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Enhancing Graduate Employability:
a case study compendium

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Going digital: introducing ePortfolio to promote digital literacy in ITE

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Background

In September 2017, the University of Sunderland rolled out the new virtual learning environment (VLE), Canvas, for its first year. Up to this point, the PGCE Post-Compulsory Education Training (PGCE PCET) programme had worked solely as a paper-based programme whereby trainee submissions were in the form of a hard-copy assessment file of evidence. Canvas provided the opportunity to 'go digital' and follow other initial teacher education (ITE) programmes which have implemented digital portfolio systems. It also meant we could respond directly to government and Ofsted priorities of digital literacy.

In particular, Ofsted encourages teachers to "develop further the use of information learning technology so that it complements and enhances learning as well as giving learners wider access to learning resources and teachers' support" (Ofsted, 2014, p9). However, we believe there is a disconnect between required standards and the reality in classrooms and training for teachers; this is highlighted by the Further Education Learning Technology Action Group's (FELTAG) 2014 report and reinforced by the Jisc eAssessment Survey (Roads, 2016) which stipulates a 50% rise in eAssessment across the sector but with little positive impact on student digital literacy (FELTAG, 2014).

Some of the key questions we ourselves asked before starting the project were:

1   How can we encourage trainees to engage in a **regular reflective practice** (ETF, 2014; Pollard, 2014)?

2   How can we help improve **digital literacy** of our trainees? (This is to do with skills and competencies (White and Cornu, 2011).

3   How can we develop a programme that **mirrors the requirements of the profession** (House of Commons, 2016)?

4   How can we encourage a **professional mindset** ready for professional formation and further study Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) (Bhattacharya and Hartnett, 2017)?

Part of our framework builds upon ideas presented by Beetham and Sharpe (2013) whereby a blended learning model includes "learning as behaviour, learning as the construction of knowledge and meaning, and learning as social practice" (p25). This supports our overarching philosophy that trainees should have the tools to teach in a modern education environment; an environment where their students will be preparing for a future in a society that will look very different to today as technological advancements develop at an increasing pace. Therefore, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) need a foundation of digital skills so they can react and adapt to future changes in society and their classroom environments.

Approach

This work builds upon previous research by Mellor *et al* (2015) which considered how the ePortfolio might offer a 'kick start' and a virtual 'space' to articulate and develop students' ongoing skills (including transferable skills) and qualities both within formal higher education (HE) music learning and music-making outside their formal study. The blurring of boundaries between the formal and informal spaces was also commented on favourably by the students in that they could develop the ePortfolio off the university campus with the option to work at their own pace, thereby modelling a more differentiated pattern of workspace and place mediated by technology. "It's about learning, and the emphasis is less on 'employ' and more on 'ability' (Harvey, 2018) to develop a 'revolutionary agency" (Kallio and Smith, 2017) to forge their own pathways beyond HE.

In the first iteration of the Going Digital Project (2017/18), an ePortfolio template was designed for the full-time PGCE students (Jenkins, 2017) to adopt as their own and populate with evidence of their practical teaching, which aligned to a large proportion of the programme. It encouraged students to use the ePortfolio as a host for 'professional proactive reflective practice' (Gregson *et al*, 2015) as seen in Fig.1. ePortfolio training for staff and students was embedded into the curriculum and modules were redesigned to follow a digital model. More specifically, it was implemented across the two practical teaching modules on the full-time programme (2017/18) and part-time programme (2018/19). This was evaluated following focus groups with students (n=25) and suggestions for improvement were taken forward into the research design for 2018/19.

Fig.1 ePortfolio reflective practice cycle
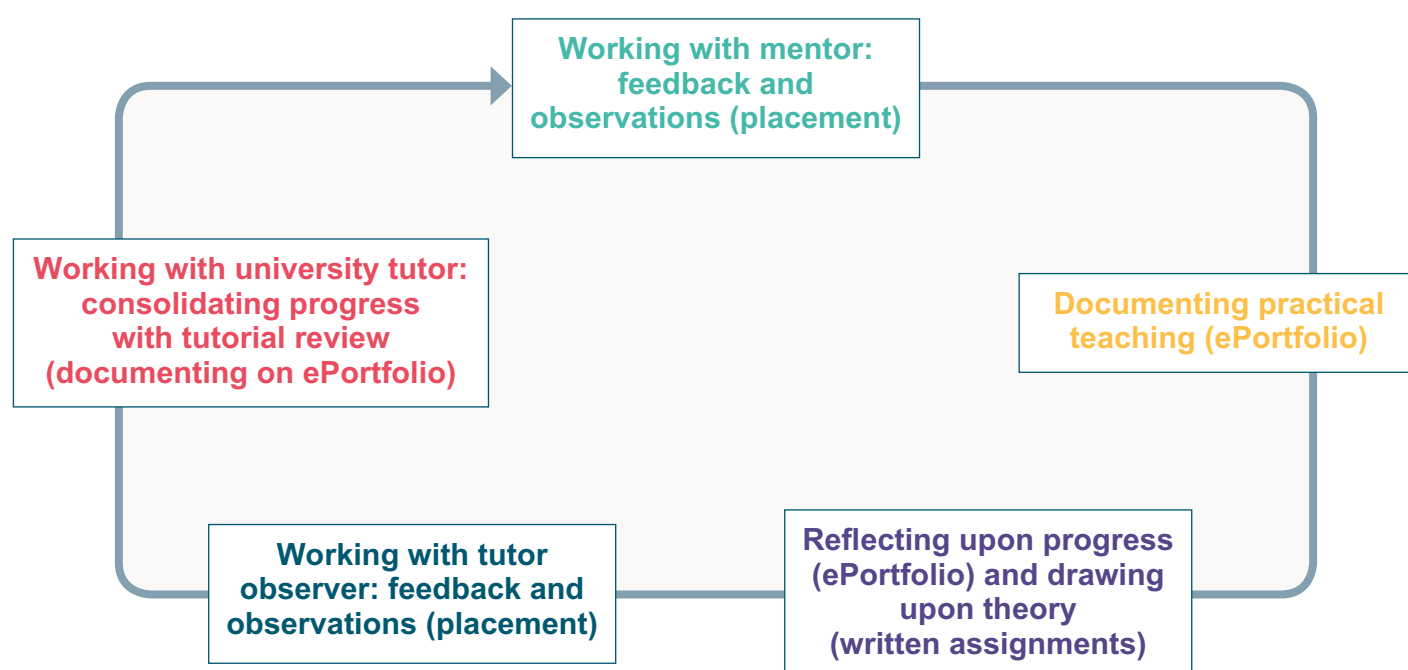
The second iteration of the project was developed following a review of the previous year, this included changes to the template (Jenkins, 2018) (see Fig 2), training structure and extending to the part-time PGCE PCET Programme (stage one) at our partner colleges (Gateshead College, Bishop Auckland College, East College Durham and Durham Sixth Form Centre). An important part of the review was to improve the design and delivery of assessment templates for both full-time and part-time programmes, formalise training for students and staff on the editing and uploading of content and consider the timeliness of this training based upon student feedback. In total more than 150 staff and students have been trained in the past academic year, and summative assessment has been transformed for modules across two programmes.

Fig.2 PGCE PCET 2018/19 ePortfolio template (Jenkins, 2017)

There will be further developments going into stage three of the Going Digital Project whereby all stages of the part-time PGCE PCET will be using the ePortfolio as a form of assessment. The end of stage two will provide an opportunity to reflect and evaluate the use of the platform for the part-time programme with leaders from the partner colleges. It also provides an opportunity to act upon student feedback and the pre- and post-course digital skills audit to measure impact.

Outcomes

Before introducing ePortfolio, full-time students (n=80) were asked to complete a Pre-Intervention Self-Assessment of Digital Skills (2018/19), developed from the Jisc eAssessment Survey (Roads, 2016). Interestingly, no students rated themselves as 'Experts' (see Table 1) and there was a direct correlation between older students giving themselves a lower assessment of their skills (see Fig.3) in contrast to 57% (n=46) rating themselves 'Knowledgeable Enthusiasts'.

Table 1 Pre-intervention self-assessment of digital skills (2018/19) data table

Age	Expert	Knowledgeable Enthusiasts	Enthusiastic Novice	Technophobe
50+	0	0	4	4
40-49	0	0	7	2
30-39	0	8	4	0
20-29	0	21	8	0
-20	0	17	5	0
% Total	0	57.50%	35%	7.50%

They were also asked what they were mainly using technology for (see Fig.4), and it was clear that students were mainly 'digital consumers' or 'digital visitors' as opposed to 'digital residents' (White and Cornu, 2011).

Fig.3 Pre-intervention self-assessment of digital skills (2018/19) data graph
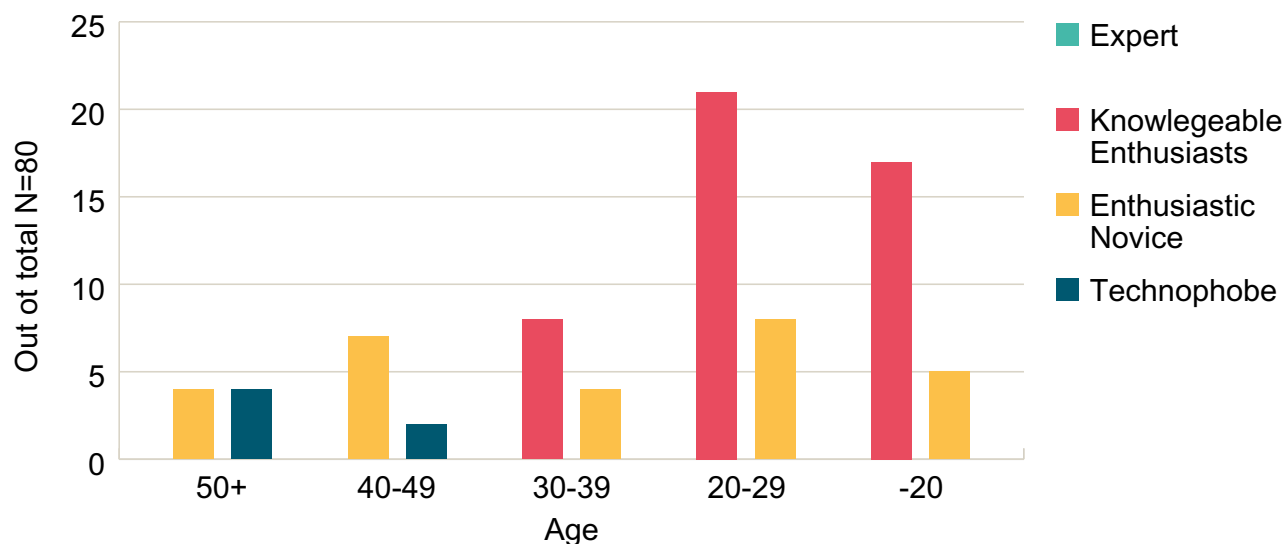
These changes in assessment to a more digitally focused assessment also helps develop students' employability and digital literacy skills. Graduates now have the ability to take their Practical Teaching ePortfolio to job interviews, where they have been received positively by employers, and have key digital skills to use in their classrooms with their students.

Fig.4 What do you mainly use technology for?
Pre-intervention self-assessment of digital skills (2018/19) data graph
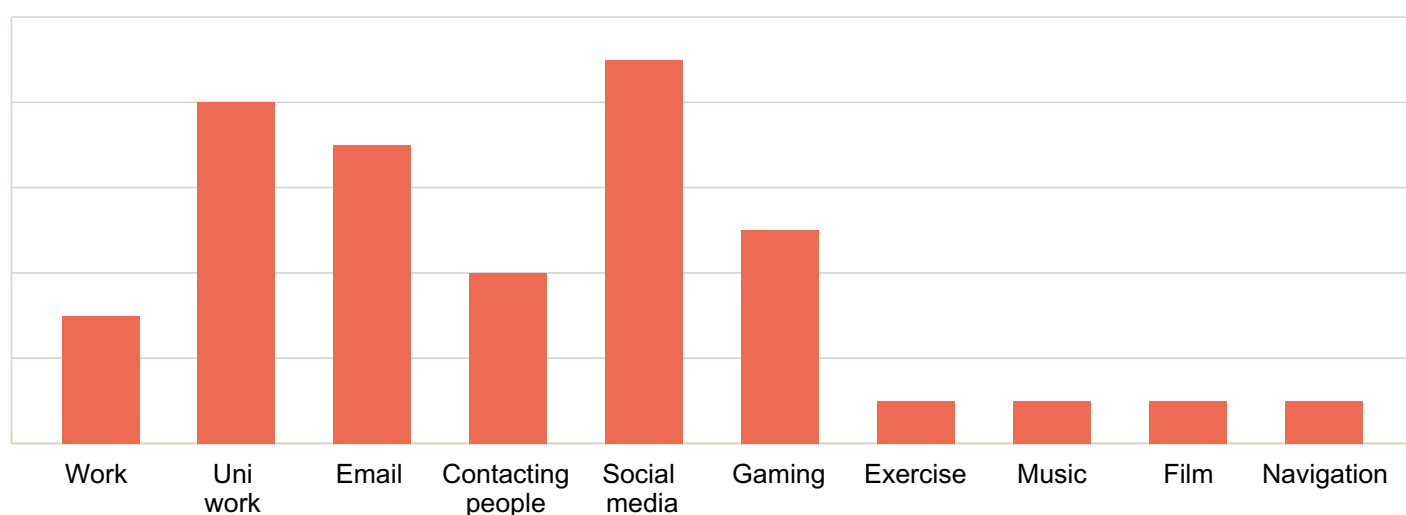
This is further supported by feedback from students in response to the Post-Intervention Self-Assessment of Digital Skills Audit (2019/19). In response to the question, **Q12b Do you think using ePortfolio and Canvas has helped improve your technology skills at all**, student responses have been mostly positive and demonstrative of the journey of confidence they have embarked upon:

> "I have been able to develop skills by using things, such as embedding links and scanning in documents, in order to create an online profile instead of having paper-based folders. Canvas has aided my improvement, as it has been more of an organisational planner, keeping me up to date with deadlines and resources that have assisted me with written work." *[Q12:S13]*

> "I found it hard and pointless at first but now understand its importance, it has also helped me use Google docs and Google drive which helps within my workplace." *[Q12:S17]*

> "It has given me more insight into a professional profile which I can continually develop." *[Q12:S55]*

There is always a need to keep improving things (see student ideas for development in Table 2) and focus groups with students and conversations with staff are a regular occurrence to make the assessment process smooth, manageable and effective.

Table 2. Post-intervention focus group (2018/19) data table

Code N=25	Q13 We really value your ideas and opinions. Do you have any suggestions how we might develop ePortfolio or the use of technology further on the PGCE PCET programme for future trainees?
FG:S21	As a mature student I felt at a disadvantage. As a result I decided to enrol in a computer course which was independent of the university. This was limited but helped me gain a little confidence to try using ePortfolio on my own. I think I avoided using it because I lacked confidence, the first time I used a computer was 1992 and this was very limited access and I haven't had to use computers to this extent in my work or study. I would have liked access to additional support classes, similar to those in English for ESOL students, as computer technology is for me, like a speaking a different language. While I can see the benefits of technology both in study and when qualified, because I have never had the training before, I didn't have these skills.
FG:S14	The layout could be easier and there could be a streamlining of certain pages, it would be more beneficial to have more live documents as it takes up memory uploading the same files after being updated multiple times.
FG:S2	Enabling to embed spreadsheets for tracker and it would be useful to combine it with LinkedIn in some way.
FG:S8	Is there a way we can have a blog/reflection page? I know it isn't an assessment but I would quite like to just free-write about my experience over time. Even add pictures of marking and wall displays?

Therefore, there is still some work to do to improve this further going into stage three of the project. As a result of the journey so far we consider the following:

1. it is clear there has been a shift from students being 'digital visitors' to 'digital residents' (White and Cornu, 2011). However, there is a clear divide regarding mindset; students who are enthusiasts in contrast to those who only feel comfortable sticking within the boundaries of the template given (Mellor *et al*, 2015)

2. in their teaching practice, the majority of students tend to stick to technologies they know and have used themselves in previous education or work. Very few have the confidence to innovate, so how do we encourage this in future (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013)?

3. there is still a long way to go before embedding technology is seen as more than a box-ticking exercise by staff, students and mentors in the FE sector – the question is how can we continue to try and change this mindset (Barrett, 2004)?

4. for the tracking of trainee progress, it is an excellent tool but we need to work harder to ensure we are encouraging and supporting students to keep on top of updating their work on a regular basis, rather than just for assessment points (Pollard, 2014).

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