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DEVELOPING PORTFOLIO PRACTICES AT LAUREA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process of developing ePortfolio practices in Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Integrating ePortfolio practices to studies and curriculum has been our objective since 2014. During these years there has been a lot of challenges but we have also been able to create some functioning practices.

In this paper, the history, current state and the next steps to be taken are discussed. The emphasis is on understanding the challenges and difficulties of the process. The findings are based on Sometaduuniin (Social Media and its Equipments as a Way to Working Life) project. During the project we have worked with five pilot groups to be able to understand the challenges. The analysis is based on data gathered from a small group of lecturers and the managers responsible for the development of education. A small survey was also conducted for the pilot group students.

The participants of eApril conference were invited to share their ideas on what should be done in the near future for the challenges. These ideas are used and developed further in this article.

BACKGROUND FOR THE PROJECT

“I can not understand why this is taking so long and not progressing” commented one manager when a workshop was held for the education managers concerning the ePortfolio practices in November 2017. The comment refers to the fact that the development work of taking ePortfolios into use has progressed rather slowly. The same question was the starting point in ESF funded Sometaduuniin project in autumn 2016.

To be able to understand the current state we have to look back in time and reflect on what we have done so far to develop ePortfolio practices. The main steps of the



actions at Laurea UAS have been summarized in figure 1 and elaborated in the following chapters.

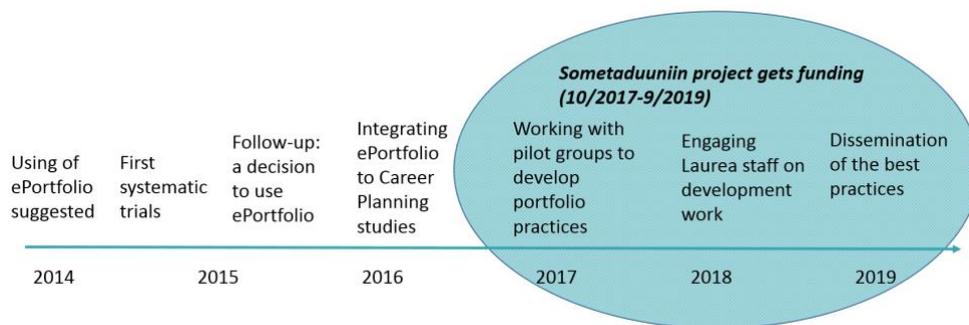


Figure 1. Timeline of the portfolio development work at Laurea.

A Decision Was Not Enough

The case organisation Laurea University of Applied Sciences is a multidisciplinary institution located in Helsinki Metropolitan Area in Finland. The university operates in six campuses and has around 7800 students and 500 staff members. (Laurea 2018.) The current curricula consist of modules in which there are several study units or projects. The modules are coordinated by nominated lecturers and each study unit or project has also a nominated lecturer in charge even if often implemented by a lecturer team. The degree programmes are led by development managers and the education development work at the university level by a vice president in charge of education. The vice president is supported by managers responsible for certain functions such as education processes or e-learning. These managers and the vice president work together in the meetings of Education Development Group.

The Education Development Group had suggested that all students should curate their portfolios during their bachelor degree studies already in March 2014 (memo, 3.3.2014). The follow up had been held in May 2015. At that point the concern had been expressed that not many students were using the ePortfolio platform (Kyvyt.fi) and that using it had not been integrated with the study units. After discussing the issue the workgroup made a decision that integration needs to be enhanced the aim being that ePortfolio is used in every study unit (memo, 28.5.2015).

You might think that the timeline between these two meetings was long, but it's something that has to do with the organisational culture. At Laurea staff are empowered to take the responsibility for the development work at hand. Laurea staff seems to have the reputation in the Finnish higher education field that we are always



eager to develop new practices. Thus, the task was thought to be rather easy: It would just mean that the staff and students should learn how to compile ePortfolios and then to integrate the studies and the portfolio process.

Consequently the staff was given freedom to proceed with the given task. The decision on how and when to proceed with introducing the idea of an ePortfolio to the students was left in their hands. Of course to support this process, training sessions for both students and lecturers were provided on how to use the chosen Mahara-based ePortfolio platform. Soon enough it was realised however that the lecturers need to attend the training session at the same time as their student group so that the lecturers would also learn how to use the platform. The solution that there are only few experts who are able to train the students doesn't work in a university that has six campuses.

As a consequence the efforts of taking the platform into use varied a lot. Some neglected the decision and some tutor lecturers tried to use portfolios with their own groups.

Besides of these individual trials, one campus made a joint decision for all degree programmes that portfolios are taken into use during the career planning studies already in autumn 2014. But the result was a total failure. Already during the first term many tutor lecturers swore that they would never use the ePortfolio platform again. The main reason behind the failure was that they had not taken into account in the process of returning the assignments to be evaluated that the ePortfolio platform is a personal learning environment (PLE). This means that the staff members do not have any access to the student portfolios unless the students share their portfolios with the staff by e.g. creating a secret URL. Thus the lecturers had used a lot of time for trying to find the content from the platform and not been able to access it. Consequently they got naturally extremely frustrated. All sort of comments could be heard when walking the campus isle from both the staff members and students (see Figure 1). When we think back in time the reason behind this misunderstanding might be that the logic of the PLE platform had not been emphasized enough in the training sessions.



Figure 9. Staff members and students wondering the portfolio practices during the academic year 2014-2015.

First Attempt to Integrate ePortfolio in Bachelor Studies at Organisational Level

As this kind of attitudes are difficult to pass, it was no sooner than in spring 2016 when first organizational wide steps could be taken to ensure the integration of the ePortfolio practices into the studies. As the main reason for the failure in autumn 2014 was clearly a matter of better instructions, the issue could be brought back to discussions. What need to be solved was to plan the process for how to return the ePortfolio links for assessment.

As a result a common learning platform was created for the career planning studies in spring 2016. The use of a portfolio was integrated in three assignments:

- In the first semester the idea is that the students describe their background and prior competences as well as goals for their studies in their portfolio. This will help with recognition of prior learning.
- In the end of the first academic year they are expected to describe and assess their learning and to set new goals and to reflect on their possibilities for internationalisation during their studies.
- In the third study year a showcase is made to demonstrate that the student has acquired the generic competences that have been set as a target for the UAS graduates nationally. It worth noticing, that this could also provide information on the quality of the education if only used.

(Career Planning workspace 2016.)

The idea is, of course, that the students will build their portfolios also during their other studies and projects so that the showcase is easy to compile during the third year studies (see Figure 2).

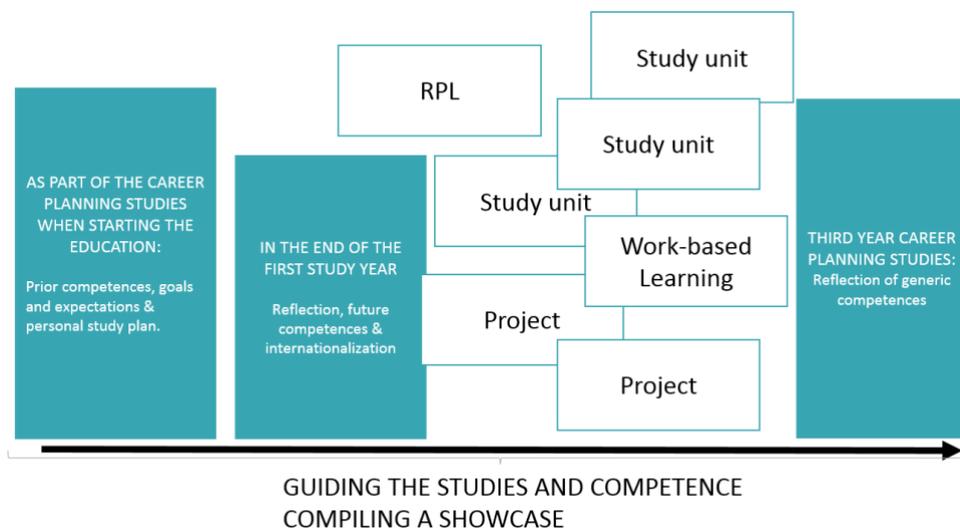


Figure 2. A vision of how portfolio is upgraded gradually during the studies.

As the learning platform for career planning studies was commonly taken into use, the ePortfolios were too. To make the lecturers feel more comfortable with the idea, it was emphasized that the main thing is that the students – not the lecturers – need to learn how to use their personal learning environment. This aim has been supported by providing the students on-line training as this was regarded as an efficient way of guaranteeing similar support services for all campuses.

PROJECT FUNDING ACQUIRED TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT WORK

As described above, a good start has been made at Laurea to utilize ePortfolios pedagogically but the fact seems to be that not much is being curated in the portfolios from other studies. Therefore it is important to understand what the challenges from the lecturers' and students' perspectives are.

Luckily, as a portfolio is a good tool for describing the competences when applying for a job, the development work of portfolio practices could be included in the Sometaduuniin project plan. The ESF funded the project for three years starting in autumn 2016. In general the project aims to a permanent change in the guidance processes in higher education in Finland by increasing the use of virtual tools and social media to support students' employment. Development process has started by approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives: higher education students,



HE teaching and guidance staff and employers. Various training packages will be produced during the project in co-operation with our partners.

To develop the use of ePortfolio the idea is to work with pilot groups and develop the practices based on the experiences. Finally, the good practices developed during the Sometaduuniin project will be shared nationally in Finland.

METHODS USED TO EXPLORE THE CHALLENGES

The challenges were examined from the points of view of lecturers, education managers and students. It must be emphasized that the data used in this paper was not gathered for scientific use but for development purposes. Thus the aim has not been to acquire data that provides information on how common these challenges are but to give insights into the situation.

Actually when the data from the lecturers was gathered the idea was not to use the material for practitioner research. The data was gathered from a group of lecturers (N=8) teaching in the bachelor degree programme in Hospitality Management in their development meeting before introducing them the idea of an ePortfolio. Thus it is not known how many of them had any prior experience on the matter. What we wanted to achieve originally was to put the skeptical insights aside by writing down *the challenges and threats that the lecturers felt when they thought about using portfolios as a pedagogical tool*. That way we could concentrate better on the topic without being constantly interrupted with some negative comments as these lecturers work in the campus in which they had failed with the ePortfolio practices in 2014. The lecturers were asked to write their thoughts on a white paper and then the papers were gathered and put in an envelope and the envelope was closed. Their supervisor also filled in one paper.

The same method was used with the managers responsible for developing the education at Laurea (N=13). The group included the vice president responsible for education, managers responsible for education and virtual learning and development managers responsible for degree programmes, who work also as supervisors for the lecturers. The data was gathered in the beginning of a workshop in which the idea of a portfolio was introduced to them.

The data from the lecturers was analyzed by categorizing the content by identifying common themes. As there was not that much material the comments were not counted. The materials received from the managers were used to check if some new issues were mentioned by comparing the answers to the previously identified categories.



The student experiences were examined by implementing a feedback survey for the pilot groups. The way how the students of the five pilot groups had been instructed to use the ePortfolio platform varied. 65 students (40 %) answered to the survey. We received most answers from the business information technology and business management students, but also from the field of social services and hospitality management. The content of the survey was not planned to reveal challenges but to reveal what kind of support the students would like to have for compiling their portfolios. Thus it might be that not all the challenges are identified with this data. The questionnaire included both multiple choice questions and offered an opportunity for open feedback. The data was analyzed by counting percentages from the multiple choice questions and categorizing the written feedback.

OBSTACLES FOR LECTURERS TO TAKE THE EPORTFOLIOS INTO USE

The challenges, worries and threats recognized by the lecturers can be categorized under three titles: 1) "New technology is scary", 2) "Do I know what to do as a pedagogue" and 3) "Do we need changes in the education". These categories are described with quotations.

New Technology is Scary

It seems that digitalisation brings challenges and questions that need to be addressed. In relation to an ePortfolio these include the following challenges mentioned by the lecturers:

- *Who guides the students and where do they get help to learn to use the ePortfolio platform, make videos, publish pictures etc.?*
- *Do I need to know how to use the ePortfolio platform myself? How do I guide the students?*
- *Where do I find the ePortfolio sites? Do the students remember to give a permission to view their portfolio or do I need to remind?*
- *Is the content in safe?*
- *Are there too many learning environments?*
- *What options there are for curating the portfolio? (platforms etc.)*

To summarize, the lecturers seem to be concerned whether they have the technical ability, knowledge and resources to support the students. As one lecturer put it: "*The portfolios seem to be messy and difficult to use and thus they create a lot of job for the lecturers.*" In the era of digitalisation, the amount of platforms and systems is



already huge and thus it is a good question if something else can be left unused when a new tool is taken into use.

A study conducted by Kunnari, Laurikainen, Pires and Rodrigues (2017) highlights also technical challenges.

Do I Know What to Do as a Pedagogue

How to utilize a portfolio as a pedagogical tool is something that not all the lecturers are familiar with according to the comments. Several questions were raised. It's only natural that lecturers tend to choose teaching methods that they are already familiar with. Thus, these challenges need to be considered while planning staff training and teacher education in general. These themes consisted of three abilities: 1) ability to understand the purpose, 2) ability to plan the demonstrations and 3) ability to guide and evaluate.

1) Ability to understand the purpose

The lecturers' comments included evidence of that the idea behind the portfolio needs to be discussed in depth. The lecturers asked:

- *Is a portfolio compiled just because it needs to be?*
- *How do I affect the attitudes and explain the value of constructing a portfolio?*
- *How do I motivate everyone to curate one?*

If the lecturers can't explain to the students the benefits of compiling a portfolio, the task remains as one compulsory assignment among others. That will easily lead to a situation where students will not be motivated to update their portfolio as their learning proceeds and they will miss the opportunity to reflect on their learning, find connections with their earlier experiences and what they have just learned and to build a toolbox for the future. Thus, even if the lecturers were only to support the idea of a continuously upgrading portfolios by integrating the portfolios in their study unit implementations, they need to be able to understand what the benefits are for the students. Only that way they will be able to encourage the students to curate materials.

It's also likely that understanding the purpose has to do with the lecturer's motivation to learn new practices. It's just so much easier to ask the students to return their essays and reports in a return box in the lecturer managed learning space, isn't it? In fact it doesn't acquire a lot more to ask the students to return a link to their portfolio site instead.



2) Ability to plan the demonstrations

The next comments surprised the most. These comments indicate that at least some lecturers lack the pedagogical skill to use portfolios or at least they feel insecure:

- *Do I know how to utilize a portfolio in my study units? In which studies should I use it?*
- *While planning the assignments how do I take into account that the output is suitable for a portfolio?*
- *What is the amount of instructions needed to allow the student to be creative but still to understand the idea?*
- *What competences are described and presented in the portfolio? How to instruct?*
- *Is portfolio always made alone?*

The studies in a university of applied science should be closely related to the industry and world of work. These comments reveal that not all the assignments that lecturers give to the students correspond the real work tasks. It's worth asking if we could require the students to produce more realistic outputs as an evidence of the gained competences. On the other hand, the challenges in this pedagogical area might be the reason behind the fact that recognition of prior learning seems to be a challenge still.

3) Ability to guide and evaluate

Assessment has also earlier been recognized as an area in which lecturers need new tools in Laurea UAS and in general in many universities (e.g. Kunnari et al., 2017). The challenges related to assessment as well as guiding the portfolio content were mentioned also in this context:

- *How do I guide the content?*
- *How do I ensure that also other type of evidence is added in the portfolio than just descriptive reflection?*
- *How do I evaluate a portfolio? With which competence?*
- *Is it going to be a tool to recognize competence that doesn't exist? An easy path to graduate?*

These questions are important as the evaluation criteria should work as a hint for the content and the scope of the portfolio. The learning outcomes set for the studies and the degree programme in the curriculum should also work as a tool for guiding the portfolio content. Discussion is needed to build a common understanding of what is expected from the students.



Do we Need Changes in the Education

The final theme was formed by gathering those comments together which indicated that the current curricula, pedagogical practices and the student services might not support the portfolio process enough. To embed the portfolio in the student process might mean that the role of the tool needs to be described in the curriculum. After that it is likely that the need to develop the pedagogy and support services will be taken into account accordingly.

The lecturer comments included:

- *Is it compulsory? Who is controlling that it is being curated?*
- *When does the student get guidance for the portfolio and by whom?*
- *Is the final portfolio evaluated? If so, when? Do we have the time required for the task?*
- *Could all the studies be completed by upgrading one's portfolio? This would suit well for a thesis!*
- *Will there be extra work? It sounds like that!*
- *Should we rethink the whole idea of a digital portfolio?*

In the current curriculum the student portfolios can be discussed during the personal study plan (PSP) discussions which are held once a term. Unfortunately the resources seem not to be sufficient for an in-depth discussion and thus some other solutions should be considered. This is important as what would be more important than guiding the students in their path of professional development?

Kunnari et al. (2017) also write about the lack of sufficient organisational and structural support and resources. We are not alone with this challenge.

STUDENTS NEEDS TO BE MOTIVATED AND SUPPORTED

As described earlier, the survey conducted for the students did not specifically aim to identify the challenges that the students had confronted but rather their wishes on how to support the process. Thus to maintain the focus, in this article the data has been utilized only partially.

There are Challenges to Use the Platform

The lecturers have reported that the students have quite a lot of challenges with the platform. The survey verified this information as one third of the students reported that it had been difficult to take the platform into use. On the other hand one third reported that it had been easy. Yet only 25 % thought that the platform is easy and



clear to use. The system seems to be easier for the business information technology students, which is only natural. Based on these answers and other studies (see e.g. Devaere, Matrens and Van den Bergh 2018) a conclusion can be made that support is needed.

When we asked in what areas they need help, the most popular answer was with the visual aspects (57 %). With describing the competences was the second wish on the list (46 %). Only a few needed help with videos (18 %) even if it is known that not all the students are familiar with making videos. Perhaps they do not understand how videos could be utilized in this context.

These findings are in line with Kunnari et al. (2017) who state that both technical support as well support for creating content is needed.

Benefits Need to Be Told

According to the open feedback, it seems that many students did not see any point in compiling an ePortfolio and they were doing it only because it was compulsory. On the other hand, some students had realized that it is a good tool for to reflect and rehearse what has been learned. Some students appreciated that the instructions left space for creativity.

A conclusion can be made that the idea of a portfolio and how it can be utilized need to be clarified for all students (see also Kunnari et al. 2017). The ePortfolio training at Laurea needs to be harmonized and offered in the campuses, not just on-line.

MANAGEMENT LEVEL SEEMS TO HAVE SOME DOUBTS TOO

In general, the managers responsible for the education felt similar challenges and threats than the lecturers. Besides, the following perspectives were given:

- *The lecturers will not be committed to develop portfolio practices if they do not understand the value for the students and for themselves. It doesn't work if it's seen as something "extra".*
- *The threat exists that the lecturers have no time to get acquainted with the idea or have prejudices.*
- *Is it suitable for all fields of studies?*
- *Can the benefits be demonstrated?*

To summarize, in their opinion all starts with committed lecturers.



SUGGESTIONS AS THE NEXT STEPS

Thinking about all the challenges identified above, the next steps on the road of developing the ePortfolio practices need to be carefully planned at Laurea UAS. Now in early 2018 one measure in the road to proceed with digitalisation has been identified to be that every student will compile a portfolio during their studies (vice president Katri Ojasalo's presentation 22.11.2017).

To support the students training must be offered in the campus premises. At the time of eApril conference (29.11.-1.2.2017) the plan was to ensure that in the near future there will be trainers available in each campus who can motivate and coach new student groups to start curating their portfolios.

There was also a plan that teaching staff needs to be trained: first the module coordinators, who would then take the responsibility to coordinate the development work in their module to integrate the studies and portfolio process.

One idea had been to develop a peer coaching model to support the students in the ICT skills needed while making the portfolio content. Thus one student project was already implemented in autumn 2017 to verify that students are able to coach other students on how to use the ePortfolio platform. This model needs to be further considered. Peer guidance is also suggested by Kunnari et al. (2017).

In eApril we also asked the participants, who were listening to the challenges, to give their suggestions on what should be done. The eApril conference programme also provided some new ideas. These ideas are shared in the next chapters.

Tips for Planning a Training Programme for the Lecturers

First of all the training programme needs to provide a very clear answer to the question why portfolio will be used. In fact, it would be beneficial to start with combining the idea with the pedagogical model used in the university. In the case of Laurea UAS that would mean to analyse how portfolio is utilized in the context of Learning by Developing action model (see Learning by Developing Action Model 2014). That way we could hopefully form our own interpretation what we mean by an ePortfolio as it serves many purposes. These could be acknowledged as a result of creating of a common conceptual model as done elsewhere (see Buyuarski et al. 2015).

The starting point would be also to emphasize that portfolio is already successfully used in the career planning studies. To expand the usage, the audience advised us to start with one subject. In our case that could mean to start by analysing the studies



in one core competence module. Based on the analysis it needs to be then decided in which study units portfolio could be used so that students can create meaningful content in their portfolios. These plans should to be shared in a common platform. That way in the lecturers could form an ePortfolio community of practice which would be for their competence development in this area (Carson, Mcclam, Frank, Hannum & Greenhill 2014).

The Importance of Assessment and Feedback Must be Emphasized

We were reminded that the assessment criteria should guide the students while they are creating and curating the content. It would be advisable to provide guidance for the students during their first assignments and coach them to produce high-quality content. That way we could increase the students' motivation to continue to work on their portfolios. The output should be used for assessment and providing feedback. This means that the focus must be in the process not in the tools as Kunnari, Laurikainen and Ruhalahti (2017, p. 50) emphasize.

The conference audience also noted that portfolio content can be created also in pairs or in a group. That way the barriers could be reduced to start curating one's own ePortfolio.

Student Support Needs to be Further Developed

According to our audience, it would be ideal if the students were instructed on how to compile portfolios already during the introduction week. The session in which the portfolio platform is introduced should be compulsory. During the first semester there should be several follow-up sessions in small groups to discuss the portfolios and to provide feedback. Easily accessible helpdesk service could be available for technical questions or possibly a platform for the students to share their work and build confidence that they are curating an appropriate ePortfolio. As Davaere, Martens & Van den Bergh (2018) noted in their study, the teacher's need to be actively involved.

Even if the basic training materials have been created that can be used when introducing the idea of a portfolio for the students, the support materials need to be further considered. There could always be better examples and, as suggested by our audience, storytelling could be used to convince the students that a portfolio can be utilized in various situations, not only when applying for a placement or a job. These kinds of stories could be gathered from the graduates who have utilized their portfolios during their career path.



The Development Process Needs to Monitored

Thinking back we could not have got a better advice from our audience even if it is self-evident: this kind of pedagogical transformation needs to be planned and monitored. Project management tools and methods needs to be used to ensure that change is actually taking place.

The eApril conference also inspired us to think about the possibility to try to commit the lecturers to develop the practices by asking them to provide information that will be used for a practice-based research in the future. That would show them that this development challenge is taken seriously and that the value of the practices is critically analysed, not taken for granted. Perhaps the research should focus on authentic learning and portfolio outcomes. That kind of research should be done more according to an analysis made by Bryant and Chittum (2013) of prior research reports. That could also lead to a situation that this article was just the first one of many in which the story told by Laurea UAS continues.

Many thanks for our audience for your valuable tips received during our case study session.

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