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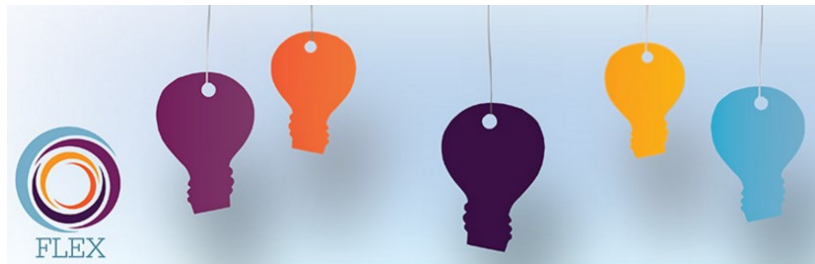
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FLEX to evidence Good Standing

Chrissi Nerantzi and Kath Botham



Introduction

At MMU the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) operates an institutional Professional Standards Framework scheme (MMU PSF) accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) for all categories of HEA Fellowship. The MMU PSF scheme is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF), (HEA, 2011) and provides an internal scheme to support colleagues in achieving HEA Fellowship. This scheme offers both programme based routes and individual routes to achieve fellowship.

From November 2014 until July 2015, MMU participated in a pilot project with nine other higher education institutions to explore possible mechanisms for 'Remaining in Good Standing'. "A person is said to be in good standing if they have fulfilled their obligations. It's the responsibility of individuals to ensure they continue to work in line with their relevant Fellow descriptor standard" (HEA , 2015).

It is therefore important to identify effective ways to evidence Good Standing of the staff who teach or support learning across the institution and to increase engagement in academic CPD, in order to enhance standards of professional practice and the student experience. This was the main driver for participating in the Pilot Project: 'Strategic Enhancement Programme Career Progression and Staff Transitions'.

The engagement in this HEA pilot was a continuation of MMU's engagement with the HEA Change Academy in 2013/14. This investigated mechanisms and the potential of reward and recognition of teaching in career progression. The pilot also built on the Framework for Academic Quality and Practice – an HR led University-wide project that has four elements: Induction and

probation, Academic CPD and Research Training, Peer Review and Observation, and Management Review of teaching.

This project's findings will be shared with key stakeholders to identify opportunities for wider implementation across the institution.

This paper explains how FLEX, a practice-based CPD programme has been used to pilot Good Standing.

FLEX: a developmental CPD programme

As well as the accredited PSF scheme, in operation since September 2013, a developmental FLEX CPD programme has also operated since January 2014. FLEX is a practice-based scheme and includes the option of formal (credit bearing) or informal (non-credit bearing) pathways for engagement in academic CPD. It provides a mechanism to evidence CPD via an online academic portfolio. Internal and external offers, organised and practice-based CPD can be incorporated into the online portfolio. CPD activities are selected by participants using a pick 'n' mix approach. An overview of FLEX and how it relates to other provision can be found in Figure 1. An annual FLEX Award (an open badge) has also been created as a means of recognition for ongoing engagement with peer-reviewed CPD. Open badges are digital stickers with metadata that can be used in a variety of ways to evidence, for example, belonging to a community. They represent a memento, an expression of playfulness as well as engagement, and achievement beyond academic credits (Nerantzi, 2015b).

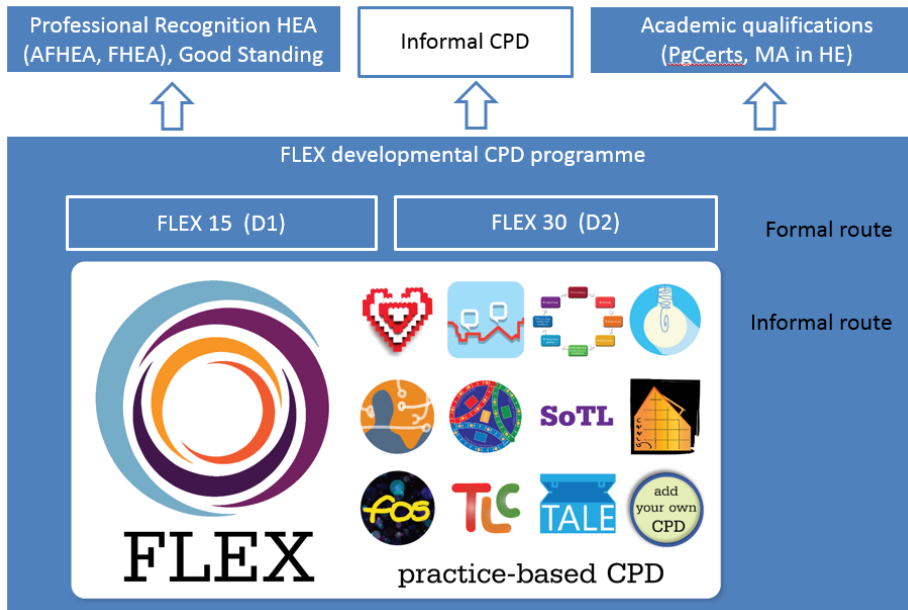


Figure 1. The developmental FLEX programme

There is currently a lack of evidence that such incentives can increase engagement with CPD (Crawford, 2009). However, King (2004) notes that recognition for formal and informal CPD can be important. It is an ongoing challenge to encourage academics to regularly engage in CPD. Initial professional development or professional recognition is often compulsory but maintaining continuing engagement with CPD and reflective practice can be inconsistent after this point. King (2004) recognises that engagement with CPD might be required for a professional body but that it can also be self-driven. The requirement for Good Standing when eventually articulated will in itself act as a stimulus for engagement with CPD and reflective practice. The FLEX Award recognises the value of informal or non-formal engagement in CPD and enables personal, focussed CPD opportunities as well as creating a bridge to professional recognition and academic credits.

The purpose behind FLEX is to create a mechanism that will enable each member of staff to develop their own bespoke Academic CPD portfolio to evidence and support their personal career development, and bring together their teaching and research interests and discipline contexts. Siemens (2006, 47) notes, that “Learning is continual. It is not an activity that occurs outside of our daily lives.” We see that this also applies to professional development as we get the most out of it when it is ongoing and embedded in practice. The portfolio is populated with a series of FLEX activities that form critical

reflective accounts of practice and related formal or informal CPD activities. These are carried out to enhance a specific aspect of teaching or supporting learning and evidence a commitment to action to achieve development in practice. Furthermore, colleagues are encouraged to use their portfolio regularly in order to develop reflective habits and become genuinely reflective practitioners.

Stefani (2005) talks about using teaching portfolios for ongoing CPD and modelling reflective practice. The use of digital portfolios that can be shared is also important because it creates opportunities for professional dialogue and conversations. Such conversations are a valuable tool to support personal and professional development and have the potential to bring renewal and growth to that development. Palmer (2007) states “If I want to teach well, it is essential that I explore my inner terrain. But I can get lost in there, practicing self-delusion and running in self-serving circles. So I need the guidance that a community of collegial discourse provides – to say nothing of the support such as a community can offer to sustain me in the trials of teaching and the cumulative and collective wisdom about this craft that can be found in every faculty worth its salt.” (p146)

The programme team are exploring ways to refine the approach and integrate the range of FLEX provision more overtly within the MMU PSF as accredited units leading to recognition at D1 (leading to Associate Fellowship of the HEA and D2 (leading to Fellowship of the HEA), together with providing a resource to provide ongoing evidence for ‘Good Standing’ within the UK PSF. The HEA sponsored project described earlier enables us to pilot the use of an online portfolio linked to the UK PSF as a method of demonstrating good-standing.

FLEX is an Open Educational Resource (OER) available under a creative commons licence and could potentially become a CPD resource available to other Higher Education Providers to adapt in their own context. The team are very interested in developing this concept further and working in collaboration with other institutions to achieve this.

Why pilot?

We were interested in participating in a pilot for Good Standing as a way of testing the use of online portfolio as a tool to support ongoing CPD and reflective practice. We were already considering it as a method of evidencing the engagement with CPD necessary for HEA good-standing. Participating in the pilot would also enable us to: work closer with the HEA; connect and collaborate with other institutions, sharing practices, ideas and dilemmas; and also connect with colleagues and departments and professional services internally, especially where there are lower levels of engagement with academic CPD.

We hope to develop our knowledge and understanding linked to Good Standing as a means of ensuring that the MMU Framework for Academic Enhancement and Practice becomes embedded in individuals' career development, and of exploring the potential to use a portfolio as a mechanism to evidence this. As a large institution we also needed to consider it as a method of building capacity in readiness for an institution-wide implementation of 'Good Standing' and identify if this is an effective mechanism to achieve this.

Through the MMU PSF Framework, staff who teach or support learning at MMU are able to gain professional recognition through HEA Fellowship. The scheme is positively received and the process has been shown to encourage reflection on practice and build academic staff confidence in their practice. We would therefore like to explore ways to further develop successful academics as reflective practitioners and extend engagement in academic CPD beyond the initial engagement with the professional recognition route. This would also develop integrated provision that would frame the MMU PSF as also providing developmental and aspirational opportunities, embedded in academic practice that will assist the ongoing development of academics teaching practices.

Approach

An action research approach was used as it gave us the flexibility to continually evaluate with participants in this pilot the process of developing the portfolios, capture the 'Good Standing' accounts as well as respond to feedback and challenges as they were experienced and make changes were needed while the pilot was live.

This meant that we would get the maximum out of the pilot together with our participants. Using an action research approach also enabled the pilot team to have a voice in this study and participate in the reflective process.

Participants

Five participants initially expressed an interest in engaging in the pilot study: three academics who completed the PGCAP at MMU within the previous 2-3 years and gained Fellowship of the HEA, and two Academic Developers from the Centre of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) who are Senior Fellows of the HEA and Fellows of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA).

The participants from outside CELT were from different disciplines. Two had used portfolios before and used existing portfolios during this pilot, while the remaining three had set-up new portfolios using Wordpress. Participants were initially split into two groups of three and two and each group was supported by a member of the project team. Only three participants engaged in the process to its conclusion (one PGCAP graduate and Two Academic Developers), therefore only one peer group was eventually required.

Timeline of activities

- 2 February 2015 first meeting with participants to introduce the project
- 1-15 February 2015 participants supported in setting-up their portfolios and familiarising themselves with the digital space
- 16-28 February 2015 capturing the first draft FLEX activity in the portfolio – engagement with this this stage was a little variable
- 9 March 2015 a second meeting was organised to discuss the FLEX activity and reach consensus about how to progress which only the CELT SFHEAs were able to attend. It was agreed that the Good Standing account would take the form of either one FLEX activity or a summary page that gave the overview of 5 Flex activities and this would be captured in the portfolio.
- 17 April 2015 deadline to complete the Good Standing account.

- 18 April until 24 May 2015 participants share Good Standing account with pilot buddy(ies) and engage in a professional conversation around the shared accounts. The group could decide on the format of this conversation i.e F2F (face to face), Virtual etc.
- 15 May pilot team attends Progress meeting at the Open University, pilot participants are invited.

A final meeting to bring the pilot to a close took place on the 20th of October 2015.

In total three portfolios with Good Standing records were received. These were peer reviewed and the pilot was brought to a close via a reflective conversation about the process and its value. The conversation has been summarised below.

Progress report

1st meeting: Getting started

Three pilot participants attended the introductory meeting where ideas on the proposed approach were shared and discussed. A template Wordpress portfolio was accessed at <https://mmupsfflex.wordpress.com> where guidelines for demonstrating Good Standing had been included, based around the FLEX approach of creating five CPD activities which were aligned to the Areas of Activities of the UK PSF. It was agreed that for the Good Standing requirements each of the five FLEX activities would be around 200-300 words. There was also the potential to also use this portfolio to study towards the Accredited Flex Provision (30 level 7 Credits) and this process was explained. One participant expressed an interest in gaining academic credits.

The pilot team faced a number of challenges when planning for this meeting. These were mainly linked to the lack of a current clear definition of Good Standing and how this links or doesn't link to the appropriate category Descriptors (D1-D4) of the UK PSF. The team are still unclear whether the HEA will require that Good Standing to be evidenced in respect of a specific Descriptor or whether it will be more loosely linked to general engagement with the UK PSF. The team also discussed the necessary length of the Good Standing account and it was agreed that the word length set out above would

be appropriate as a starting suggestion. More guidance will be required from the HEA when the Good Standing requirements are finalised.

During that first meeting it was agreed to create the portfolio where applicable, and to capture the first FLEX activity in the portfolio. This would then be discussed during the 2nd meeting.

2nd meeting: Shift in approach

Two pilot participants (SFHEAs) attended this meeting where their draft Good Standing account was discussed. Both had made a start with capturing their reflective accounts in their portfolios. The three further pilot participants were unable to attend this meeting. This will need following up by the project team as a matter of urgency.

During the meeting, it was agreed that the initial plan of completing all 5 required FLEX activities linked to the 5 Areas of Activities was too extensive and was too onerous for a Good Standing account. It was agreed that one FLEX activity, typically of about 1000-1500 words, would become the Good Standing record together with appended evidence of engagement with CPD. The Good Standing record could be in the form of a case study, a critical incident or reflection on the learning from a range of CPD activities.

Colleagues who wished to gain FLEX credits could then continue working on four further activities and submit their portfolio to gain up to 30 credits at postgraduate level for the PG or the MA in Academic Practice. An alternative approach would be to complete the 5 Flex activities and create an overview summary that became the good standing account and the five Flex activities were the evidence to support the engagement with CPD. This was the preferred option for the two SFHEAs where the five sections did not align as easily with the D3: Descriptors

The template portfolio therefore was simplified to reflect the outcome of this meeting. See <https://mmupsfflex.wordpress.com/guidance/guidance-for-remaining-in-good-standing/> - the original guidelines are still there, together with the new ones, which are at the top of the page.

3rd meeting: All coming together now

The final review meeting took place on the 20 October 2015. Two of the three study participants who had fully engaged with the process

were present and the third provided responses to the key questions via email. The main questions asked related to the following:

- Usefulness of the Wordpress portfolio as a method of capturing evidence and reflection relation to prof CPD –linking to good standing
- Barriers to using this format (technological/personal etc)
- Thoughts in relation to moving forward – future use /as a learning tool etc.

Useful for evidencing Good Standing

Study participants were in agreement that they found the portfolio a useful space to capture their development and are considering continuing using it in their professional capacity to record activities and achievements for evidencing Good Standing. Participants were also considering expanding the content of the portfolio and using it for other purposes such as the showcasing of activities, research and achievements. All three participants also had to provide evidence of good standing for other professional bodies and were suggesting that the portfolio could be double badged and used to provide evidence for other professional bodies' good standing requirements.

Reflective habits

The value of the portfolio in developing and supporting reflective practice and reflective habits was highlighted together with its value in creating action plans that can encourage an academic to implement changes and developments to their own practice. One study participant spoke about using the portfolio as an “organic exercise” to track progress and development annually.

Sharing

The sharing aspect of such a portfolio was discussed and the benefits of being able to create public and private sections of the portfolio was deemed to be important. It enabled personal reflections that could remain confidential and not seen by colleagues or students unless the academic who 'owns' the portfolio wished to share it and engage in dialogue. It was agreed therefore that there should be the opportunity to have a public portfolio with private or password protected sections which would contain more confidential information.

Engagement in dialogue and sharing of the portfolios within the group had not really occurred and study participants felt that they were unsure how to comment on each other's portfolio; they would have preferred initially to receive feedback from the pilot organisers. They suggested that more guidelines indicating the purpose of and the best mechanisms to provide feedback to peers may have encouraged them to engage with this more readily.

Technological challenge

Overall, Wordpress as a tool was seen to be useful and flexible. None of the study participants had used it before and found that the tool itself presented a real challenge to engage. One participant noted "If an easy online portfolio is available it would be a better option." It was acknowledged that supporting colleagues to get started with the portfolio system was time consuming. The tool itself was seen as the biggest barrier. Therefore, clear portfolio building guidelines, sample templates but also information around being a professional when using social media and how peer review portfolios were highlighted as important to better support colleagues in this process.

Format of recording Good Standing

The suggested format was to use the FLEX activities template linked to the Areas of Activity of the UK PSF. One of the study participants found this restrictive and moved towards capturing their Good Standing Record on one page using the overall questions provided as guidelines. After discussion with the other study participant who was present at the meeting it was concluded that recording Good Standing on one page would streamline the process and also provide a clearer filing structure in the portfolio. This method would be flexible to cover the different categories of Fellowship and it has been proposed that a portfolio will form the core method of submission of an application within the re-accredited MMU PSF scheme due to commence in September 2016. This would enable colleagues to submit their initial recognition application via a portfolio – the structure of this varying depending on the category of Fellowship – and then develop an additional page in the same portfolio to demonstrate good standing in subsequent years.

What we learnt and the way forward

This pilot project enabled us to experience first-hand how colleagues experienced collecting evidence for Good Standing using a digital portfolio. We found it challenging to identify sufficient colleagues who had completed their teaching qualification or gained professional recognition in the last 3 years and were willing to participate in the pilot study. In the end, we did work with three colleagues who all set-up their academic portfolio and engaged in a meaningful way with the process.

The focus group organised at the end of the pilot was useful and we discussed challenges created, benefits and ideas to move forward so that the inclusion of a FLEX based portfolio could be developed further within the forthcoming re accreditation of the MMU PSF scheme (Spring/Summer 2016).

Specific outcomes are the following:

Mini course

We plan to develop a mini course that will enable colleagues to develop their understanding, knowledge and capacity in using digital portfolios as spaces for reflection and collecting evidence of CPD. This will also be useful as a resource for applicants engaging with the planned re-accredited MMU PSF scheme. The suggested format of the course will be in three parts:

- Developing reflection, reflective practice and reflective writing
- Portfolio-based development, use of professional dialogue and peer reviewing portfolios as well as support with developing competence in the technicalities of using an online portfolio.
- Engagement with the UK PSF from the outset

It will be important to work with Learning Technologists in the faculties on this proposed mini course, especially for setting up portfolios, and to explore alternative portfolio building tools and platforms.

Sample portfolio

We need to rethink our approach to what is included in the existing sample PSF portfolio, its structure and possible layouts so that this

space becomes of real help to colleagues. We will need to perhaps consider alternative formats and samples for each level of Fellowship. Exploring alternative, freely available portfolio platforms will be valuable, in collaboration with learning technologists in the faculties.

Format of recording Good Standing

Simplifying the current format and moving away from the good standing report being formatted on 5 FLEX activities is essential. We propose that one page in the portfolio will form the Good Standing account enabling the whole account to be presented together and to provide a quick overview of activities. Mapping to the UK PSF will also be important.

Final note

We are currently reviewing our MMU PSF scheme and this pilot provided a useful starting point. It has informed our plans and how to move forward, both to create a stronger scheme and to support colleagues effectively in their professional development process.

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Further resources and related outputs

FLEX site at <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/flex/index.php>

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