**Personal Tutoring and e-Portfolios: A Cross-Sectional Study**

**Abstract**

Following the Quality Assurance Agency’s recommendation that Newcastle University prioritise its personal tutoring practice development, the decision was taken to implement an e-Portfolio system to make tutoring more accountable. However, before a full institutional implementation could take place, it was necessary to assess the benefits and limitations of e-Portfolio in a personal tutoring context from tutors’ perspectives. This article discusses the ways in which tutors used e-Portfolio for personal tutoring, the ways in which they benefitted from it and what they perceived to be its limitations. In considering how the pilot study referred to in this article has indicated the efficacy of e-Portfolio is in a personal tutoring capacity, it suggests ways in which Newcastle, and institutions further afield, can benefit from a university-wide implementation.

**Key words**

Personal Tutoring; e-Portfolio; Pastoral Care in Higher Education; e-Learning

**Introduction**

In addition to teaching and learning provisions, universities also place importance upon the role of the personal tutor. The personal tutor is a key member of staff who deals with a range of pastoral issues raised by the student, including advice on wellbeing, disciplinary action, careers options and managing academic study. However, just as teaching methods vary from lecturer to lecturer, the ways in which pastoral care is delivered also varies.Following an Institutional Audit in 2009, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) recommended that Newcastle University give high priority to the development and implementation of a revised system for personal tutoring. The next QAA review will likely take place in late 2015 and Newcastle must demonstrate that it has successfully addressed the recommendation. e-Portfolio was implemented as a response to this recommendation, as it offers greater accountability of the tutor and offers a number of innovative ways in which the tutor and tutee can communicate. It also provides a single space in which personal tutoring documents can be stored. Some departments of Newcastle University already use an electronic platform – NESS – to enhance personal tutoring. However, the use of Ness is not compulsory and is not standardised across the university: it is the university’s intention that e-Portfolio will become a compulsory, university-wide system for personal tutoring practice over the coming years. However, before the gradual roll out of e-Portfolio begins in September 2014, research pilots were implemented as there was a clear need for e-Portfolio to be assessed before use of the system was made compulsory. Questions surrounding the usability and potential limitations of the software – as perceived by tutors themselves – had yet to be established. The evaluation of those pilots is presented here, and the discussion of the findings indicates the ways in which e-Portfolio is an effective and user-friendly tool, and one which has the ability to enhance and simplify the tutoring process in-line with the University’s Personal Tutoring Framework. Given the absence of research into the use of e-Portfolios for personal tutoring, it also draws upon studies based on their academic use to situate these findings in the context of previous research. The results that are presented, though specifically obtained from Newcastle University, are applicable to other educational contexts in which there are requirements to provide pastoral care.

**Context**

The implementation and evaluation of e-Portfolio as a personal tutoring tool was conducted during Newcastle University’s second semester (February – June) of the academic year 2013 - 2014. This cross-sectional study was established a year prior to this, when pilots were implemented across the university by the Quality in Learning and Teaching (QuILT) department. The evaluation intended to focus on how e-Portfolio was being used by personal tutors with their undergraduate (UG) and taught postgraduate (PGT) students, and this report is the conclusion of that evaluation. Personal tutors were aware that they would be asked to provide feedback on e-Portfolio’s efficacy as a tutoring tool, and were asked to remain reflective throughout the pilot.

**Newcastle’s Personal Tutoring System and e-Portfolio**

Newcastle University has a strong background in using e-Portfolios in various pedagogical contexts (Cotterill et al. 2007; Cotterill et al. 2009; Cotterill et al. 2010). However this project is unique in that the e-Portfolio is being used for pastoral care and not for teaching and learning. Each UG and PGT student at Newcastle is allocated a personal tutor, ‘an appropriately trained member or senior member of academic or-academic related staff’, who must arrange to meet their tutees at least twice in the first semester, and at least once in the second (Meacher, 2010, p.1). Throughout the programme of study that the student follows, the personal tutor offers support to their tutees or directs them to other university services that are better positioned to offer support. At any point – and without giving justification (Meacher, 2010) – a student is able to request a change in personal tutor. In addition, a student’s personal tutor may change due to illness, research leave, or because a member of staff has taken an academic appointment at another institution. However, personal tutors are not only required to offer pastoral care, but often have teaching and research duties that they must also fulfil. Evidently the role of the personal tutor is an important one, but the role is not without challenges. It is the intention that the implementation of e-Portfolio into the personal tutoring framework will improve the role and practice of the tutor, without placing further demands upon their time and other workloads.

All University staff and students have access to e-Portfolio. Figure one shows the menu that is available to students upon first signing in. e-Portfolio includes sections which allow users to write blog entries (which can be either personal or shared with their communities), record their skills against the University’s Graduate Skills Framework, build a CV in a format approved by the University’s Careers Service, and arrange meetings. Figure two shows the option that tutors have when they access the ‘My Meetings’ tab. Tutors can select a period of time in which they are free and invite their tutees to sign up to meet with them to discuss personal tutoring issues: one of the current ways in which this is done is simply by pinning a paper sheet with the same information to an office door or common room notice board. From this space, they can also view the notes made in previous meetings, and export their meetings to their University Outlook calendar. Figure three shows the page that opens when a meeting is recorded. As well as offering a sense of the time and place that the meeting took place, the participants are also listed, as well as any notes that the student or tutor adds to the meeting. The written content is viewable by both the student and the tutor, and both have the option to add text to the record.



**Figure 1.** The e-Portfolio not only allows personal tutoring meetings to be recorded, but offers a range of tools relevant to personal development planning (PDP).



**Figure 2.** The ‘My Meetings’ tab takes users to the options relating to creating new meetings or listing previous ones.



**Figure 3.** The e-Portfolio creates a record of when and where a meeting took place, as well as who was in attendance and what was discussed.

**Methodology**

In order to fully gauge how effective e-Portfolio had been in a personal tutoring context, the tutors involved were asked to fill in an extensive electronic questionnaire (though two respondents answered on paper). The interview featured a range of closed and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative data, the former of which would allow for statistical analysis. Where closed questions were used, these tended to be ‘yes’ / ‘no’ questions, and were followed up with an opportunity for the respondent to qualify their answers. Following the analysis of the tutors’ responses, several interviews were held to discuss specific points that had been made, or gestured towards, but not elaborated on. 14 personal tutors responded to the questionnaire: eight from the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering (SAgE), five from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) and one from the Faculty of Medical Science (FMS). Following on from this, five personal tutors were interviewed: three from HaSS and two from SAgE.

**Results**

The questionnaire responses and interview comments are detailed in the tables below, and the content is analysed in the discussion section. Where ‘N/A’ is listed, this represents a member of staff who was unable to fully participate in the pilot due to technical difficulties, but gained experience using e-Portfolio towards the end of the pilot. This respondent is not included in the calculation of the final percentages presented in the tables. Similarly, where no response was given, this respondent is not included in the calculation of percentages.

**Table 1. ‘Did you use e-Portfolio to schedule meetings with tutees?’**

Yes 11 85%
No 2 15%
N/A 1

**Table 2. ‘Were notes added to the meeting using e-Portfolio?’**

Yes 7 54%
No 6 46%
N/A 1

**Table 3. ‘If you answered ‘yes’ to the above, whose responsibility was it to add the notes?’**

The tutor’s 5 71%
The student’s 2 29%

**Table 4. ‘If you, the tutor, took the notes, had you considered delegating this responsibility to the student?’**

Yes 2 40%
No 3 60%

**Table 5. ‘Is there a recognisable benefit to being able to add notes to e-Portfolio meetings?’**

Yes 10 77%
No 3 23%
No response 1

**Table 6. A sample of responses from open-ended questions.**

If it was the student’s responsibility to add notes to the meeting, how did the student feel about recording the notes?

‘Where I asked the students to fill in the notes but I found these to be too brief. They did not capture the important information in enough detail’

‘Some were happy to do that, some did not add notes’

As a personal tutor, do you have any concerns about the student being responsible for recording the minutes of the meeting? If so, what are your concerns and why?

‘Yes - they won't make complete minutes’

‘I hope that I would still be able to add my own notes and hence would not be too concerned about this (would also drop a note to student to update the records if there were any inaccuracies, although this is starting to demand more and more of the tutor's time.’

‘No’

‘I did not do it this year as I wanted to take it step by step. Next year it will probably be a joint task between me and the tutee (the tutee writing the notes and I adding to them if necessary).’

‘For my tutees, I would prefer to retain the responsibility for recording notes - as much as anything else, I want to make sure that any advice that I have given is correctly recorded.’’

‘Notes by students generally tend to be too brief.’

‘In my opinion students should be responsible for taking notes and we need to encourage them more to do that, hoping that they eventually will. Main concern is they will not do it and any important information will not be recorded.’

‘I did try first time round to get the tutees to write the notes themselves but only one did. I prefer to make a brief note myself while the meeting is fresh in my mind’

If you did consider delegating this role to the student, but did not, why did you decide against it?

‘I would next year but not this as it is the first time it has been used’

‘Students need proper training to do this properly’

Think about the process that led up to deciding who wrote the notes. What was this process? Did you, for example, ask the student their views on being responsible for creating the notes?

‘I took responsibility’

‘I haven't but will ask my tutees what they think about it in the next few meetings.’

‘I gave them the responsibility of doing this at the start in order to see how well they could do it but it has not worked very well in most cases.’

‘We had some discussion but I was happier making the basic notes myself and then asking them to add these. Some did, some didn't.’

If you said that there were clear benefits to using e-Portfolio to schedule meetings, what were the benefits?

‘It meant the students didn't have to come and sign a sign-up sheet on my door, which they often don't do in advance.’

‘Time slots (although in some cases they didn't work properly)’

‘Easy to use. No lists in the common room for students to sign up to - a confirmation was sent.’

‘It made the process much easier overall’

‘It meant that I did not have to put a 'sign up' sheet on my door, which allowed the students to book their meeting remotely.’

‘Can manage the booking system more efficiently i.e. send booking slots to appropriate groups of students in a few clicks, rather than looking for students' emails and emailing them.’

‘It is easier to keep track of meetings, attendance and notes’

‘The ability to see and pick from a list of all tutees, as well as being able to filter according to stage, degree, etc.’

‘Booking slots were useful (but cumbersome - I know this is being improved’

If you said that there were clear benefits to using e-Portfolio to record meeting notes, what were the benefits?

‘Scheduling of meetings’

‘To be able to check my tutees' marks, timetable etc. all in the same place - the

“one-stop-shop" for personal tutoring is what I like best about using the ePortfolio for tutoring.’

‘Easy access to information (marks, timetable etc.)’

‘None. I only used it to set up the meeting but NESS can do the same’

‘e-mails I have been sent to confirm that student booked a slot.’

‘The interactive nature of the notes’

What potential barriers might stop the implementation of e-Portfolio across the University?

‘Other older systems in place that do a lot of the same tasks in a wider environment (e.g. NESS) that people are likely to keep using’

‘Still need to work on this being 'the single system' to be used and connect directly to Outlook to make it as easy as possible for both tutors and students to use.’

‘Ensuring access to the portfolio in the absence of the allocated personal tutor’

‘Some tutors may be reluctant to embrace the ePortfolio for personal tutoring as some fear this will increase their workload.’

‘Overlap with NESS?’

‘I would like a more social media way of doing it.’

‘Supervisors not willing to give it a go’

‘Being able to set up meeting slots over multiple days is essential.’

‘Worries about who can see what.’

Was there any aspect of e-Portfolio which you found to be a personal barrier?

‘No way of capturing the student non-cooperation at the moment I don't think (student being invited, but not attending).’

‘Would be good if it allowed the option of printing out a hardcopy of the note to attach to the file.’

‘I did find that recording notes (and finding them afterwards) was not always as straightforward as could have been. The marks given for students aren't always up-to-date either but I'm not sure this is due to the ePortfolio…’

‘I could sign students up for meetings (sometimes they e-mailed me asking me to do this as they were experiencing technical problems)’

‘Lack of clarity about when e-portfolio is sending automatic emails. E.g. if I make a note on a student's e-portfolio do they receive notification? And am I notified if they make notes? Some notes need to be shared more widely - eg private notes of concern about a student visible to tutor, DPD or senior tutor. This is possible in NESS, but not clear how this will continue to work if e-portfolio becomes the only location for our tutor notes.’

**Table 7. A sample of responses from staff interviews.**

Would you make use of being able to add audio, rather than written, meeting notes?

‘No but it is good idea if the student agrees to it but you would need audio recording equipment which may make students shy as people don’t speak in the same way when they know they’re being recorded’

‘Written notes are a more efficient use of time’

‘Probably not – some people might – it’s down to personal preference about how you record information and refer back to it’

‘I’d prefer written records’

How would you expect the transitional process when a student changes tutor to be managed?

 ‘There should be somebody who has overall access. Most likely the Senior Tutor’

‘There could be two levels of notes, the personal notes that the tutor keeps and the more formal summary of the meeting which the Senior Tutor has access to’

‘Senior Tutor access is important’

‘There needs to be consistency [across the university] about how we share and document information’

Do you have any views on data confidentiality in e-Portfolio? What do you think about the idea of it becoming a social media platform?

 ‘I would like to have both [social media and strict privacy], but there needs to be confidentiality between the tutor and tutee’

‘There is the risk of accidentally sharing something with somebody who you don’t want to see it or accidentally sharing it with a community, and so there should be a prominent and obvious pop-up to let you know who can see what you have written’

‘There should be a generic dummy account for training purposes as I could see \*\*\*\*\*\*’s tutees’ information during the training session’

‘No [to social media idea], I’m always wary about confidentiality’

‘No it should be private and strictly confidential by default. It’s not a social media space’

‘I’d prefer a confidential route – how would you regulate / police social media?

What are you views on students taking notes?

‘I’d prefer to maintain responsibility to record important information but I am concerned about whose responsibility the University are officially saying it is to record the notes’

‘It should remain optional and shouldn’t be a constraint. There could be two sets of notes if needed’

 ‘I’d prefer to as the tutor’s advice should be correctly recorded’

‘It’s not a good idea for students to take the notes – see them, yes, but take them, no – because this would create more work for the tutor who would have to scrutinise everything’

‘There’s no risk in asking the student to if you can add your own afterwards. I’d probably just do it myself anyway if the student didn’t’

To help students understand the role of the tutor and the purpose of meetings, would it be useful if the note section contained headers to scaffold the meeting and the notes?

‘Yes this would help tutors as well as tutees because I’m not even sure about my role as a personal tutor’

‘This would be extremely helpful as some staff take tutoring more seriously than others. Students would know the role of the tutor if their own tutor didn’t tell them’

‘This would be good – but it would also be good to have this information in as many places as possible – and [e-Portfolio] could also direct students to other services and facilities to show them what other forms of help are available’

‘It would be useful if it was formatted like a form to fill in – I use that layout anyway’

How did your students find using e-Portfolio?

‘All students said that it was easy to sign up’

‘There needs to be some kind of staff training and introduction at student inductions on it’

‘e-Portfolio is much more user-friendly for tutoring’

‘All of my students were fine except for one or two’

‘Some students were confused by generally they found it easier to use’

How has e-Portfolio impacted upon your workload?

 ‘It has made my job easier. There’s a misconception of how it works, and it’s easy having everything in one place’

‘It’s more convenient to use e-Portfolio as it removes the need for physical timesheets and signing up’

‘It’s just a case of transferring what you were – or should have been – doing before to somewhere else’

‘It’s the same – a different method of doing the same thing – but better than receiving a load of emails’

**Discussion**

Though all of the data presented above is linked by its emergence from the same sources, much of it is disparate and relates to specific elements of personal tutoring or particular issues arising from the use of e-Portfolio. Thus, in order to draw more meaningful conclusions, this section employs a thematic analysis and focuses upon three main areas: the current practices employed; possible limitations and suggested improvements; and confidentiality, handling information and tutors’ theorisations of the most appropriate way for an institution-wide implementation of the software.

**Current Practice**

There is much to be celebrated about the use of e-Portfolio as a personal tutoring tool. 85% of those involved in the pilots used e-Portfolio to schedule meetings with their tutees, and numerous respondents pointed to the ability to do so as a particular benefit. For both tutors and their tutees, not requiring a sign-up sheet on the office door is identified as a particular benefit. Tutors specify that students are no longer required to travel to the office and tutors do not have to manually enter the data into their Outlook calendar: as one respondent pointed out, much of the physicality of the old system is removed by e-Portfolio. Also welcomed was the email confirmations which are automatically sent from e-Portfolio to confirm that a student has signed up to a meeting, however some respondents were keen for e-Portfolio to also include a reminder system which would inform students that they had upcoming meetings, and a tool to note when students did not turn up to scheduled meetings.

In addition, 54% of tutors added notes to their meetings despite doing so being optional. The ability to make notes was listed as one of the most beneficial features of e-Portfolio and 77% of all respondents could see its usefulness. In 71% of those instances where notes were kept, the notes were made by the tutor and not the tutee. The reason for this varies. In some instances the tutor viewed the role of note-taker to be the natural duty of the tutor as it is important that the record reflects exactly what the tutor said. It was also the case that some tutors did not think that the tutee would note the right information, or create a record in as much depth as was necessary. One tutor expressed the view that serious issues should be recorded by the tutor, but less serious issues could be noted by the student. Another made the observation that it was more efficient for the tutor to take the notes following the meeting, rather than the tutee, as the tutor would then have to scrutinise and edit their notes thus increasing the tutor’s workload. However one recent development now allows the tutor to receive a weekly digest of student-written notes, which may alleviate this issue somewhat, though the content of the notes would still prove problematic in this context. Of the 71% of tutors who took responsibility for note writing, 60% said that they would not consider delegating this role to students. This was qualified by various respondents stating that they had originally asked students to take the notes, but what was produced was too short and overlooked what the tutor perceived to be important information. However, the 40% that would consider allow students to take notes in the future had expressed the view that it was not appropriate to do so this year as they wished to establish a greater understanding of, and confidence in, the use of e-Portfolio. Of all of those asked, no tutor indicated that it would be desirable to replace written notes with audio notes: this way mainly due to personal preference and the notion that it is easier to browse written notes than it is to search through an audio file.

Finally, tutors were unanimous in stating that e-Portfolio either decreased their workload or that it remained the same. Tutors’ description of implementing e-Portfolio into their practice was one of simply having to continue what they had done previously in a new virtual space. Indeed, Louise Frith (2010) and Elizabeth Symonds (2010), in separate studies, indicated that e-Portfolios are more effectively implemented when they are incorporated into previous practice. This is congruent with what tutors at Newcastle have described and their experience supports Frith’s description of such a ‘smooth process’ (p.13).

**Limitations and Possible Improvements**

One of the limitations of the practice surrounding e-Portfolio related to student engagement. Students who had been asked to take notes had not done so competently, or in some cases, at all. As it is optional to include notes under the new Newcastle University Personal Tutoring Framework (and only compulsory to note that a meeting has taken place), tutors felt that they could not discipline students who failed to make the notes they requested. When a version of this paper was given at the 2014 Newcastle University Learning and Teaching Conference, two points were raised in response to this. Firstly, one member of staff noted that students could not be expected to provide detailed notes as they are unlikely to have had any prior experience of doing so. Indeed, this was mentioned by another tutor who suggested that the notes section of e-Portfolio should have headers to scaffold the notes that are written, adding that this would make the role of the personal tutor clear to both students and tutors. Rachel Moule and Ethan Rhemahn (2010, p.13) have previously described the benefits of scaffolding to support those who are not, in academic terms, deep learners to reflect; by extension tutors have indicated that this is true of tutoring. Furthermore, a number of tutors interviewed subsequent to this approved this approach, and one added that she currently uses a sheet with headers to conduct meetings which the e-Portfolio notes could adopt (headers included “Personal Issues”, “Personal Development Planning”, “Careers” and “Actions”). Secondly, it was also suggested by a delegate that students would need to be engaged in order for the implementations to be a success: he believed that this could be achieved by promoting the benefits of e-Portfolio (its ease of use and quickening of the tutoring process) to students to highlight how it works in their favour.

Similarly, tutors interviewed indicated that another barrier that might hinder e-Portfolio’s implementation was a lack of willingness to on tutors’ behalf to use it, especially those already using NESS. One interviewee expressed the view that it was the misconception of e-Portfolio adding to the tutor’s workload that would be likely to cause such an attitude. This misconception is contrary to what the research has suggested: tutors, as mentioned, did not find this was the case, but it seems necessary that this point is made clear to tutors before the implementation in order to encourage tutors’ engagement with it. To a similar extent, it is also necessary to ensure that tutors are made aware of updates to e-Portfolio. In two interviews, when asked about e-Portfolio’s limitations, tutors mentioned the lack of Outlook calendar integration and the inability to print a hard copy of the meeting notes. However, at the time of the interviews these issues had been resolved and both tutors were unaware of this. Though the issues they raised were already resolved, this did indicate that they had not realised this, and that tutors would need to be regularly notified about changes to the programme.

**Confidentiality, Data and Implementation**

The final limitation mentioned was that, for one tutor, e-Portfolio should become a form of social media. However this suggestion was contradicted by several points regarding confidentiality. When asked about e-Portfolio becoming a social media space, tutors unanimously agreed that this would be inappropriate and that it was important for information to remain secure: tutors evidently have anxieties about “who can see what”.

Generally, tutors agreed that there are occasions when their notes may need to be seen by others. Most cited were those occasions where a student changes tutor, something which can happen for a number of reasons, and the new tutors require the predecessors’ notes to ensure continuity. Tutors shared the view that it should be the Senior Tutor in each academic school who should have responsibility for overseeing this transition. However, the Senior Tutor to simply accessing the notes without the student’s permission is not congruent with the Personal Tutoring Framework which stipulates that a student’s permission is needed. In response to this, e-Portfolio is being developed to include a feature which allows the student to authorise a new tutor to view their meeting notes: staff feedback suggests that the Senior Tutor should ensure that the student gives this authorisation to their new tutor: it is due for September release. In doing so, the transition is well-managed and tutors’ anxieties towards confidentiality being broken are also addressed.

**Conclusions**

Overall, e-Portfolio has proven successful in allowing tutors at Newcastle University to continue their professional practice in-line with the institution’s Personal Tutoring Framework. In addition, it has also proven popular with members of staff: they have described the ease of using the tool, its multiple benefits, and its alleviation of their workload. The ability to quicken the tutoring process and to allow tutor and tutee to create shared, agreed-upon notes was particularly beneficial. Where limitations to using the tool have been suggested, these have related more to the practice surrounding e-Portfolio rather than the actual platform: lack of awareness of recent developments, anxieties surrounding the confidentiality of information, and the unwillingness of some tutors to use it due to their misconceptions are three such examples. However, the findings of this report indicate that the successful implementation of e-Portfolio will be beneficial to staff and students alike, though the university must clearly articulate how and why. Indeed, as these results are generalisable, it is likely to be the aim of any university to place an emphasis upon the benefits that e-Portfolios can offer. Furthermore, the e-Portfolio also makes the tutor more accountable to the Senior Tutor, and tutors have suggested ways in which the introduction of scaffolding to the notes section (something which has proven successful in other aforementioned case studies) can make clear the role of the tutor.

**References**

Cotterill, S. (2010). ‘Blogs and e-Portfolios: can they support reflection, evidencing and dialogue in teacher training?. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.

Cotterill, S., Horner, P. and Edney, M. (2009) *EPICS-2: North East regional collaboration for personalised, work-based, and life-long learning. Final project report.* Available at: http://www.epics.ac.uk/report (Accessed: 12 June 2014).

Cotterill, S., Horner, P., Gill, S., McDonald, A.M., Drummond, P., Teasdale, D., Whitworth, A. and Hammond, G.R. (2007) ‘Beyond the Blog: getting the right level of structure in an ePortfolio to support learning’, *Conference Proceedings: ePortfolios 2007.* Maastricht 18-19 October.

Frith, L. (2010). ‘How do different models of PDP influence the embedding of e-Portfolio?’. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.

Meacher, S. (2010). *Framework for Personal Tutoring*. Available at: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/quilt/resources/engagement/tutoring.htm>. (Accessed: 09.06.2014)

Moule, R. and Rheman, E. (2010). ‘Student experience with e-Portfolio: exploring the roles of trust and creativity’. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.

Symonds, E. (2010). ‘Evaluating an e-Portfolio implementation with early adopters using Appreciative Inquiry’. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*.