# Case Study

# Teacher eportfolio Project for Northern Ireland – a multi agency approach to teacher lifelong learning

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## The background context

Having worked in 2006/7 to establish the principles and concepts for a teacher eportfolio, the Teacher eportfolio Project for Northern Ireland (Te-PNI) partners listed above have piloted and evaluated eportfolio processes across a range of professional development activities to the extent that there are now plans to have an eportfolio for all teachers embedded into the Northern Ireland Managed Service for ICT through its management organisation 'Classroom 2000' (C2K). The teacher eportfolio is defined as:

'… a collection of authentic and diverse evidence of teaching competence that has been the subject of reflection, synthesis and selection for presentation to a professional audience for a specific purpose.'

The agreed principles state that all eportfolio work should be based on the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI, 2007) teaching competences and the National Stand-

ards for Headship for Northern Ireland (RTUNI, 2005), that ownership of all eportfolio content resides with the individual user throughout his/ her career, that each organisation will ensure that its eportfolio software solution will conform to the Te-PNI specification, and that its implementation is based on collaboration among the partners involved. To date, there are over 700 active users across a wide range of professional development phases including Initial Teacher Education, Induction and Early Professional Development, teachers' annual review process (Performance Review and Staff Development) and the Professional Qualification for Headship.

## The current practice

Although there is a strong culture of reflective practice among teachers in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education is pressing for greater "continuity and progression in professional development" between the phases (ETI, 2005, p34). There is divergence in the support offered by the partners in spite of the range of policy initiatives that require all support agencies to work together. We believe that having a single eportfolio area for teachers, with common tools, platform and outcomes will provide this coherence.



## The challenge

The project addresses a number of key challenges:

1. How do we break the cycle of inward reflection and try to build better and more effective communities of practice where learning is truly shared, debated andembedded in classroom practice?
2. How do we create continuity and progression around the professional development activities that teachers are required to undertake from the start to the finish of their career so that they are able to recognise common elements and build on each activity through a common set of processes?

3. How do we manage such commonality in a way that allows the Northern Ireland teacher partnership organisations to maintain their distinctive contribution to professional development while making it possible for the outcomes of one phase to initiate more effectively the activities of the next?

4. How do we achieve standardisation of software tools, support materials and services in support of these common processes, particularly in the use of similar forms of multimedia evidence in similar ways?

We argue that a common set of processes based on eportfolio-supported professional development will help bring about commonality in the 'teacher development continuum' proposed by Wang et al (2008).

## The purpose

*Increasingly teachers are expected to be more accountable for their own learning and for the impact of their teaching on their pupils' development. Professional learning has traditionally been recorded using paper-based systems.*

However, in a context of ever increasing teacher e-maturity, there is a higher expectation on classroom practitioners to demonstrate their professional learning using the digital technologies that the children they teach (their digital natives) use so intuitively from an early age. The Te-PNI Project has therefore presented the opportunity to explore eportfolio tools as an alternative way of selecting, presenting, reflecting on and quality assuring evidence of core ITE, Induction, EPD and CPD activities as part of a teacher's lifelong learning journey. This has taken place against a background of local and national policy drivers including:

- the NI Department of Education's recommendations for:

**" the integration of an eportfolio for professional learning as a means of creating efficiencies in professional development "**
(ETI, 2008, p34)



**" … better strategic planning and delivery of professional development opportunities for teachers "**
(DE, 2007, p6)

- DfES's recommendation to "develop support systems for teachers to … build their record of achievement throughout their lifelong learning." (QAA, 2009)

## The approach

*An evaluation of the work was undertaken between March and June 2009. There were over 100 respondents from a total of 400 eportfolio users across all the organisations represented.*

The professional development milestones included assessment activities, action planning, Formative and Career Entry Profiles in ITE, Induction Action Planning, EPD Professional Development Activities and webfolios (web-based eportfolios).

Questionnaires were developed to ascertain views regarding the eportfolio-based processes along with other issues such as their personal experiences, the role of the tutor and the technical issues they faced. Following the questionnaires, focus group interviews sought to probe the issues raised more deeply. Cohort samples

included PGCE students, first year B.Ed students, teachers in the first three years of their careers and tutors in HEIs and schools.

# The issues

*The following 'barriers' present challenges to the Te-PNI team:*

*1. Financial issues in relation to software licenses and professional development and training costs for project participants*

2. Technological issues in respect of standards, software selection and use as well as the need to match user and organisational needs to software tools. While recognizing that the choice of an appropriate model will require wider discussion prior to any policy decision, it is hoped that Phase 3 will conclude with the development of specifications for the procurement of a Teacher eportfolio for Northern Ireland

3. Cultural issues in respect of achieving a shift in traditional mindset from paper based to digital evidence of professional development and reflection. An important and emerging outcome of the project evaluation to date has been the identification of a '*cultural change*' model (Figure 1) that places teachers and support personnel at the centre of all our work, and that aims to improve the quality of their reflection and more closely link their professional developmental stages and the dialogue in which they engage.

This model, drawing on the JISC change management infokit (JISC, 2009), summarises how change has taken place in the respective organisations during the three phases of the project but with regional change some way off. The extent of the model's organisational fit varies from partner to partner. For HEIs, the advent of the project fitted with institutional PDP policy requirements has provided a means of addressing QAA requirements. In other organisations, embedding is impeded by an uncertain policy background as we await the formation of a single Education and Skills Authority for Northern Ireland.
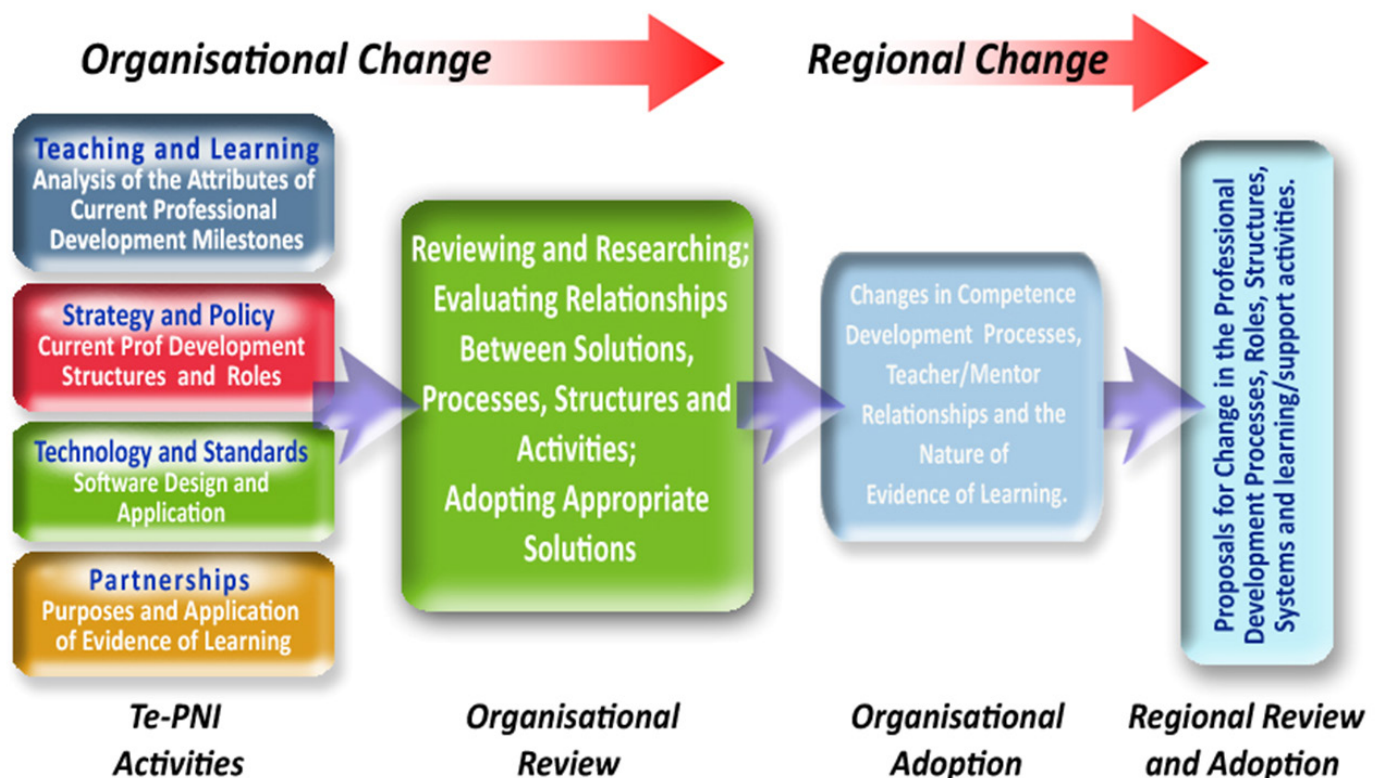


Figure 1: Cultural Change Process in Teacher Education

## The result

*Student teachers (PGCE and First Year B.Ed.) and their tutors gave a positive endorsement to eportfolio-based processes of Action Planning and Formative and Career Entry Profiling, indicating their support for its ability to facilitate professional development across a range of activities. While some students expressed a range of concerns including technical problems, duplication of paper-based and online activities and having to operate the software, their tutors were positive about how the eportfolio facilitated learning.*

> " Beginning Teachers and their tutors were exceptionally positive about the benefits of eportfolio-based professional development and viewed the tools as making a valuable contribution to their Induction and Early Professional Development (EPD) activities. "

Their tutors' opinions largely mirrored the views expressed across a range of descriptive attributes and focused on the effectiveness of the technology to support more strategic and long-term benefits. The potential for impact on the wider teaching workforce, therefore, is strong.

There was a consistent and strong positive correlation between users' engagement in eportfolio-based reflection and their identification of areas for improvement. We have distilled this correlation into a three-stage model of eportfolio use, "**Reflect-Identify-Develop**" and argue that it provides a coherent and long-term pattern for engaging in the reflective process and supports teacher lifelong learning.



Figure 2: Three-stage model of eportfolio use

## The learning

*Emerging from the project have been the following 4 important lessons which must be borne in mind if an eportfolio for teacher lifelong learning is to be embedded in the profession across Northern Ireland:*

1. **Teaching and Learning** - eportfolios must be seen to produce real improvements in innovative practice that have the support of all professionals. The outcomes of the project evaluation to date suggest that the culture for implementation is right as the overwhelming majority of participant teachers view professional eportfolios as a natural progression from the way they use ICT in their personal lives. The project team will continue to engage in longitudinal research and evaluation and share innovation within and beyond the project.

2. **Strategy and Policy** - The Te-PNI project will continue to seek to integrate with the key professional development milestones and the Management Information System and inform e-learning policy initiatives

3. **Technology and Standards** - E-mature teachers need software that is adaptable, fit for purpose and which can provide benchmarks for learning. In this respect the project team will continue to test and refine processes and examine practice in other Education sectors and professions

4. **Partnerships** - Relationships have already been forged with key UK agencies and the project team will aim to develop both these and other emerging European contacts, into real working partnerships for joint learning, development & dissemination.

## In brief

There is strong data to support the view that an eportfolio can make a very positive contribution to teacher professional development although evidence in support of its efficacy to develop reflection is less strong. There remain challenges in embedding the eportfolio across the teaching career life cycle, in particular developing the teacher education partnerships in such a way that there is not only commonality in understanding but also continuity and progression in the use of eportfolios to support teacher lifelong learning.

## Project Partners

University of Ulster

Queen's University, Belfast

St Mary's University College

Stranmillis University College

Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards

Regional Training Unit, Northern Ireland

C2K

GTCNI

Department of Education for Northern Ireland

Becta

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