.

Staff expressed their belief that PSeP was an excellent tool for gathering evidence. They saw the personal and professional value in using ePortfolio as a tool to collect evidence for their professional development as well as performance planning and review and for use in selection criteria and interviews.

Certainly there is a need to develop many more online resources that can be delivered just-in-time. For staff in ITS and IHS, these could be aligned with the PCF for maximum benefit and impact. Staff would find it beneficial to see a range of examples of reflections and ePortfolio exemplars that provide a benchmark. This would make the goal more clear and lessen anxiety about the quality of evidence and reflection that might be required. It was also evident that these exemplars could be aligned with the PCF and the detail of each discipline's capabilities. The example reflections and exemplars that will be developed can also assist staff more generally where they find difficulty in effectively communicating their skills. To this end, use of the frameworks for reflection will continue as these were reported as being highly effective.

A number of new support initiatives will be put in place. One of the keys to success with PSeP is appropriate scaffolding of staff. In 2009 this will be carried out in a number of ways. Face-to-face and one-on-one support will continue but compliment other types of support. With a wider implementation but the same amount of support resources, a new online module will be developed. This online module will allow staff to work through at their own pace and at a time that suits them, all the ePortfolio concepts, the mechanics and reflective practice framework and exercises. Further and more sophisticated resources to support supervisors will be developed.

Staff expressed concern about prioritising time for entering evidence into their ePortfolio against day to day work activities. This will continue to be a challenge but some models for effective practice are emerging in TILS and these will be examined and expanded in work to be carried out in 2009. Supervisors are supporting staff by encouraging staff to set aside time each week for ePortfolio activity.

In 2009, the PCF will move from pilot to full implementation across ITS and IHS with further consideration to be given for its application across TILS. The project goals will be to further define and articulate the core capabilities, technical and specialist

capabilities and training matrix across the Higher Education Worker (HEW) levels. PSeP will continue to play a significant role. PSeP will be an underpinning activity to ITS/IHS Section-based submissions that capture staff development requirements for technical and soft skills. This assists with justification of levels of expenditure on targeted staff development, allows QUT to make greater use of student employment as more experienced staff move to higher levels, and to retain those staff.

CONCLUSION

Initial findings show positive results for PSeP in meeting its objective of supporting staff in evidencing their skills, their professional development, and career progression. In 2009 and beyond QUT will continue to focus efforts on providing self-sustaining frameworks for that support, giving a wider reach and impact of benefits. Further evaluation, case studies, and longitudinal studies will be important in understanding the value, that is and can be, delivered to both staff and the University. To do this, QUT will move forward with its multi-disciplinary project team model and with enmeshing project activities with other strategic projects like the PCF. An important key to the success of ePortfolio at QUT, has been to ensure there is a strategic vision but to keep ePortfolio learner-centred and learner-focused. This principle, that keeps the individual at the heart of the initiative, will stay fundamental and integral to all ePortfolio activities at QUT.

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