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# USING THE E-PORTFOLIO - AN AWARDING BODY'S PERSPECTIVE, CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** City & Guilds, the UK's leading awarding body for vocational qualifications, outlines the particular requirements of awarding bodies for the use of e-portfolios (in this context, e-portfolio management systems) for assessment and verification purposes. Market research and the experience of centres and learners have identified both benefits of and barriers to using e-portfolios. It is likely that a blended approach to learning and assessment will lead to the growth of the uptake of e-portfolios in the future.

**Keywords:** awarding body, assessment, verification

## Introduction

National structures for external qualifications vary from country to country, not just across Europe but even within the UK. Not everyone within EIfEL's network, therefore, will necessarily be familiar with the system we have in place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is regulated by three authorities QCA (England), ACCAC (Wales) and CCEA (Northern Ireland). There is a separate structure for Scotland. These regulatory bodies review and accredit not only the qualifications themselves but also the external awarding bodies which deliver the qualifications. An awarding body must gain recognised status before it can submit qualifications for accreditation within the NQF. In short, an awarding body is a body approved by a regulatory authority for the purpose of certifying learners' achievement

City & Guilds, a business founded 130 years ago, is the UK's leading awarding body for work-related qualifications. Twenty million people in the UK have City & Guilds qualifications and the organisation awards a further 1.5 million qualifications to learners every year. It has around 7000 approved centres in the UK. Of the main types of vocational qualification, the most significant are National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), introduced some 20 years ago, which use a methodology based on competence and learning outcomes. City & Guilds has over 56% share of this market. An awarding body's prime consideration for the NVQ process is the collection of evidence towards a particular qualification.

Within EIfEL there has been much discussion on the definition of an e-portfolio, ranging from a 'simple paperless portfolio to sophisticated e-portfolio management systems'<sup>1</sup>.

An awarding body's interest in e-portfolios is focused on the capability to record and manage evidence mapped to the standards required for the qualification. In this context, therefore, the meaning is closer to that of EIfEL's 'e-portfolio management system (organisational)' definition and 'e-portfolio' is used in this sense for this case study. Although individual learners working towards a qualification may well have their own personal learning spaces, for an awarding body the most essential features of an e-portfolio are:

- storage and presentation of learner achievements over time,
- proof of learner competence,
- a record of achievement over a lifetime of learning,
- gathering evidence to show competence,
- mapping of that evidence against national occupational standards quality assurance.

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<sup>1</sup> For an ePortfolio enabled architecture – Position Paper. EIfEL 2007

## **Background and history**

Some nine years ago a company which had developed a CD-ROM-based electronic portfolio approached City & Guilds to seek feedback. This was an informal and relatively cursory assessment of whether the product met our quality assurance practices. It did however make us realise the extent of the potential benefits that paperless portfolios could bring to all parties concerned in the assessment and verification processes.

Other companies developing web-based e-portfolios started to approach us in 2003-04 which led to City & Guilds introducing set criteria for meeting quality requirements and formal endorsement of systems that met the standards. There are now four suppliers whose products have met the rigorous criteria and are now endorsed by City & Guilds<sup>2</sup>.

## **Benefits**

Typical first impressions of paper-based assessment are that bureaucracy has buried the learner value and e-portfolios can help to rectify this. Three key stakeholders benefit from the use of e-portfolios - learners, centres and verifiers:

- Learners: candidates registered for a qualification at an approved centre,
- Centres: centres, usually further education colleges and training providers in the private and public sectors, approved to offer particular qualifications. Centre staff who can especially benefit from e-portfolios are assessors and administrators who allocate candidates to assessors,
- Verifiers: internal verifiers within a centre who monitor the assessments and external verifiers, appointed by the awarding body, who monitor a range of centres.

In late 2005 City & Guilds commissioned market research across a sample of approved centres in order to determine both the benefits of and barriers to using e-portfolios. The research identified the following benefits:

- learner 'ownership' of learning programmes (as opposed to the traditional assessor-led paper-based NVQ process),
- integrated learning (via extra features such as diagnostic/placement and formative/practice tests and assessment,
- learner retention,
- faster, more efficient learning programmes (greater throughput of candidates),
- greater transparency for funding agencies,
- greater transparency for quality assurance (in terms of having a secure audit trail that is date-stamped and impossible to amend or lose),
- reduced bureaucracy (less paper and automated notification to relevant parties of when evidence has been submitted for assessment or verification).

## **Examples of feedback from centres**

### ***Benefits***

'Forty per cent reduction in the administration of candidate's work. Learners can see exactly where they are... you can see people who are falling behind much earlier and comment or help them.'

'It saves on the amount of paperwork you have to move from one place to another. It also gives the candidate more access and freedom to do their own work... you can see exactly where someone is on a

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<sup>2</sup> see [www.cityandguilds.com/eportfolios](http://www.cityandguilds.com/eportfolios)

particular piece of work. You as an assessor can give instant feedback... the major benefits are administrative.'

'Looks good for the college, forward thinking.'

### ***Barriers***

'Not everyone has easy access or the ability to use it... the system took six months to set up and customise to this organisation's needs.'

'We have had a huge number of updates – we have to have it upgraded continually and I don't think it should have been set up until it was ready.'

'Trying to interpret what the awarding body requirements are, eg, signatures on work, ink and electronic signatures.'

'Changing staff mindset – when different students use different systems it creates confusion.'

### ***City & Guilds' approach***

The market for e-portfolios in the NVQ environment is still not mature but demand is growing. With so many products on the market and limited guidance from awarding bodies and other key players, centres have to be cautious when buying licences for e-portfolio systems. Additionally, some external verifiers have viewed e-portfolios with caution, particularly those systems with which they were not familiar. As a major awarding body City & Guilds felt an obligation to make its position known and to offer guidance to centres to help them make the right decisions when investing in a new e-portfolio system.

Initial considerations did include adopting a branded single-product approach but this would have been difficult to achieve. As new entrants to the marketplace we lacked the expertise to build our own e-portfolio system and in any event internal IT resources were heavily deployed on existing projects. As many e-portfolio suppliers have developed products to meet the particular requirements of niche occupational areas (eg, business administration, care) it would have been difficult to identify one supplier whose products suited all sectors.

It was considered better to support centres in finding a product that best meets their individual business needs and this could be achieved through the current endorsement policy, where City & Guilds works closely with several suppliers.

Products presented for endorsement are put through a rigorous quality assurance process by an internal team and external consultants. This is to ensure that City & Guilds does not endorse any system that compromises public perceptions of its brand. Suppliers seem to appreciate the rigour of the quality assurance process – it can be fairly lengthy but it has resulted in better products since any potential problems have been resolved before release.

### **What makes a good e-portfolio?**

The quality assurance evaluation process focuses on the following areas:

- suitability for City & Guilds systems,
- assessment and verification,
- security,
- reliability of the system,
- commercial viability.

Endorsement is City & Guilds' guarantee to a centre that its external verifiers will happily use the system. If centres use non-endorsed products, the onus is on them to ensure that the external verifiers are familiarised with their system.

## **The future**

The rate of uptake of e-portfolios will increase further for the reasons outlined above and also because of likely future regulatory requirements. The main awarding bodies for vocational qualifications in the UK are beginning to offer an e-portfolio as part of a blended learning and assessment package or total learning system. The goal is to enhance student retention and achievement as well as to gain from the efficiency benefits of an e-portfolio. One such example is ProActive Hospitality & Catering, an innovative learning resource that City & Guilds has developed with the educational publishers, Harcourt. ProActive includes textbooks, e-learning content and e-portfolio assessment, all linked through a single portal. Another awarding body, OCR, has introduced a similar kind of package, iMedia, for its media technology qualification.

As the market develops, City & Guilds will remain responsive to the needs of its centres and learners.

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