Blue sky innovation with pragmatic incrustation

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The Context

The existing eportfolio solution available at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) as part of the Learning Management System (LMS) package had remained relatively unchanged for over 5 years. Within this period stakeholders representing service organisations and faculty held numerous meetings with the vendor to raise critical issues relating to the product. However, these discussions proved ineffective in gaining updates to the product with the necessary functionality. The vendor then announced an impending update release of their eportfolio product targeted at early childhood and primary education contexts, with higher education requirements flagged for consideration for "sometime" over the next 2 years. After consultation with internal University stakeholders it became clear that UTAS could not wait for another 2 (or more) years in the hope that the current product might evolve to meet current and future academic requirements. In fact, it was not made clear by the vendor that they could or would ever be able to meet these identified requirements.

The Problem

With the existing eportfolio application not fit-for-purpose, many academic programs refused to use it, resulting in the following sequence of events:

- Individual academic staff refused to engage with the eportfolio application, especially when it was perceived as nonessential to the course. This led to many unique workarounds and ad-hoc software solutions which the central UTAS Information Technology Services (ITS) could not support.
- The Faculties of Education and Health Sciences considered separate, self-funded approaches to investigate and secure a third-party application. They were facing increasing pressure from industry and, in particular, the Teacher Registration Board (TRB) to come up with a

- professional portfolio solution that graduates could take with them into the workplace, which was useful and maintainable.
- In consultation with both faculties, an agreement was reached to attempt to develop and promote a coordinated project proposal, avoiding central support/resource issues and cost duplication.
- This emerging issue was taken to both the ITS Services Director and the PVC (Learning & Teaching), presenting them both with the critical need for UTAS to supply a suitable eportfolio application because of the increasing risk to institutional reputation and the inevitable outcomes should faculties independently fund such an endeavour.
- The groundswell movement of one school, then another, followed by external industry requirements provided unassailable support for the project, something which management could no longer ignore. Approval to form a working group was obtained and funds were sourced.

The Approach

A project plan was devised that outlined the need to consider a fit-for-purpose application that also might offer a significant opportunity for contextualised cultural change in the way learning and teaching could be developed by academic staff and experienced by students at UTAS. This initiative received in principle support from Faculties and was approved via the UTAS Technology Enhanced Learning & Teaching Governance Group as a high priority. A working group was established to define the initiative so that it met institutional as well as learning and teaching requirements.

The primary objective(s) of the project were to evaluate, select and implement an eportfolio solution that best supported:

- the provision of quality learning experiences for students;
- data collection and documentation of student attainment of learning outcomes; and
- the capacity of courses and the University to provide evidence of student learning for benchmarking, accreditation and auditing purposes.

Courses in Nursing, Education and University College Associate Degrees all identified an appropriate professional portfolio capability as a core and underpinning component of their course offerings, along with also being a critical industry requirement. All contributed to the project as part of the information gathering exercises leading to the development of essential business requirements. An appropriate and functional portfolio system is also a critical component of the Work Integrated Learning framework being developed as part of the University's *Degrees of Difference* education model.

Evaluation criteria and a series of case studies/usage scenarios were developed in collaboration with representatives from the following areas:

- School of Health Sciences;
- Faculty of Education;
- University College;
- School of Architecture and Design; and
- Tasmanian Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT).

The evaluation criteria were used to assess systems capacity to best meet and exceed UTAS's current and future business requirements for a portfolio system.

Efficiencies to be realised in a number of key areas included:

- Academic staff and students will have access to a portfolio platform that is functional, is easy to use and enables them to complete teaching and learning activities without being concerned about the technology.
- Practical Experience components for Education and Nursing degrees: Guided and streamlined processes within the portfolio system to evidence logged hours of practicum, supervisor feedback, completion of electronic workbooks and competencies. Many of these activities are currently paper based and tedious to manage and maintain for both student, staff member, external stakeholders and Faculty.
- Benchmarking, auditing and reporting: Grades, feedback and the associated submitted evidence from the portfolios are easily accessible within the portfolio system and can be used for both cross institutional benchmarking and re-accreditation, where the regulator demands that evidence of standards aligned with student competence over time is provided.
- A valuable tool for Academic staff to evidence their achievements to meet the University's performance expectations for both research and teaching.
- Lifelong access for students brings the UTAS brand into the workplace after they graduate, leading to efficiencies in communicating the UTAS brand in future.

The initial project was designed and developed across 3 stages:

- Stage 1 (July - November 2017): Evaluate technologies against requirements through a tender process and make recommendation

    Evaluation and selection occurred through a formal tender process of market leaders with established mature products. Representatives from the participating schools, TILT, and IT Services staff supporting Technology Enhanced Learning & Teaching (TELT), worked as a team to evaluate the technologies against established requirements and case studies, and recommend the procurement of a best-fit solution. Ongoing costs associated with the

incumbent system, as well as potential replacement systems, were also evaluated, as well as potential funding issues impacting the E-portfolio Replacement Project business case approved by the Capital Infrastructure Committee.

- Stage 2 (November 2017 - February 2018): Procure and implement chosen solution

  Implementation of the chosen solution (PebblePad) occurred in late November 2017. Course offerings required significant lead-time to set up workbook templates, assessment items and scaffolded learning & teaching materials applicable to their disciplines in order to be ready for student access and soft launch usage by staff and students in Semester 1, 2018 (February).

  Vendor led documentation, training, and support activities were launched for the three main stakeholder faculties and the University College from late November/early December 2017.

- Stage 3 (February - June 2018): Migration and Sunset of the incumbent eportfolio system data
  The existing system was discontinued after materials were migrated to the new system if appropriate or exported from the system for archiving if necessary.

  Training and support for schools new to the project commenced by reviewing and designing embedded eportfolio components into their learning and teaching activities.

  The closure of project, transition of ownership to the institutional business owner (Head, Tasmanian Institute of Learning and Teaching), and move to an ongoing support model.

- Stage 4 (June - December 2018): The project team will develop further strategies around communication and integrating learning and teaching expertise with academic staff and students.

  The priority is a sustained institutional adoption continuing through specific areas of study leading into Semester 2. This means no broad institutional communications to all staff and students until the project team have a full understanding of the functionality of PebblePad and have all spent some time working in particular study areas that have industry led requirements in using portfolios for professional accreditation purposes.

The eportfolio practicalities were, and are, but a small part of the overall PebblePad product offerings. In order to future proof this decision, and for the application to realise anything near its demonstrated capability for staff and students, there needed to be created a cohesive strategy for communication, professional development and empowerment to and by staff to engage with the application and the culturally different thinking around a virtual learning space. To this

end the TILT will seek managerial support in recommending that clear guidance and leadership be provided and aligned to support the University's proposed Degrees of Difference education model.

The Results

Through the implementation of PebblePad the University of Tasmania has the opportunity to display its commitment to a student-centred learning experience that links to the needs of industry and the ever-changing employment market. The following outlines some high-level opportunities available through institutional implementation and adoption:

- Endorsement of Degrees of Difference through a new, institutional approach to learning and teaching at the University of Tasmania.
- Enhancement of the student experience through the development of learning spaces for both academic and non-academic 'learnings'.
- Bringing learning and teaching closer to industry requirements and expectations through accreditation, as well as increased acknowledgement of work-integrated learning and skills development.
- Support the University's mission on sustainability and the environment through increased use of technology.

In the two months since going live (Feb-March) there are now more than 3000 users enrolled into PebblePad across a number of study areas including the Faculty of Education, UTAS College, Faculty of Medicine (clinical placement) and some breadth units.

Semester two will see a soft-launch orchestrated expansion, offering the application (through existing champions) into new areas across the institution with the end goal of enrolling another 15,000 users into the system. The final 12,000 users will be on-boarded during the normal release of units and courses in semester one 2019.

Lessons Learnt

From a technical perspective, establish a good working relationship with the PebblePad team and their technical representatives. This becomes critical if an LTI or ADFS integration does not quite perform as it should. As the first institution-wide adoption and implementation of PebblePad with full integration with the Desire2Learn (D2L) LMS, these relationships were essential for success at UTAS.

From an ITS project perspective, the initial implementation of PebblePad exhibited few risks. Through an intensive two-day implementation workshop involving case studies of implementation and lessons learned from other Australian universities, it was evident that for sustained and

successful implementation of the system, increased senior management sponsorship and support through both advocacy and initial resourcing was required.

From a learning & teaching perspective, be cognisant of the start-up risks which include:

- Lack of institution-wide support, advocacy and resourcing which must be provided by management;
- An inconsistent learning and teaching experience for students unless guided at the whole of course level;
- Accreditation risk particularly in areas such as education and nursing, if industry is not consulted and provided with sufficient information; and
- Lack of visibility for both staff and students of changes to learning and teaching that align with both Degrees of Difference and New State of Mind education models.

Take home messages about 'Scaling up'

- Resist the urge to respond to comments (in July 2017) like "I might be able to fund your project, but you will need to commit and spend the funds before the end of the year".
- Take the time to gather detailed information of all possible tasks, interactions (within and outside the institution), outcomes and outputs required by the initial adopting disciplines
- Develop accurate and realistic case studies for vendors to respond to as this allows them opportunity to showcase features that you may not know or have even thought about that could really benefit your final project outcome(s)

Having now attempted, and some would say, achieved, the near-impossible (given the tight timeframe), the project is still in its infancy and was only realised through the concerted efforts of a small group of people who believed their institution could provide a better experience for staff and students – and just wouldn't take no for an answer.

To view further case studies from PebbleBash 2018 please visit https://bit.ly/PB18PUBS