

# Case Study

## Embedding eportfolios into an undergraduate degree program

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### The background context

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Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a regional university with multiple campuses in regional cities in New South Wales and beyond. The University has identified itself as a University for the Professions. The Faculty of Education is one of the largest in the country with four of its six Schools focussing on Teacher Education.

The Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) aims to develop graduates who will work with children from birth to year 6 in primary school. It is 'delivered' on three campuses – Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst and Dubbo – and

the students tend to generally come from those towns and other smaller rural cities and towns nearby. There are a mixture of school-leavers and mature-age students with very mixed pre-university experiences and skills, and their abilities with regard to technology are quite diverse. Across the three campuses there can be up to 200 students coming into the first year level. The academic staff members are campus-based, but plan the student learning collectively via video- and tele-conferencing.

## The current practice

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In the former B.Ed program, eportfolios existed in individual subjects, and students also created an eportfolio in their final year to showcase their abilities to prospective employers. They were created in a variety of formats, from paper-based to iWeb and PowerPoint electronic presentations, and usually shared only with the individual markers.

The final eportfolio often proved difficult for students, as many valuable artefacts were difficult to find from former years. In addition, as students often discarded their earlier portfolios, there wasn't a great deal of reflection on their development throughout their degree.



## The challenge

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*The designers of the new degree knew the value of the different purposes of eportfolios and wanted to introduce the process of collection and reflection right from the very beginning.*

We wanted students to value their prior-to-university experiences, to encourage them to undertake self-directed learning, and for them to document all learning, whether within the degree or outside it. At the completion of their degree, we wanted them to draw on these records and see the value of both informal and formal learning as they reflected on their overall development as a teacher.

We also wanted consistency, and a way for their work to be shared across campuses, both

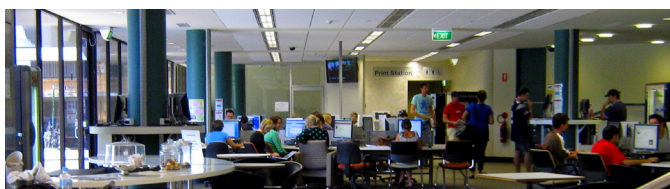
between tutors and students. This was a great challenge, as some of the tutors were highly familiar with web-based portfolios, while others remained tied to paper-based versions.

However, the main challenge was for both staff and students to see eportfolios as existing outside of individual subjects, and much thought and planning was needed to ensure this occurred, while maintaining individual tasks and assessments within subjects.

## The approach

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We wanted to embed the various positive eportfolio processes into each year level of the program to give students the optimum benefits throughout their years of study, and build progressively on the enrichment of artefacts and reflective practice.



Another strong driver was the growing emphasis on technology in the early childhood and primary classrooms and the need for new teachers to be very familiar with the tools of technology, the value of using them for learning, and the knowledge of how to implement them into the lives of young children.

There was also a desire to make things easier for the markers of eportfolios, especially those who were used to hard copy portfolios.

## The approach

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*We first spent quite a lot of time defining the type of graduate required to meet the demands of an increasingly complex role as Early Childhood and Primary teachers, and used this vision to inform the design of the degree. Activities and assessment tasks were devised for each year level to ensure that students were supported in their development towards this goal, that their informal learning was valued, and that their archive of work would be valued and consistently enriched by the students. This work was supported by a CSU Flexible Learning Institute fellowship which was granted to one of the program designers.*

The overall structure of the four years currently includes the following:

**1st year** – Students reflect on their prior-to-University learning and experience, particularly in relation to Graduate Attributes, in a PebblePad webfolio and complete a gap analysis leading to an action plan that involves self-directed learning and skill enhancement. They also document and reflect on their progression towards course learning outcomes as part of the webfolio.

**2nd year** – Students use PebblePad during their first professional experience observations collecting artefacts of teaching and learning, and develop a webfolio about their progression towards their own ‘knowing’ in the arts (including a group documentation of planned performance using the meeting tool).

**3rd year** – Students begin a developmental profile of the New South Wales Institute of Teachers graduate attributes created in PebblePad, taking independent responsibility for collecting evidence during the final two years (four practicums) of their planning and achievement towards these attributes.

**4th year** – Students complete a final showcase PebblePad webfolio, including Curriculum Vitae, to highlight achievements and learning, specifically designed for prospective employment.



“... staff and students found it extremely easy to use in comparison to previous tools.”

In the early stages, there was still inconsistency in the technology used by students, with each campus adopting their own tools. After the first year of implementation, CSU adopted PebblePad which provided this much needed consistency and stability, and staff and students found it extremely easy to use in comparison to previous tools.

Even so, there still remained some inconsistencies in process, with different academics asking students to submit in different ways, some using templates to help ‘get students started’ on their webfolios while others started from scratch, and staff providing feedback via comments, a marking criteria form, or as a MSWord attachment to a comment.



## The issues

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*The main barrier turned out to be the technological proficiency of staff, rather than students. Students on the whole appeared willing to work with the technology given the time and support.*

But there was, and still remains, a divide in the level of technology skill and comfort for those staff responsible for introducing PebblePad to students. At times, these perceptions of being 'all too difficult' were conveyed to students, who also adopted a similar attitude.

A large part of the problem was that many of the academics were learning the tools at the same time as the students, due to the timing of the release of PebblePad within the University. Some coped well, accessing support as required, while others delayed the implementation, add-

ing additional pressure on students which exacerbated any anxiety they had about learning a new program. A system failure, resulting in the need for a server upgrade, just at the time of submission didn't help.



## The result

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*PebblePad has now been embedded in the first two years of the degree program, and the learning outcomes achieved have been immense and fabulous. Students are becoming used to collecting evidence of their learning and reflecting deeply as they catalogue their artefacts – and they are developing a great deal of independence and responsibility towards their learning. The meta-cognitive learning is very evident to the academic teachers who collect and assess the webfolios in each year level.*

**“ Staff are introducing PebblePad earlier in the semester, and using a range of support strategies, including ‘drop-in’ computer labs where second year students act as mentors to the first years. ”**

They are also making more use of Learning Skills staff to assist students where possible, ensuring that both staff and students feel more confident with the technology. Initial technical issues have now been resolved as well, with a server upgrade ensuring that last minute ‘frenzies’ don’t overload the system.

Some academic staff are taking ownership of the tools, encouraging students to use PebblePad in different ways beyond the course requirements, and many are doing so. However, there is still a way to go until all students take the

same ownership and see PebblePad as a suite of tools for real independent personal learning. Most have further developed their technical skills, not only in PebblePad but also in associated skills such as image and video editing / compression. While some markers have found it easier, others found the constant clicking on links frustrating.

The students are now going into their 3rd year and the ePortfolio purpose and content has been designed, but whether it will be implemented as designed will depend on the comfort and competence of the academics involved.

## The learning

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*While all course team members participated and agreed on the incorporation of eportfolios in the degree, this didn't equate to equal acceptance of the technology used to action that plan. Time is needed for academics to learn PebblePad first, before they are required to teach it, so that the chances of resistance are lessened.*

The technology is, in subtle ways, changing how some of the assessment items are implemented; for example, a previous learning contract table has now become an action plan incorporating reflection and resource identification. It's allowing students to be more creative in how they present themselves, incorporating video and images, which is really building confidence. It's also driving some academics to provide written comments on students' work before submission where the feedback can be used to improve the students' work. We expect much more of this in the future.

We've also learned about the power of allowing students to reflect on both informal and formal learning and the seen impact of this on their understanding of themselves as learners, and also on their confidence in student practicums.

## In brief

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- Give teachers time to learn themselves, before teaching others.
- Value students' learning and reflection – both within and outside the Program.
- Technology can impact on the learning that occurs – make sure it's the kind of impact you want to happen.
- PebblePad has assisted students to take responsibility for documenting their own learning and flexibly showcasing it for various viewers.

## Acknowledgements

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Case study by Jenni Munday  
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