Chapter 10
E-Portfolio as a Tool to Respond Higher Education Ambitions and Societal Expectations

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Abstract For several years now, we may observe a shift from a traditional knowledge-oriented educational philosophy to the importance for students to acquire skills and competences in the higher education (HE) arena. This echoes the recurrent idea of employability combined with graduates' concern to find their first job and potential recruiters' expectations. Hong Kong is no exception here, and societal expectations and HE ambitions place a strong emphasis on exposure to a range of transferable skills (e.g. team-working, communication, problem-solving) and attitudes that all students will need in their future professional life. This chapter illustrates how e-portfolios can support the reorientation of discourse in HE and societal expectations with a final year seminar with French as medium of instruction as a case study. This seminar focuses on the multi-faceted skills and competences appropriate in a multicultural professional environment. Students are required to compile a reflective e-portfolio with the support of two main activities, such as a simulation project in a French professional setting as well as a professional development plan. E-portfolios and the inherent component of self-reflection/ awareness and other awareness are envisaged as highly valuable tools to better equip fresh graduates for the global world of work.

Keywords Hong Kong · Higher education · Employability · Competences · Skills · E-portfolio

Introduction

Tertiary institutions around the world have to demonstrate to various stakeholders (funding bodies, community members, employers…) that their programmes result in positive outcomes for students (Jones 2010). Hong Kong is no exception here:

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universities are pressed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and they need to ensure that the education they offer meets the expectations of students and the requirements of employers. It entails that university education and higher education (HE) modes of learning need to equip students with appropriate skills, knowledge, values and attributes to thrive in the world of employment. It also means that the building and creation of knowledge should be developed together with a reformulation of the concept of knowledge in learning situations and an understanding of working life. The concern for fresh graduates' employability in Hong Kong appears crucial given societal issues, such as the importance given to the concept of knowledge economy, the strong profile of globalisation, the possible shortage of human resources, the intensified access to HE, students' financial burden, i.e. to pay back their study loans, and the increasing demand of European companies for skilled labour force. Hence, HE institutions are at some point responsible to help students accomplish personal and professional growth and develop valuable lifelong learning skills as well as make them aware of employers' needs and expectations. In the light of these new expectations and trends observed within the HE arena, this chapter aims at answering the dual question: why and how can e-portfolios help smooth "the students' pathways from classroom to career" (Flanigan 2006: 110) in the HE context in Hong Kong?

Theoretical Frame

These last years, we can observe a shift towards outcomes-based education accompanied with the redefinition of curricula and assessment in order to include generic skills and graduate attributes in HE. This indicates the importance of the role of universities to prepare students for lifelong learning skills and employment. Lifelong learning skills are defined as "the ability to solve problems, work both independently and in a team, communicate effectively in all formats and on all levels, and self-direct one's learning and professional development needs". (Heinrich et al. 2007: 653) Various terms are used to describe the abilities, qualities and skills expected from graduates who are prepared for lifelong learning in an increasingly international/global environment such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reasoning skills; information and technology literacy; self-management skills; communication, teamwork, collaboration, and leadership skills; language skills beyond first language; understanding of professional and ethical responsibilities; appreciation of human diversity, cultures and business practices; understanding of importance of lifelong learning and ongoing professional and personal development (Heinrich et al. 2007: 653). This long list illustrates the fact that employers generally expect to see a graduate's achievements not solely related to the subject discipline to be recruited. In fact, "in some employment contexts the actual subject discipline may be relatively unimportant. Achievements outside the boundaries of the discipline (such as the possession of so-called "soft skills") are generally considered to be important in the recruitment of graduates"

(Yorke 2006: 2). Students are then expected to go beyond their study requirements (Heinrich et al. 2007), and skills seem to appear a priority consideration in employer hiring, since "the presence of desirable work skills in new employees means less time and money spent in training and development" (Lumsden et al. 2009: 127).

These considerations are obviously linked to the idea of graduate employability which is defined as "a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke 2006: 8). Universities' reputation is increasingly being based upon, among others, the hiring rate of their fresh graduates. This is the reason why far from being "an intrusion on the proper concerns of academic life" or "being toxic to academic values" as it is often perceived, […] "a concern for employability aligns with a concern for academic values and the promotion of good learning" (Knight and Yorke 2004: 1, 5). Hence, institutions and employers have to support the students' need in terms of knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity to succeed in the workforce (Kinash and Crane 2015). Hence employability skills include a wide range of generic skills (Yorke 2006). The problem is that academics have various conceptions of generic/transferable/soft skills, which partly explains their limited implementation in university courses (Barrie 2007). This might not come as a surprise, since "universities have seriously underestimated the kind of cultural, institutional and policy change required to implement the graduate skills agenda" (Green et al. 2009: 17). Knight and Yorke (2004) also point to the need to include attitudes to work in graduates' assets praised by recruiters.

For several years now, e-portfolios have been implemented in several universities as a means of enhancing and assessing skills and competencies (Cambridge 2010). A portfolio is "a demonstration of skills and abilities, containing evidence of growth and competence" (Flanigan and Amirian 2006: 103). The predecessors of e-portfolios, i.e. non-digital portfolios, were already considered as supporting constructive alignment, promoting quality learning and bringing about different learning outcomes to those of traditional assessment tasks (Jones 2010). It is important to stress here that the word e-portfolio may cover different realities, depending on the academic contexts and objectives of their use (Hallam and Creagh 2010). Nevertheless, e-portfolios can be classified into three main categories: learning/developmental/reflection/formative/working; assessment; and professional/formal/presentation/representational/career employment portfolios.

Hallam and Creagh (2010) consider e-portfolios as a tool "to assist students become reflective learners, conscious of their personal and professional strengths and weaknesses, as well as to make their existing and developing skills more explicit, with an associated value apparent in the graduate recruitment process" (2010: 186). According to Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005), e-portfolios "allow students to demonstrate competencies and reflect upon the experiences, documenting academic preparation and career readiness. Creating e-portfolios enables students to enhance their learning by giving them a better understanding of their skills, as well

as where and how they need to improve to meet academic and career goals"
(2005: 1). E-portfolios are even envisaged as a synergy tool between the HE world
and societal needs and expectations: "e-portfolio policy and practice can draw
together the different elements of integrated education and learning, graduate
attributes, employability skills, professional competencies and lifelong learning,
with the ultimate goal of developing an engaged and productive workforce that can
support innovation and productivity to ensure ongoing national economic devel-
opment and growth" (Hallam and Creagh 2010: 179). Reflective practice and more
precisely, developing skills in reflection appears as a crucial component of
e-portfolios for students engaged and responsible in lifelong learning process (Doig
et al. 2006).

Contextualisation

Higher Education in Hong Kong: Ongoing Trends

In its report entitled *Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong*
(2010), the University Grants Committee (UGC) stated that the prime objective of
further developing HE is to enhance a nation's competitiveness through nurturing
an educated and highly skilled workforce to meet the challenges of a
knowledge-based economy (UGC 2010: 24). Students are expected "to contribute
in the kind of globalising economy in which Hong Kong must find its place" (UGC
2010: 57). The emphasis put on the necessity for students to adopt an outward
vision is justified as follows: "Hong Kong's future relies upon the ability of its
best-educated people to understand the wider world and to become persuasive
interlocutors with those with whom they do business" (UGC 2010: 58).

One of the consequences is that as in other parts of the world, universities in
Hong Kong have been engaged in redefining curricula and assessment and expe-
rienced a shift towards outcomes-based education with an increased emphasis on
skills to be developed by students (UGC 2010: 78). This was echoed with the
alignment of curricula with graduate attributes, learning outcomes and the needs of
industry. Under the new four-year curriculum introduced in 2012, universities were
expected to devote more attention to whole person education (Cabau 2015b). This
echoed the recognition of the importance of skills and knowledge transcending
academic disciplines.

Recently, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the UGC stressed the
necessity to reconsider students' achievements not only through academic awards,
but also other students' abilities which could provide an effective measure of overall
personal development:

> In addition to an academic qualification, employers have an interest in how students can
> apply their learning and in their skills of communication and self-motivation. […] insti-
> tutions may be expected to show how they evaluate the needs of employers and other

stakeholders, how they support students in their development during their studies and how their achievements are recorded and publicised (Quality Assurance Council 2013: 7).

This is the reason why the QAC encourages institutions to use external reference points in setting their own academic standards and assessing the achievements of students, among which is the evidence from employers about the expectations for graduate employment (2013: 38).

Last but not least it is worth mentioning here that Hong Kong is not immune to the phenomenon of decline and population ageing. It must therefore deal with a possible shortage of skills in various professions, which are essential to preserve its status as global megalopolis. In various official documents, mention is made of the growing importance of the service sector and increased need for human resources, which emphasise the need to increase competitiveness within HE and develop communication skills and critical thinking of students (Cabau 2014).

HKBU's Vision and Commitment to Graduate Attributes

Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) aims at preparing students for the challenges of a globalised knowledge-based economy in order to groom the workforce of tomorrow. Two educational principles are seen here as essential: to nurture students a mindset for whole person development and lifelong learning. As the former president and vice chancellor explained, "HKBU believes 'whole persons' must meet the following requirements: 'solving global problems', 'savvy with technologies', and 'working in successful teams'. At HKBU, it is believed that students who obtain a whole person education also obtain 'employability skills'" (Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia 2012). This is echoed in the University Vision 2020 aiming at improving "employability of students in terms of percentages of employment after graduation and career progression of graduates thereafter" (Hong Kong Baptist University 2014a).

At HKBU, we may observe a growing interest in e-portfolios to facilitate reflection on learning and the university experience. Academic staff is expected to encourage "students to record, access, reflect on and present achievements in ways appropriate to a variety of situations" (Hong Kong Baptist University 2014b). HKBU also supports project-based learning in that "it allows students to construct their own knowledge and skills by working cooperatively on complex and challenging real-life project" (Hong Kong Baptist University 2010a, b).

Employers' Expectations

In the past years, the Education Bureau (EDB) has been conducting surveys on opinions of employers on major aspects of performance of post-secondary

programmes graduates with the aim of keeping track of the quality of graduates and employers' views over time. The latest survey covers full-time locally accredited publicly funded and self-financed first degree and sub-degree graduates of 2010 ($n = 16,615$) (Concourse for Self-Financing Post-Secondary Education 2014). Nine major aspects of performance were selected: Language Proficiency in Chinese, English, Putonghua and other languages; Numerical Competency; Information Technology Literacy; Analytical and Problem-Solving Abilities; Work Attitude; interpersonal Skills; Management Skills; Technical Skills Required for the Job; and Knowledge of Current Affairs and Business Issues, Self-learning Ability and Self-esteem. It clearly indicates that Hong Kong employers' expectations go beyond pure academic knowledge to include not only skills but also attitudes.

Amongst the different areas, employers considered Work Attitude to be the most important aspect for the positions held by the graduates, followed by Interpersonal skills. Work Attitude together with Information Technology Literacy was the best rated area. The lowest performance scores could be observed for Management Skills, Knowledge of Current Affairs and Business Issues, Self-learning Ability and Self-esteem, Analytical and Problem-Solving Abilities. The most noticeable gaps between the graduates' performance score and the importance score given by employers were observed for Analytical and Problem-Solving Abilities (3.35 vs. 4.02); Work Attitude (3.73 vs. 4.35), Interpersonal Skills (3.53 vs. 4.10), and Technical Skills Required for the Job (3.49 vs. 4.04) (Concourse for Self-Financing Post-Secondary Education 2014: 11).

The employers suggested further enhancement on Work Attitude, Language Abilities and Interpersonal Skills for improving the performance of first degree graduates in general. Work Attitude was defined as willingness to take responsibilities, making commitment, being more enthusiastic about their work and taking more initiative at work. As for Interpersonal and Management Skills, some respondents recommended that graduates should enhance their team spirit. Employers suggested various ways to improve these aspects, among which more opportunities to develop practical skills, such as speeches, presentations, business writings, promoting contact with the outside world, current affairs and updated professional knowledge.

Overview of the Seminar European Economic and Business Life: Travailler en Contexte International

The specific features of B.Soc.Sc. (Hons) in European Studies Programme (ESP) at HKBU combine a systematic study of European political, social and economic affairs with intensive foreign language acquisition (French or German). The four-year programme comprises two years of full-time study in Hong Kong, a third year spent in Europe with academic study and, whenever feasible, working

experience in companies or institutions, followed by a fourth year of full-time study in Hong Kong. In terms of skills, the ESP should enable students "to show familiarity with high, professionally relevant proficiency in one major European language (other than English), so as to apply these skills both orally and in written form to academic and/or professional purposes" (Hong Kong Baptist University 2010a, b). Eighty per cent of the ESP graduates find their first job in the commerce/industry sector (Hong Kong Baptist University 2015a, b).

Final year students of the French stream of the programme want to find a job in a French-speaking environment. It is important to mention here the growing importance of the French community in Hong Kong. The number of French nationals in Hong Kong is estimated at 17,000. They represent the largest French community in Asia and their number doubled during the last decade. There are about 750 French companies in Hong Kong, mainly involved in trade (60%) and banking/finance activities (25%), and hiring more than 30,000 employees (Consulat Général de France à Hong Kong 2014).

"European Economic and Business Life: travailler en contexte international" is a final year seminar with French as medium of instruction taught by the author. It is specifically designed to answer two objectives of the ESP, namely "to train students to become skilled and knowledgeable communicators between Hong Kong/China and Europe; [and] to enable students to contribute to Hong Kong's role as a major international commercial and cultural crossroads" (Hong Kong Baptist University 2010a, b). The seminar focuses on the multi-faceted competences and skills appropriate in a multicultural professional environment to answer students' recurrent concern about their lack of professional experience. Students are hence expected to develop their knowledge about the business world and its environment and to acquire a "know-how" tool set in an occupational context. The course also enhances the students' communication and interpersonal skills in a French-speaking work environment. These multi-faceted competencies build a *savoir d'action* ("how to act") transferable to the world of work (Cabau 2015a, b).

This is mainly a project-based seminar in which students use Web resources to set up a simulated professional situation involving French and local company representatives. The project devised by the students sets the objective to be achieved (e.g. the opening of a French company in Hong Kong) and defines the different steps (micro-tasks) of the mission (macro-task) to be accomplished. The assessment takes place for each micro-task focused on reception, interaction and production of written and oral communication. Each task reflects situations the student may encounter in his/her future work (Cabau 2015a, b). At the same time, throughout the semester, students are required to fill out a document of self-assessment and professional life planning (Etudier.com). It is similar to a personal development planning (PDP), which is defined as "a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect on their own learning performance, and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development" (Jackson 2001).

Introduction of an E-Portfolio

As already mentioned, final year students of the French stream of the ESP want to find a job in a French company in Hong Kong, even if they have generally no clear idea of job nature or sector of professional activity they want to engage in a few months. Moreover, since the introduction of the seminar in 1998, it has looked obvious that they are not fully prepared to enter the world of work, even if they master French at a fluent level. This was reflected in various activities and assignments (project development, interview simulation, CV…) organised in the seminar. As a fact, it appears from discussions with potential French recruiters that it is not the sole proficiency in French per se which is valued: recruiters are expecting fresh graduates to be mature, to take initiatives, to understand and fit in a French company culture, to possess intercultural competences to work with French counterparts, to be knowledgeable about Hong Kong in various domains…

The gap between final year students' competences and skills and potential recruiters' expectations was the pivotal axis for the orientation and format of the seminar as described above. The participation in the Community of Practice working on Learner e-Portfolios at HKBU helped the author grasp the potential of e-portfolios to answer students' needs as a self-assessment/development tool, as a learning tool, and as an employment showcase tool (McCowan et al. 2005: 50). The decision to develop first a reflective e-portfolio was justified as follows: first, reflection was definitely considered as being "at the heart of the process of composing an eportfolio" (Cambridge 2010: 199); hence, a reflective e-portfolio appeared as a promising support in that it would help "students to recognise the variety, depth and ongoing development of their knowledge and abilities, increase their confidence in themselves as an emerging professional, and help them identify skill areas in need of improvement" (Cockburn et al. 2007); second, since the author and students alike experienced e-portfolios for the very first time, it seemed appropriate to focus on one aspect, i.e. self-reflection, as an experimental basis before trying to develop the other two profiles of the e-portfolio.

The reflective e-portfolio was introduced as a compulsory component of the seminar and Blackboard was used as virtual learning environment and course management system. It is supported by three main categories of assignments/tasks given to students, namely the PDP, the project of opening a French company in Hong Kong, and finally the analysis of texts exposing cultural differences between the Hong Kong/Chinese and French/European work environment. It is interesting to note here that class simulations of a typical business environment and the use of e-portfolios were identified among six strategies to enhance graduate employability within the generalist disciplines in Australian universities (DASSH 2015).

Structure and Profile of the E-Portfolio

The e-portfolio was divided into three parts. In the first part entitled "This seminar and me", the reflective prompts focused on students' expectations and needs for this seminar in terms of course format, support tools, knowledge, skills and competences to be developed, the proportion of linguistic versus non-linguistic component to be included, assessment format, and the use of their own and their classmates' experience in France. The second part entitled "My future professional life" focused on students' self-assessment in terms of competences, skills, assets, and weaknesses versus potential recruiters' expectations. Students were asked to answer two questions based upon their reflective work achieved in the PDP as well as in the various tasks they were involved in for the simulation project, i.e. the creation of a French company in Hong Kong. The third part was related to intercultural communication in a professional setting. Given space constraints, only the two first parts will be presented here and their outcomes analysed in the next section of the chapter.

The prompts of the first part of the e-portfolio were as follows:

1. Could you briefly state what you expect from this course?
2. What would be the best learning support tools to help you integrate a professional environment?
3. What should be the share between the linguistic component (the use of French in a professional environment) versus the content part (knowledge, i.e. the work and company culture, economic environment) in this seminar?
4. What assessment formats would be the most adequate to monitor your progress in this course?
5. To what extent can your peers' various experiences (inside and outside the university context, in Hong Kong or abroad) help you for this course?
6. To what extent will your experience in France help you acquire the required competences, skills and knowledge for this course?
7. Do you think this course differs from the other courses you were enrolled in during your studies at Hong Kong Baptist University? If so, please elaborate the reasons by providing some examples.

The prompts of the second part of the e-portfolio are as follows:

1. According to you, what are job applicants' major attributes expected by potential recruiters?
2. State first your assets, then your shortcomings in a professional perspective for the following terms:

   Communication
   Skills
   Competences
   Knowledge
   Team work

Outcomes and Further Development

A full analysis of the outcomes of the reflective e-portfolio in the above-mentioned seminar is beyond the scope of this chapter. We will discuss the content of students' e-portfolios in the light of two seminar activities and assignments, namely the simulation project and the PDP only.

First of all, it appears that the e-portfolio enabled students to analyse the thinking and reasoning process they were engaged in both activities. For example, students stated in their e-portfolio that the PDP enabled them "to reflect upon our competences/professional future", "to engage in a self-assessment process", "to gain self-awareness of assets", "to better know myself by analysing my interests in a professional perspective", "to understand the necessity to set some professional objectives". Students identified their skill gaps and training needs, for example, their "difficulties to express one's opinions", their "lack of in-depth analysis skills" which became more salient with the regular work on their PDP and the simulation project. They also recognised their assets, such as their proficiency in several languages and their confidence in their abilities "to manage time and stress to provide efficient and good quality services". They were fully aware of the importance of interpersonal skills, where linguistic proficiency is to be accompanied with intercultural competences (Cabau 2015b). In fact, students' e-portfolios sustained their ongoing professional development, to slowly forge a professional identity, which is "a key component of employability" (Cambridge 2010: 153). They complemented the self-assessment work embedded in the PDP.

At the same time, students' self-assessment process was supported by integrating a reflection about an external point of view, namely the recruiters' and/or the company manager's perspective. Students realised the need to ponder about what as job candidates they can offer to the company, what the company needs. In their e-portfolios, they reported their difficulties to present themselves in a favourable way, to show their motivation and dynamism during interviews. As a student explained, "if I know what I can offer the company, I can present myself in a favourable light during interviews". Students also referred to the external perspective highlighted in the simulation project, where they have to anticipate and design tasks that are necessary for French businessmen who want to create a company in Hong Kong.

E-portfolios also appeared to help as a tool for enhancing metacognition (Yorke and Knight 2004) and supporting students' thinking and learning process. Students reported how and what they were learning. Let us take an example: in the simulation project, a student had to present a business plan to a French company manager. In her e-portfolio, she reported the different strategies she used to find and select reliable and relevant information, how she benefited from other students' experiences (business/marketing courses, internship) to incorporate valuable data she would not have thought of. The reflective work she achieved in her e-portfolio was a metacognitive support tool for her between the time gap when the assignment was given and when the assignment was delivered.

In their e-portfolios, students referred to their work mindset: they appreciated the possibility of taking initiative and intervening during the simulation project, which made the seminar "different from traditional courses". They stated that they were eager "to synthesise several skills and competences directly transferable to a professional context", with a predilection for team working versus individual work. Students reported their increased self-confidence and motivation, sense of initiative and anticipation. The regular use of e-portfolio appeared beneficial to help them acquire the skills listed by employers, such as analytical and problem-solving abilities; work attitude; interpersonal skills; management skills; technical skills required for the job; and knowledge of current affairs and business issues. Hence, e-portfolios greatly contribute to help students engage with the course's learning experiences (Barrie 2007: 248), since they offer students the opportunity to ponder about the content and the profile of the graduate attributes such as knowledge, skills, communication or teamwork through learning activities. The e-portfolio with its embedded materialised self-reflection work supports students' personal engagement and consequently consolidates their graduate attributes.

In the light of the positive outcomes of the reflective e-portfolio, the next step is to develop next year a show/public e-portfolio including a combination of multi-media support such as video, audio recording, PowerPoint presentations, reports, digital images, text documents, Web pages, etc. The showcase e-portfolio will help fresh graduates describe to potential recruiters what their strengths are, and "share concrete examples to convince interviewers that they are suitable for the job" (Cheng 2012: 130). The concrete examples here will be among others all the micro-tasks accomplished by students during the simulation project. They will provide "better evidence of their employability skills in ways that are relevant to employers" (Precision Consultancy 2007: 56). At the same time, e-portfolios will be used as assessment tools for the teacher and student peers as for students' ability to interact, adapt, integrate, interpret and negotiate in a French professional setting. These future developments will be operated while paying attention to possible technical problems students may encounter and students' concerns about time management. Furthermore, representatives of a French recruitment company and the French Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong will be invited as external reviewers to expose their views about e-portfolios' pertinence, format, content as an employment showcase tool.

Concluding Remarks

When analysing the content of students' e-portfolios, findings were consistent with the literature: students reported their increased self-confidence and motivation, sense of initiative and sense of anticipation… But benefits can also be derived for other stakeholders, namely HE institutions and employers. E-portfolios can help prepare students for the transition from university life to work environment, hence enhancing universities' visibility by showing their link to business and industry.

The development of e-portfolios for all final year students would highlight universities' concerns to answer societal demands and expectations. As for potential employers, they would get a clearer picture of the profile, competences and achievements of fresh graduates, especially Social Sciences graduates. Here, a large-scale survey would help determine whether Hong Kong employers would favour the e-portfolio approach as a means to assess fresh graduates' strengths and potential, what kind of evidence e-portfolios should include, and what format and structure would be the most suitable for e-portfolios to incorporate different needs and categories. Students would have a more informed understanding of how to structure their e-portfolios and best present their employability skills according to the type of job they want and the profile of the company they intend to join.

Finally if e-portfolios are to be envisaged as a valuable tool to help fresh graduates smoothly integrate into a professional environment, the contact with potential recruiters can only be fruit-bearing with the first step, i.e. the self-assessment process embedded in the reflective e-portfolio. This is a sine qua non condition for graduates who are expected to have been engaged in their learning process, but also to be ready to engage in their future professional life.

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