

The short and the long of it: Sustaining workbooks from three weeks to three years

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Chosen theme(s)

Unit level implementation

Program curriculum

Professional learning and accreditation

Overview

This report details case studies from four different faculties where we used the workbook tool in the enterprise-level eportfolio system (PebblePad) as the preferred design solution. The formal learning periods during which students engaged with the activities ranged from three weeks to three years.

The workbook feature allows multiple templates to be created and compiled for students. They were used in our designs to support a variety of learning outcomes; developing iterative writing skills, nurturing the application of theory to practice, facilitating reflection and personal goal-setting and collecting evidence of learning during placement for accreditation.

The anticipated benefits of using a structured collection of templates were to scaffold the development of the target learning skills and to provide more opportunities for formative feedback. Even where the formal class contact was short, the activities were designed to model a process that had relevance beyond the unit of study. We hoped that students could and would reuse and build upon their initial work.

Reflection on the outcomes and challenges of implementing the activities also led us to some general conclusions for maximising the success of eportfolios in the higher education context.



Case study 1: A Workbook for a three-week intensive unit of study

Improving Academic Writing, Faculty of Arts

The context

Many students have difficulty mastering the skills needed to write well in an academic context. The University of Sydney offers a range of credit-bearing courses to improve academic writing and these courses involve a range of reflective and journal-style writing exercises for both formative and summative assessment. A key part of the teaching curriculum is frequent, ongoing formative feedback for students as they create their writing.

How it was ...

Previously, it was logistically complex for teachers to provide ongoing feedback to students across lecture and tutorial groups. Writing was stored in paper-based diaries and students were unable to keep working while they were waiting for teachers to provide feedback. Teachers also had to control large amounts of paper both in and out of tutorials.

The approach

The academic wanted to provide ongoing feedback to students without relying on paper. The existing assessment items were analysed and it was decided that a collection of templates would provide the basic structure for students to develop a virtual diary where both reflective and formative pages could be provided. The templates provided models for students to then create their own pages and develop their own rhetorical style.

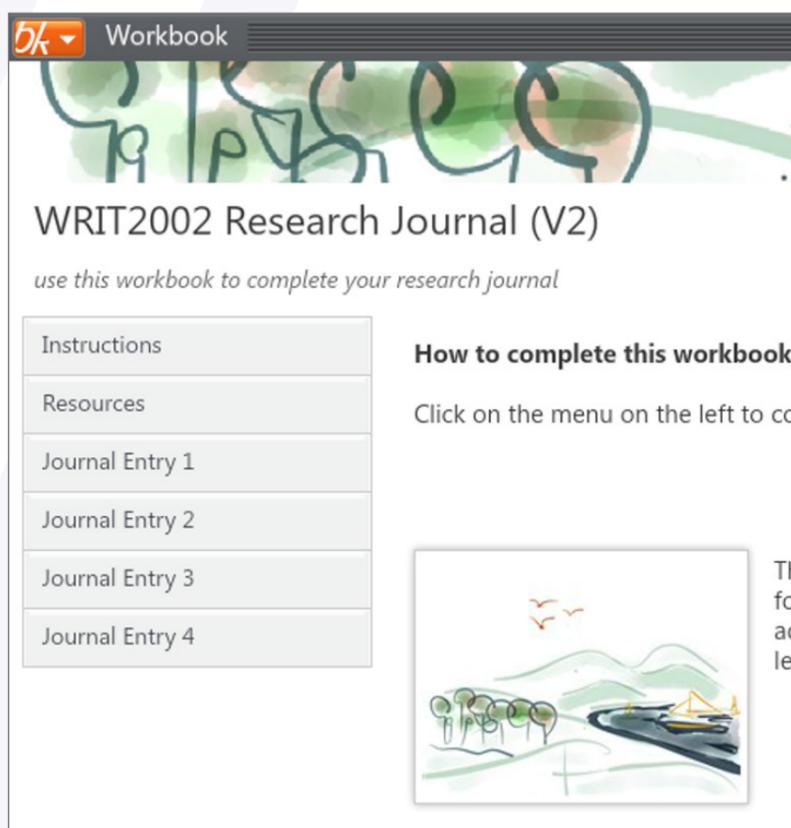


Figure 1: Research journal workbook

The real-time feedback loop was also seen as a distinct advantage for the condensed Summer School timetable on which the activity was trialed. Students were encouraged to use their eportfolio to store other writing assets and also create a repository for the references they needed to support their arguments. The workbook activities were piloted with a small cohort of 32 students.



The outcomes

The students were positive about their eportfolio experience and the associated feedback process, with an evaluation questionnaire confirming this. They were in their second year and were already familiar with the University of Sydney's Learning Management System (LMS) so they were confident to try a new student-centred system with perceived benefits. Also, the project allowed for in-class support from an educational designer in tutorial time. This meant students soon developed the skills needed to complete their assignment and many started to build content outside the set tasks. The academic perceived that being able to provide more formative feedback online enhanced the students' learning outcomes. She was also able to mark at home and at work and generally manage marking more effectively. After this successful three week intensive course with a small cohort, the reflective activity is now being used with a larger cohort of 100 students over a full semester.

[Case study 2: A Workbook for a three-month unit of study](#)

[Introducing Reflection to First Year Education Students, Faculty of Education and Social Work](#)

The context

As part of a curriculum review for the Educational Theory program at the University of Sydney, it was considered important to help students reflect on their motivation for becoming a teacher. Students were also required to consider how their attitudes and previous experiences influenced their response to the pedagogical theories presented across the degree program and to reflect on changes in their attitudes as they progressed through their degree. This first year course has a cohort of over 500 students in their first semester at university.

How it was ...

Previously, the reflective process was introduced in tutorials. Students were asked to write informally about their reasons for becoming a teacher, but this was not part of the summative assessment process. Introduction to theoretical frameworks was part of the lecture process and the first summative assignment was an essay summarising the theoretical frameworks underpinning current teaching practice. This essay was not explicitly related to the reflective exercise undertaken in tutorials. The essay was submitted on paper in week seven and was often the first academic essay that students had written at university.

The approach

Using an eportfolio was seen as an opportunity to support the process of reflection for students and also to provide a method for maintaining this process across their whole degree. The reflective and essay tasks were combined into one submission. Students were first required to submit



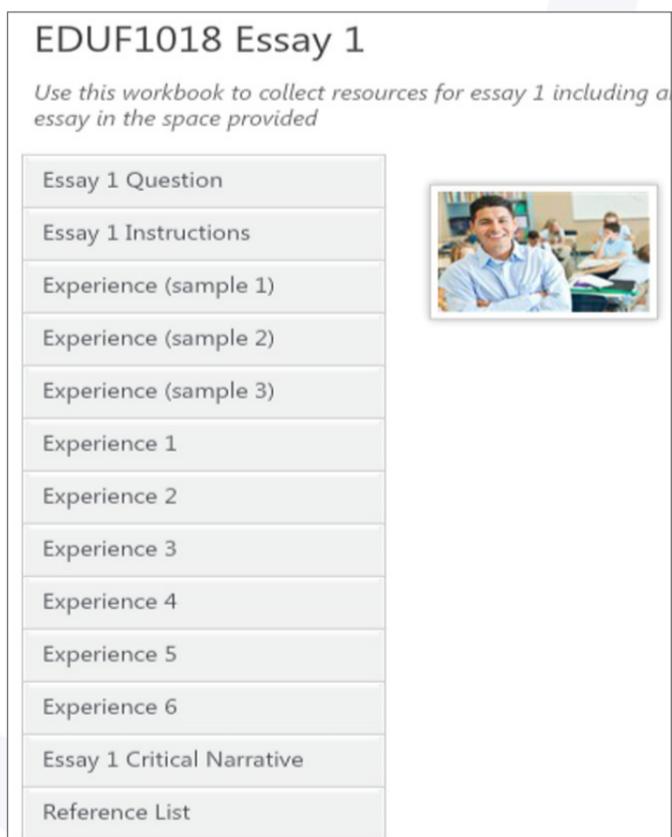


Fig 2: Workbook for reflective essay

three experiences that had motivated them to become a teacher. They were encouraged to add images or multimedia material which encapsulated this motivation. Contextual examples were provided to show what was possible and encourage the collection of assets for use in later courses. Students then completed their own pages and these were submitted one month later for tutors to comment on.

In the second part of the activity, students were asked to write an essay which explained how each experience related to one of the theoretical frameworks outlined in lectures. An example of a correctly formatted reference list was also provided in the workbook for students to use as a model. Formative and summative feedback was to be given through their eportfolios.

Issues and outcomes

Overall, students responded very positively to providing images and reflection on why they wanted to be a teacher. However, approximately fifteen percent of students required one to one support to enable them to use the software. An introductory lecture on using the software and an on-line downloadable handout with step-by-step instructions and screen shots were provided but the cohort size prevented a thorough lab-based student introduction to the task. We now view this feature as vital to the success of implementing eportfolios. The eleven tutors were provided with two two-hour training sessions on how to complete a workbook and how to then provide the feedback but were often unable to provide students with help in tutorials.

Our end of semester evaluation showed that for first year students, learning the LMS and eportfolio software at the same time created a lot of anxiety. They often completed the reflective task successfully, but over thirty percent found the essay component frustrating, especially as they were expected to submit essays for other subjects to the LMS. As they did not receive formative feedback as was initially intended, the additional value of the eportfolio was diminished and because eportfolios were not used in any related subjects, over forty percent felt they would not continue to use it as a personal learning space. Approximately half the tutors also found using an eportfolio to be challenging and, despite receiving some excellent reflective journals, did not wish to continue using it.

Generally the level of support required was unexpectedly high with resulting resource implications for continuing to manage and train such a large cohort. As a result, it was decided that proceeding with the plan to embed eportfolio tasks in the remaining units of study was not viable. After the three-month trial, a decision was made not to introduce eportfolios across the curriculum at this time.



Case study 3: A Workbook for a three-year undergraduate program

VETS Extramural Placement portfolio, Faculty of Veterinary Science

The context

A mandatory component of the Bachelor of Veterinary Science is the VETS Preclinical Extramural Practical Work Placement program. Students are required to collect evidence of work experience while on six compulsory placements over their three-year degree program. For each compulsory placement students must complete:

- A property management report
- A reflective journal requiring daily contributions
- A basic skills declaration form

How it was ...

Historically, students have collected this information using a range of documents, forms and hand-written notes placed in a folder and handed in after their last placement. The unwieldy nature of folder collection and the burden of marking all six placements at once prompted the Faculty to move to an online collection of documents where progressive marking and feedback could occur.

The approach

The resulting workbook provides an effective interface for the collection of a range of document types and the menu allows a clear and consistent layout for the six placements which occur over an entire degree program. The various tools employed are:

- a form for the property reports with in-field hints (Figure 3)
- a form for the skills declarations (with one field for a summary of each skill set with evidence attached)
- a Foliopage for the Daily Diary (as this encourages creativity with images, links etc.)

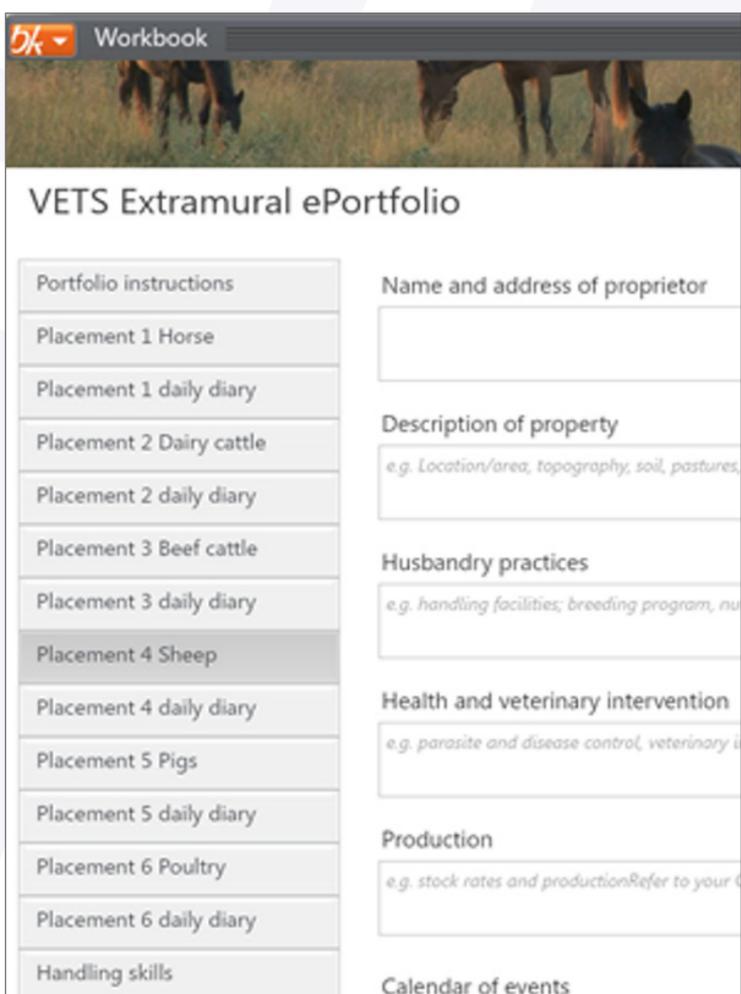
The student-centred nature of the eportfolio, which allows for iterative creation and progressive formative feedback, made it most suitable for this activity. However, building a workbook with no prior experience is not feasible for a time-poor academic and educational design support is essential in the design and development phase.



Benefits

Feedback

Students submit their workbook for feedback before their first placement. Lecturers can then check students' progress after each placement period and provide feedback. A final grade is given at the end of the three-year period. Previously, academic staff had no means of monitoring students' placement experiences. The workbook provides a way for supervisory staff to check that students are acquiring the necessary skills and experience as the placements occur. It is expected that continuous feedback will raise students' awareness much earlier in their degree of the role their extramural placements have in progress toward a professional qualification.



The screenshot shows a web interface titled "Workbook" with a "VETS Extramural ePortfolio" section. On the left is a table of contents with 13 items, including "Placement 1 Horse" through "Placement 6 Poultry" and "Handling skills". On the right are form fields for "Name and address of proprietor", "Description of property" (with a sample text: "e.g. Location/area, topography, soil, pastures..."), "Husbandry practices" (with a sample text: "e.g. handling facilities; breeding program, nu..."), "Health and veterinary intervention" (with a sample text: "e.g. parasite and disease control, veterinary i..."), "Production" (with a sample text: "e.g. stock rates and productionRefer to your C..."), and "Calendar of events".

Fig 3: Placement workbook

Student engagement

Student engagement

The 'Daily diary' has in the past been a simple record of activities undertaken on the property, without any reflective dimension to the task. The introduction of the workbook has provided an opportunity for a more scaffolded approach to the development of reflective skills. A Student Guide (provided as an extra resource) gives students a step-by-step guide to reflective writing. As this is a difficult skill to attain, it will be necessary for the markers to provide ongoing assistance and encouragement in this area.

A focus for future evaluation will be an assessment of whether the reflective skills developed in the daily diary carry into the classroom, with greater student recognition of the need to integrate practical experience with theory.

Issues and outcomes

The atypical nature of the assessment workflow for an eportfolio demands close attention to administration. Students who are used to submitting completed assignments to the LMS have difficulty with the early, pre-completion submission of their templates and the resulting real-time 'window' on their portfolio development. The concept of submission before work has been completed is entirely foreign to students and they are reluctant to allow supervisory staff to see unfinished work. Despite clear explanations of the workflow, several email reminders and resetting of submission deadlines, many students have yet to submit.



Student evaluations during the trial phase of the activity rollout showed that the learning curve with the eportfolio was much steeper than with the LMS. In response to this feedback, each of the current cohorts was given an introductory session, showing how to pick up, complete and submit complete the workbook. A detailed, customised Student Guide was also provided.

Student queries to the central eLearning Helpdesk to date have been on submission and on template customisation issues such as adding pages. This underscores the need for initial and ongoing student support.

[Case study 4: A Workbook for a three-year postgraduate program](#)

[Map my PhD, Faculty of Health Sciences](#)

The context

Many Higher Degree Research (HDR) students find their candidature a lonely, bewildering and intimidating experience. There is often little formal opportunity or space to plan their studies, to set realistic learning objectives and milestones, and to assess their progress in a community environment that shares ideas, resources, and experiences. This sense of isolation and bewilderment can be exacerbated by a perceived lack of support from academic supervisors.

One way to ameliorate these feelings of floundering in a liminal space is to take a holistic approach to PhD candidature: to provide a cohesive space for planning, feedback and conversation, so that both student and supervisor are communicating in a timely and effective manner. This project aimed to empower students to see their development and to realise that their learning goals were being achieved and, at the same time, encourage supervisors to take a more articulated approach to supporting their students. It was hoped that students would have an enhanced candidature experience by involvement in a continuous planning and monitoring process and engagement with a community of other HDR students.

How it was ...

Previously, there was a less structured approach to supervision and goal-setting for HDR students in the discipline of Radiation Science. The academics felt that there was no provision for tracking students' progress and thus little ability for shared feedback and discussion. A lack of documentation and a non-standardised approach to goal-setting was causing added stress to students. In addition, there was no paper trail to keep track of the planning or supervision process, which made the management of progress, goal-setting and timelines difficult.



The approach

The academics provided some models of paper-based templates and types of files that were being used in the supervision process, specifically, a research plan template. Meetings were held to discuss the types of files required and means of providing templates.

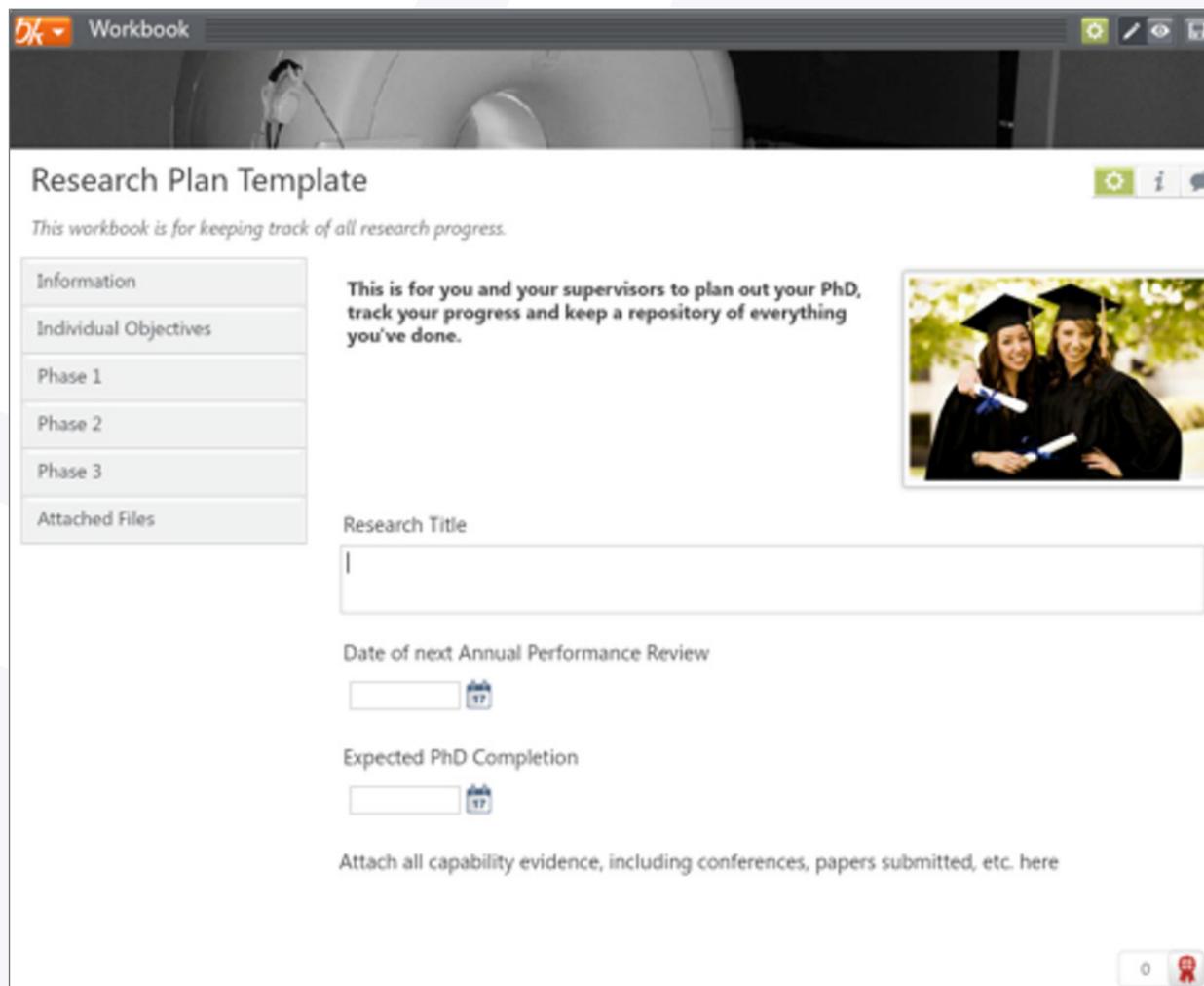


Fig 4: Research workbook

It was decided that the best way to ensure a community developed would be to utilize the workspace functionality in the eportfolio software. A workspace was created with an area for conversation, resources and the community, while a workbook was created for the Research Plan template. This contained areas for dates of Annual Performance Review, expected completion of PhD and reminders to upload capability evidence, such as conference proceedings, journal papers published and other important documentation. Other pages included areas for individual objectives with estimated completion dates, and different phases of candidature, plus areas for reflection and additional capabilities and achievements.

Issues and outcomes

While the HDR students welcomed the concept of the space, after a period of trialing the template, they decided that they preferred to use email, with their own files and reports. It was therefore a great idea, but not easy enough to use for the students to invest the time and energy on it.

Lessons learnt are that it is very important to make sure that there is a real need to use eportfolios, otherwise students will not be willing to invest the time to learn the system. This is especially true of PhD students, who are perhaps less motivated to take on extra work.



Lesson learnt from the four case studies

Sustaining scaffolded activities in an eportfolio over three weeks with a modest student cohort is not difficult. We suspect however, that the students who took part in the intensive unit of study will not continue using their eportfolio in future subjects as there is no extrinsic motivation for them to continue using it in other units of study. It takes time for the habit to be embedded and the full value of the tool to become apparent. We conclude that using eportfolios for even a semester provides a poor return on time investment for academics, support staff and students. Due to the learning curve involved, use of the eportfolio should not be a “one-off” event but should be integrated into the curriculum. Related to this is the necessity of including continuous assessment and formative feedback processes to maximise value.

Our experiences with embedding eportfolios at the program level underscored the essential role of the academic sponsor. Without this leader and champion, successful implementation and sustained use is not feasible. At a unit of study level, we saw the importance of the introduction of the software to students. A ‘hands-on’ session at the computer appears to be an essential part of the induction process but this can be operationally impossible where large cohorts are involved. We also observed that academics who brought enthusiasm, commitment and a “can-do” attitude were much more likely to have a successful experience.

It is vital that tutors as well as unit coordinators be given adequate induction, training and support to ensure the success of the eportfolio. Increased casualisation and high staff turnover in higher education makes this more challenging to achieve. It is also imperative that the unit coordinator takes a leadership role with the tutors, otherwise they may seek alternatives to using the eportfolio to save time.

Implementing eportfolios requires more resources for student and staff training and support than we had anticipated. Some users found the learning curve steeper than we expected and we wondered whether in some cases it might be more suitable to wait to introduce eportfolios until students are in their second year as they undergo so much learning and adjustment to change when commencing university. A number of academics and students coped poorly with using both the LMS and eportfolio technology and despite clear delineation of their function some students questioned the need for both.

The benefits

Despite the challenges, there were significant benefits to using the workbook features:

- Implementation of continuous assessment with more opportunities for formative feedback
- Ability for students to retain feedback and refer to it later in their degree program
- Structured approach to skill development
- Modelling of processes for students



An additional benefit that we had not foreseen was that the scaffolded approach somewhat mitigated the learning curve required to master software that ultimately requires a student-led approach for its benefits to be fully realised. The workbooks' structure provided students with an entry point to the software as well as the skills development process.

In brief – personalising the curriculum

Overall, using eportfolios in the four case-studies described provided opportunities to personalise the various curricula by:

- giving students greater overview and control of their learning
- allowing students to add accounts of their own experiences in the form of narrative, images and multimedia
- allowing students to personalise the form of the product, choosing the mix of media, adding layout and design features in contrast to traditional assessment pieces e.g. academic essay
- providing academics with greater insight into the learning processes of their students and their individuality
- giving academics an insight into students at risk
- helping to mitigate against the isolation experienced by higher degree research students

Our experiences show that if the key challenges of providing holistic program implementation and training confident users can be met, there are significant benefits in using workbooks to induct students into the processes of academic skills development.

