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# **NEW VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: NOTTINGHAM'S ENGAGEMENT WITH NEW EPORTFOLIO AGENDAS BRIDGING THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT SECTORS FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE UK**

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## **Introduction**

Work in Nottingham has developed a strong new direction since last year's conference. From a focus on implementing interoperable ePortfolios for learner transitions between local educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities – the Nottingham consortium is now taking forward new projects spanning the two worlds of education and employment.

Government reform of 14-19 education in the UK includes the introduction of new diplomas, bridging work experience and learning, supporting new progression pathways in occupational sectors prioritised within the regional economic development strategy. Our JOSEPH project is working directly on this [1]. In addition Nottingham is also leading ePortfolio developments for the regional Lifelong Learning Network (LLN), a larger consortium, including Derbyshire, funded to help raise workforce attainment in higher skills, through developing successful new pathways into and through higher education for adult learners [2].

The 2006 Leitch review [3] identifies strategies to address serious skills shortages in the UK and highlights the role of information, advice and guidance (IAG) in empowering individuals to raise their skills levels. Nottingham's work for JOSEPH and the LLN, brings together eportfolio implementations, IAG specialists and resources, with vocational learners at different levels of education and training to engage with these key challenges for the 21st century.

## **ePortfolios and multi-locational learning**

The trail-blazing eportfolio work taken forward in local schools in recent years, through the development of the City of Nottingham Passport, now a web-based portfolio (Passportfolio) [4], was featured at the ePortfolio conferences of 2005 and 2006. With pilot schemes for the new 14-19 diploma going ahead during 2007-08 in Nottingham, the Passportfolio's importance is stronger than ever. The challenge is to support multiple-location, vocational learning. Once the full programme has been implemented, all young people in the state system will have a statutory right to study any of the lines of learning, regardless of their location and the specialism of their home school. This will inevitably result in multi-locational learning, especially in subjects such as Engineering which require access to specialist equipment. The new Diploma also includes 10 days' work experience. The risk of fragmenting learning becomes high, especially when the learning itself is unities. Learners are likely to be moving between environments in a non-routine way, with no opportunity to settle in one environment before moving on. As the Passportfolio is hosted by an IAG provider, Connexions, rather than by a specific school, college or employer, it can be accessed from multiple locations. Use of an ePortfolio to manage, record and take ownership of their learning provides a learner-owned fixed point, offering continuity and a sense of security. Further discussion below indicates how the JOSEPH project is providing support for this.

## **ePortfolios for decision-making**

The development of Nottingham's Passportfolio itself has now moved forward into the key territory between study and employment, where young learners research their options and reach decisions about choice of career pathways. Responsibility for the implementation of Passportfolio has been taken over by Nottingham Connexions, the region's branch of the government's support service for young people aged 13-19, providing IAG and access to personal development opportunities. Leitch stresses both raising aspirations and empowering individuals by providing full information and support: the coming together of the Passportfolio and Connexions in Nottingham makes the city an ideal testbed for this latest UK policy advance.

With no shortage of on-line information available to young learners, the challenge is to develop learners' skills to select and synthesise information about occupational sectors and learning opportunities, alongside reflective self-analysis of learning and training needs, in preparation for, and supported by, the right balance of on-line and face-to-face interaction with specialist guidance advisers – a balance which requires personalisation from learner to learner.

The University of Nottingham's JISC-funded JOSEPH project is working with Connexions and the Passportfolio to bring together IAG and ePortfolio to enrich and enhance provision of face-to-face guidance. There is much electronic and online guidance available; learners currently need to find it in the first place, work out whether it is any use/suitable, navigate their way through it and collect results to use elsewhere. We have built a unit (currently specific to Engineering, but intended to be customisable for other disciplines and subject areas) which takes learners through a decision-making process for Engineering, including identifying their relevant skills and interests, evidencing appropriate experience and achievements and researching possible career paths, progression pathways and vacancy information. The learner is guided, via a staged process, through a series of online resources selected and approved by IAG professionals. By drawing together specific learning, skills evidence and reflection, the learner is empowered to move to the next stage, whether this be application to employment, to a programme to fill an identified skills gap, or application to HE. Alternatively, the learner may be in a position to make an informed decision not to follow an Engineering pathway, but has an awareness of the processes involved in decision-making which can then be applied to another discipline or area.

## **Technological developments**

An initial pilot/demonstrator has been developed and is being refined through consultation with IAG professionals and other practitioners. It will be tested with learners in the autumn of 2007, with a view to maintaining iterative development through the second half of the project. Early results should be available for report in our conference presentation.

As a JISC-funded project, JOSEPH is committed to contributing to the international e-Framework for Education and Research. We are therefore exploring the practicality of using a web services approach. The pilot demonstrator is a distinct system from Passportfolio, and is able to use web services to draw data dynamically from the learner's Passportfolio account to prepopulate certain fields, which the user can then edit as appropriate (and re-export to Passportfolio, also via a web services route). Learners are able to share their specific responses, thoughts and reflections achieved through the unit with IAG and support staff; they are encouraged to ask questions of specific individuals along the way.

Where external web-based resources offer APIs, we are using these to demonstrate the concept of producing and consuming web services in a flexible environment; however for more closed systems we have had to resort to offering hyperlinks and the possibilities afforded by cut and paste. At the time of writing we anticipate that pilot learners will be offered access to the module and to Passportfolio through a Sharepoint-based local VLE designed to support vocational 14-19 pathways in the City of Nottingham; this will support single sign-on and a short-term solution to security issues.

## **ePortfolio futures: migrating from education institutions to employment contexts?**

While Connexions are providing a learner-owned eportfolio for young learners, supporting their reflective planning and decision-making processes with recommended processes and materials, work within the University and much more broadly within the LLN, directed at older learners, is experimenting with a range of different eportfolio systems. Within the University, the CETL for Integrative Learning is trialling a number of solutions in different learning contexts, some vocational, many non-vocational. The fit to discipline ethos seems crucial. Yet, on one level, there is a danger that the attempt to identify and embed even a diversity of eportfolio systems may be misguided. For, at the same time, the University is beginning to address the enormous challenge of developing interfaces between institutional systems and the informal and social technologies which undergraduates are employing ever more freely. If we are able to harness their ability to mix and match technologies of their own choosing to the processes of personal development planning, we may be able to implement eportfolio-based learning, while seeing eportfolios themselves dissolve out of existence.

For the work-based learners of the LLN, however, the imperatives of vocational learning inscribe occupational standards, skill sets and specific requirements for whole sectors of the population. The Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire LLN will be piloting Nuventive's iWebFolio in 2007-08, to test the proposition that the development of shared templates across the education-employment divide may in itself be able to facilitate consensus development between the two sectors and at the same time point forward to the most substantive future for eportfolio technology.

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