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Stream Title and No:	Employability and Employee Learning (No. 5)
Title of Paper:	Learning to reflect through technology, to enhance employability

Abstract:

Problem statement/rationale, including reference to key literature:

"Reflection, if managed in an ordered way, can provide great opportunities for learning, understanding and clarifying thought, both in one's personal life and in learning and professional development." Moon, J (1999).

Aston Business School's (ABS) 12-month professional placement programme has a number of espoused learning objectives, including helping students:
1. To benefit from the integration of university study and work experience in ways which facilitate critical reflection on each of these aspects.
2. To build a personal awareness of their own interests, competencies, values and potential.

These objectives focus students' development to self-reflect critically, to make sense of their experiences/learning whilst undertaking their placements. Students complete a placement year Reflective Learning Journal, supported by the workplace supervisor, through regular meetings where objectives are agreed and reviewed.

As well as reflection providing opportunities for students to make sense of their learning, it is also challenging! ABS is undertaking a pilot in 2008/9 to encourage students to engage with reflective practice, but employer feedback indicates an ability to think and analyse is often missing from the skill sets of graduates. Business students are using the PebblePad e-portfolio system as a tool to record their learning, reflect on their experiences in the workplace and to create their journals.

Research design and methods of data collection and analysis or method of inquiry:

The students chosen to take part in this study are taking the Business Computing and IT degree and are on placement in 2008/9.

Central to the research are questionnaires, to facilitate the required anonymity of respondents. Students are being surveyed at intervals throughout their placements. This paper will focus on early stages of the research findings.

Following the data collection, focus groups/focussed interviews may be necessary at stages of the research. Students will be invited to take part and will be informed that participation is voluntary and based on informed consent and that they can withdraw at any time.

The anticipated benefits from the study include developing a grounded understanding of the benefits students have gained from using PebblePad, i.e. a system to record learning experiences and develop reflective writing skills, which may be better suited to the placement year coursework requirements and students' needs in the 21st century. Is this a more efficient and user-friendly tool for students to use? Will more students be able to achieve "merits" and "distinctions"? Will there be fewer "fails" and mere "passes"? Will students engage more with reflective writing through using an e-system?

Main findings :

Student surveys are currently taking place - findings will be available at the time of the conference. Initial survey responses provide fascinating insights:
Students had access to the system 2-3 months prior to their placements starting, yet most did not access it until their placements had actually started. Student feedback on the system's ease of use is mixed, some citing the system as "quite easy", others as "very difficult".

Discussion of implications :

Implications will arise from the findings. At this stage, had the project been rolled out to all students taking business placements (c600), implications would have arisen for institutional technical/ infrastructure support.

List of key references/resources:

- Duffy, K. Anthony, D and Vickers, F (2008) Are e-portfolios an asset to learning and placement? Report commissioned by ASET.
- Higson, H and Bullivant, N (2006), Encouraging Aston Business School students to reflect on their employment experience in Becket, N and Kemp, P (eds) Enhancing Graduate Employability in Business and Management, hospitality, Leisure, Sport, Tourism. Berkshire, Threshold Press Ltd, p52-59.
- Lee, B and Downs, D (1998), 'Electronic support for student placements: part 1 context', EDUCATION AND TRAINING, Vol.40 (3) pp.115-118.
- Moon, J (1999) Learning Journals, London, Kogan Page.