



Preparing our students for the best job not just any job: Helping our pre-registration nursing and midwifery students to use their PebblePad electronic portfolio as a platform to showcase their employment potential

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A case study from PebblePad's 2016 'Future Ready' conference on preparing and equipping learners for their journey.

The Context

We are told that current employment prospects for graduate registered nurses and midwives are excellent with reportedly more jobs available than registrants to fill them. Recruitment competition within the National Health Service (NHS) and the private, independent and voluntary healthcare organisations is high, and the deficit between registrants seeking employment and vacancies is such that some Trusts are looking overseas to recruit. As we know from experience, the healthcare labour market can be unpredictable and the current situation may not last. Our local statistics from the University of York Department of Health Sciences demonstrate that over the past 2 years 99.4% of our nursing graduates and 100% of our midwifery graduates went on to gain employment, with many of them entering the local healthcare workforce. However, with the introduction of the nursing associate role, speculation is that in the future there will be a decrease in demand for degree level registered nurses and midwives, as much of the nursing workforce will be made up of the new nursing associate level. At the University of York we want to ensure that our graduates are both employable in the current climate when jobs are abundant and are also prepared for an uncertain future.

The Problem

Our aim is to enable our graduates to showcase their achievements and market their talents so that employers can fully realise their potential. We want our students to be competitive, aim high, and secure not just the first job they come across but the best job available when they first graduate and throughout their careers.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are unsure of the consequences of the removal of the current bursary system for nursing and midwifery students and the move to our students taking out a loan to pay for their tuition fees. The students will become our 'consumers' and potentially will

have an increased expectation for assurance and evidence that individual HEIs are supporting their graduates to secure employment at the end of their programme.

Traditionally our students have produced personal statements and portfolios in a predictable format and presentation style, without demonstrating flair or imagination and with nothing special to distinguish their uniqueness and individual qualities. We must provide them with a platform for a secure, portable and professional portfolio to make them stand out from other candidates and demonstrate that they are fit for purpose in the workforce. The emphasis must, of course, focus on the quality of the contents of the portfolio and not the quality of its appearance.

It is predicted that our future students' ambitions will be less limited to the local employment market and, due to the potential of recruiting admissions from overseas to our programmes on removal of the bursary system, students may be looking more towards joining the national and global workforce. This will move away from the situation where a student is personally known by the employer through previous practice placement and is 'invited back' post registration, to a situation where the student will really have to 'sell' themselves.

The Approach

Since October 2013 all pre-registration students on the BSc (Hons) Nursing, MNursing and Postgraduate Diploma in Nursing programmes at the University of York have been using PebblePad to document the ongoing achievement record of their learning in practice. Following the success in these programmes, PebblePad was subsequently introduced to the BA (Hons) Midwifery programme and Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care programme in Oct 2015. PebblePad was chosen by the Department of Health Sciences for its security, flexibility and portability. The interactive functionality whereby the student's personal supervisor, the link lecturer, and mentors in practice can all view and contribute to the work that the student has submitted from their portfolio, giving formative, dialogic and summative feedback, has proven to be of great benefit to our students and follows the York pedagogy strategy. With our increasing familiarity with the functions of PebblePad it has been a natural progression to encourage our students to start to expand their existing undergraduate portfolio into a post registration portfolio utilising technology they are already experienced and familiar with.

Our pre-registration students have a planned, staged introduction to PebblePad's functions appropriate to their stage in the programme and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) progression points. It is emphasised from the outset that the programme the student has enrolled on is just the first step in their career. Students are made aware that to maintain their NMC registration as a postgraduate nurse or midwife they are obliged to keep a portfolio of evidence of their practice hours, continuing professional development, reflective practice, and practice-related feedback. The evidence must be confirmed by a third party and provided to the

NMC if requested. Keeping a professional portfolio is not only an NMC requirement but is good practice, and elements of the portfolio can be adapted and used in personal statements and presentations to prospective employers. The alumni account offered to students on completion of the programme provides an online portfolio in which they can record and securely store this evidence.

As our nursing and midwifery programmes are applied disciplines there is an assumption that students who enrol on the programmes plan to secure a job as a nurse or a midwife on completion. Local Trust employers start their recruitment for graduates about 6 months before students complete their programmes and while we make the students aware of the portfolio building tools within PebblePad early in the course, we have found that it is not until the reality of applying for a job kicks in that the students really start to engage with it.

In preparation for employment, the Department of Health Sciences and our practice partners from the local Trusts, and from private, independent, and voluntary organisations invite students who will graduate within the next six months to a one day careers fair. This event includes presentations on collecting evidence for and writing a CV and personal statement, keeping a personal portfolio, preparing for interview and interview techniques. 'Market stalls' are set up by the potential employers to give students the opportunity to discuss and explore career options within a variety of organisations. The eportfolio team has been invited to participate in this event by demonstrating, in a presentation, the functions in PebblePad to help the students recognise the potential of the system, and plans to invite students to a series of follow up, drop in, 'play along' sessions.

In addition to the careers fair, portfolio building presentations, and drop in sessions, we have a timetabled 'completion' session for those who are about to register with the NMC, where we explore with the students the PebblePad alumni account, recording evidence of lifelong learning, and the NMC revalidation requirements. These sessions are followed up with an email to reiterate that we will be closing their University of York PebblePad account and the advice about opening an alumni account.

Most students recognise the advantages of building their portfolio in PebblePad in that it is secure, portable and flexible. They feel comfortable with the technology as they have been using PebblePad as undergraduates throughout their programme. They have an appreciation that starting a portfolio of lifelong learning, employment and education history gives them the opportunity to not only complete their personal information in a transferable format, but also allows them to attach evidence to showcase their individual competencies, talents and abilities in a logical and tidy presentation.

Our students have the opportunity to open an alumni account after they graduate which allows them to keep the portfolio they have created as an undergraduate, plus any work they have

completed towards their job applications and career development. In the alumni account they can continue to keep a personal portfolio as a record of evidence for revalidation with the NMC as well as for future career development and job applications. As more HEI's come on board with PebblePad it will be possible for the student to bolt their alumni PebblePad account onto another University's system and continue to use the same portfolio, thus keeping their evidence of lifelong learning in a continuous, secure, portable and familiar environment.

The Challenges

Most of our students have indicated that they plan to embrace the opportunity to use their PebblePad portfolio as a platform for employment application, recording lifelong learning, and as a career planning tool. However, there are pockets of resistance from students who need reassurance that their alumni account is in a secure, private space as they associate PebblePad with an assessment tool which is accessed by their mentors and personal supervisor in practice. Reassurance can be given that only those who they give permission to can see their work and that they can choose to share selected parts and not the whole of the portfolio. There have also been some negative comments from students who view their PebblePad portfolio as a necessary evil which they engage with for the minimum amount they have to in order to complete the programme and fail to recognise the value as an alumni account on completion.

One of our major considerations is timeliness. We have carefully managed the point of introduction of the lifelong learning portfolio for NMC revalidation and the opening of an alumni account. If introduced too early in the programme the students are too preoccupied with course work and future employment seems a long way off. Introduced too late and they have missed an opportunity.

While we are always delighted to have students who are as enthusiastic about engaging with PebblePad as we are, we must also advise the student who has fully embraced PebblePad to be mindful about what they are sending to prospective employers, to tailor their personal statement and only send the information relevant to the job they are applying for.

The Results and Lessons Learned

Postgraduate employability and employment rates feature highly on all university agendas in today's political and economic climate. Any advantage we can give our students which leads to a positive outcome is valuable not only for the individual student and our university but for the bigger picture of higher education's contribution to the workforce.

While we collect data on the numbers of our nursing and midwifery students gaining post graduate employment, due to the privacy properties of the system we will be unable to measure how many of those students are using functions in their PebblePad portfolio in their job applications and, if

they do, whether or not the applications were of a better quality and influenced the prospective employer. Likewise we are unable to collect data on the uptake of the alumni account by our students.

Moving Forward

So far, we have only had one cohort of 160 student nurses graduate (October 2015) and enter the NMC register after having used PebblePad throughout their programme. We recognise that we were not fully prepared to support this cohort in fully utilising the functions of PebblePad due to our own lack of knowledge of the potential of the system. Our time and energy had been focused on the successful completion and management of the undergraduate portfolio during the programme and not on the next step.

Moving forward, we plan to introduce a more robust strategy as outlined earlier to inform the students of the potential for using PebblePad to showcase their talents and achievements and to promote the alumni account for them to keep evidence of lifelong learning. We are planning to collect data on student uptake amongst those who have used the evidence in their portfolio in job applications and those who have opened alumni accounts. This data will be gathered directly from the students via evaluation questionnaires.

Using PebblePad to ensure that our students are future ready is not only being promoted within the Department of Health Sciences but also in the wider university community, with interest from the Vice Chancellor during an annual review of employability of post graduates from the University of York, and through liaison with the university careers service.

In Brief – Showcasing ‘Future Readiness’ with PebblePad

PebblePad can give the students a platform to build a lifelong portfolio and give them the opportunity to showcase their talents, achievements and ambitions to:

- Secure the best jobs in a changing employment market
- Build a portfolio of evidence for NMC revalidation
- Demonstrate personal and professional development