

## Reflective Practice, Professional Skills and Employability at UNSW Australia

*CASE STUDY: Curate, Credential and Carry Forward Digital Learning Evidence: [tiny.cc/cccdle](http://tiny.cc/cccdle)*

**Context:** Colleagues teaching in the Medical Sciences Program at UNSW Australia are collaborating on a cross-disciplinary approach to engage learners within their courses and across the program in portfolio pedagogy to develop student professional skills. Building graduate capabilities and employability is increasingly recognised as essential, even in vocational courses such as the BMedSci, to offer professional skills for those who choose not to pursue graduate medicine. We have designed and mapped a series of assessments that build authentic skills in teamwork across the disciplines of anatomy, pathology, pharmacology and physiology in the medical sciences at UNSW Australia. We also recognise that in order to build professional skills, students must be made aware that assessment tasks within their undergraduate courses are designed to do just that.

### [1] What are we doing?

A system of recognising levels of achievement is the first phase in credentialing skills attainment that build graduate capabilities in the medical sciences. Our system is comprised of a 'set' of rubrics that address teamwork skills building. As part of this process we will also identify student learning needs. This set of rubrics captures self- and peer-evaluation in key elements such as contribution, collaborative behavior and role-play. This set is used across courses and across stages of the program enabling us to track longitudinal student skill development. Our approach is designed to be implemented across the Bachelor of Medical Science course at UNSW Australia. We were part of an institutional pilot study that used Mahara ePortfolio, in courses that comprised the Pathology specialisation, from 2012–2014. We have now moved to a system of student self-directed reflection and have suggested [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) for student and teacher use. Stakeholder academics have been involved by:

- Engaging them in practice and implementation
- Devising workshops and shared resources
- Inviting them to be co-authors on successful institutional and national Learning and Teaching grants
- Inviting them to have a degree of co-ownership

Students have been happy with the use of ePortfolio to support their learning of professional skills and see the value when linked to authentic assessment tasks.

### [2] How are we doing it?

Our goal was to create a mechanism for cross-program tracking and fostering the development of graduate capabilities in a way that cut across traditional course-based academic grading. To run a manageable pilot we

restricted the scope of the project to one program and to one graduate capability that has been difficult to evaluate. We also see our process as being foundational in planning assessments that address student learning of professional skills development. We see ePortfolio for science student learning as a model that requires an ongoing developmental cycle of 'need-plan/ performance-reflection'.

### [3] Who is involved?


There are many stakeholders: students, the Institution, industry, and the academics and professional staff directly interacting with students. We identified academics by reviewing all course outlines in the program and identifying those with teamwork assessment tasks. Students were engaged through elaboration of these existing assessment activities. The Institution and industry have been involved through targeted meetings with the project team to work towards gradual meshing of our local system with institutional processes and external standards. Since we are building professional skills in teamwork, we see our approach as being easy to adopt across faculties and institutions both nationally and internationally.

### [4] Why are we doing it?

Our key driver is to get medical science students 'skilled-up for the real world'. We appreciate employers' needs for graduates to not only be knowledgeable in their discipline content upon completion of their degrees, but also have professional skills that underpin graduate capabilities and employability. ePortfolio has provided a vehicle for capturing development of these professional skills as students reflect upon their journey towards graduation



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and identify as medical scientists. Another key goal is to identify student learning needs in the area of professional skills development.

#### [5] What are the challenges?

- Ensuring that all academic colleagues as stakeholders were satisfied with the approach as a community given the content of their courses
- Engaging students in seeing the value of reflective practice as foundational in developing professional skills
- The diverse nature of each type of teamwork assessment task for each discipline needed to be understood and accounted for
- Timing of implementation needed to be carefully mapped
- Obtaining institutional ethics
- To start only at Stage 1 courses and implement across the program in a temporal manner rather than apply the strategy across all stages 1–4 at once.

Future initiatives include program-wide, cross-disciplinary ePortfolio use for other professional skills such as research communication. Teacher ePortfolio use is also required in order to articulate reflective practice bi-directionally, i.e. teacher-enhanced development of student professional skills. Our study has taught us that a community of practice among academic colleagues and professional staff as well as students and employers is required to have effective and directed professional skills development. We also realise that a recognition system that is warranted institutionally is required to create a value system for all stakeholders.

A major challenge has been around ideas of academic independence and ownership of assessment activities. This extends from the level of individual academics reluctant to 'give up autonomy' to be part of a fixed

assessment system, to institutional reluctance to cede or share credentialing with external providers. We overcame challenges by sharing and negotiating ideas in a collaborative setting to ensure that team member involvement and buy-in.

#### [6] Where is it heading?

The next step beyond ePortfolio implementation is now needed. All the evidence for its effects on student learning of reflective practice that inform professional development and success beyond university also need to be captured.

- Teacher professional development
- Employer buy-in and development of a system of tracking professional skills recognition with the view to eventually credential these skills.
- Start early on the hard work of talking and negotiating with colleagues about aligning assessment and converging on assessment tools, as this was the most contentious part of the project.
- Use a student self-directed ePortfolio digital platform.

Learners need to regulate and direct their own learning as they own their journey beyond graduation.

#### Resources

Polly, P et al. 2014, [ePortfolios for use in Professional Skills Building for Medical Science Students at UNSW Australia](#).  
Dr Patsie Polly talks about [ePortfolios in Pathology](#).  
Coleman, K, Cox, J, Das, M, Flood, A, Polly, P, Thai, T & Yang, JL 2012, [ePortfolios in the Sciences: The Role of Reflection as students build professional skills and career readiness](#).  
[Transcripts of Assessment Toolkit Media](#)

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