

# Chapter 11

## Using Student ePortfolios to Showcase Students' Learning: Experience from Hong Kong Baptist University

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**Abstract** This paper gives a descriptive account on the pilot in using learning electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) to facilitate students' reflective practice of their learning at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). The opportunities and challenges faced by HKBU are explained to share experience in our continuing endeavour to enhance teaching and learning quality at the University.

**Keywords** ePortfolio · Learning portfolio · Reflection · Learning-centred experience · Evidence · Outcomes assessment · Whole person education

### Introduction

With technologies advancing at a phenomenal pace and globalisation becoming a must, the twenty-first century is exerting great demands on the tertiary education sector, worldwide. Governments and taxpayers expect greater public accountability from higher education institutions. In particular, they are interested in whether their funding has been used effectively to help students learn successfully so that the students, in turn, can make positive contributions back to society. In consequence, simply conferring degree certificates on graduates, showing that institutions have good curricula with good teaching is not adequate. There is an exigence on evidence showing how well students have learned, and how they will continue to learn after they complete their university study. It is hence expected that institutions provide a learning-centred educational experience for students by helping them to become engaged learners, equipped to continue active learning for lifelong employability.

According to Dewey (1933), "*We do not learn from experiences; we learn from reflecting on our experiences*". So any attempt to show how well students have

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learned must involve engaging students in documenting and reflecting on their own learning experiences. In this regard, helping students to make use of electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) to collect artefacts related to their academic curriculum and extra/co-curricular activities, then assisting them to journal their own learning experiences and reflections in the same ePortfolios would facilitate evidence collection on student learning.

Within the above-mentioned context, this paper describes a pilot project, the use of ePortfolios to collect evidence and facilitate students' reflection on their learning sojourns at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). The experience of HKBU will be shared to highlight the opportunities and challenges. The paper will start with a brief literature review on ePortfolios used for education purposes. The development at HKBU leading to the ePortfolio pilot will then be outlined. A description of a sub-project under the pilot engaging students in creating and maintaining ePortfolios for a major co-curricular activity will be provided. The paper ends with a discussion on lessons learned from the pilot. It is envisaged that the ePortfolios pilot will continue at HKBU, and that the Student Learning ePortfolios will eventually become part of an overall evidence collection exercise to ascertain how HKBU is fulfilling its education ethos by providing valuable learning experiences to its students.

## **Student ePortfolio to Help Students Document and Evidence Their Learning**

Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005) defined ePortfolio as a digitised, representative collection of one's work or "artefacts", which can be in the form of audio, text, pictures and/or video on a website or on other electronic media. Unlike a Facebook account or personal website or blog, ePortfolios emphasise students' intellectual identity as they relate to their tertiary education.

The utilisation of ePortfolios has the potential to change the nature of learning environments and the ways in which student learning is promoted through different modes of application (Ayala 2006). From a pedagogical perspective, ePortfolios serve to provide a repository of work on which to base subsequent evaluation of students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions relative to their academic programme. Hence, ePortfolios provide a selection of specific artefacts from which evaluation or assessment of specific outcomes may take place and subsequently offers a medium for students to engage in, document evidence of reflective practice and take ownership of their learning (Tubaishat et al. 2009).

### ***Emphasis on the Reflection of Learning Experiences***

Reflective thinking is acknowledged as one of the most important aspects of learning and knowledge building in professional practices (Berry et al. 2003).

Reflection not only makes learning more meaningful and relevant, but also helps students own their own learning as more independent, self-directed, lifelong learners.

Barrett (2000) emphasised that “an ePortfolio is not a haphazard collection of artefacts but rather a reflective tool that demonstrates growth over time”. It is believed that learning portfolio provides an opportunity for developing students’ reflective judgement (King and Kitchener 1994) and higher order or significant learning (Bloom 1956; Fink 2003) that educators desire in students of all abilities. For example, engaging in a process of reflection using ePortfolios may improve learning outcomes such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills because it encourages an individual to generate knowledge connections (i.e. cognitive constructivism) and independently apply new knowledge and strategies that align with his or her value disposition (Chau and Cheng 2010).




For students to develop effective ePortfolios, guidance for reflection is pivotal to reveal how one’s own particular increment of learning takes place. As such, it is believed that an intentional design and well-structured learning ePortfolio framework based on the assessment criteria used in graduate attributes rubrics can provide a clear guidance for reflection (Lam et al. 2014).

## The Development of ePortfolios at HKBU

### *Whole Person Education (WPE) at HKBU*





Hong Kong Baptist University is one of eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong. Established in 1956, HKBU celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2016. Since its inception, HKBU has focused on whole person education as its educational ethos.

An education at HKBU aims at developing all aspects of the whole person. In particular, it aims to foster the following seven attributes among its undergraduates who should (Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2015):

 <b>公民</b> Citizenship	Be the responsible citizens with an international outlook and a sense of ethics and civility
 <b>知識</b> Knowledge	Have up-to-date, in-depth knowledge of an academic specialty, as well as a broad range of cultural and general knowledge
 <b>學習</b> Learning	Be independent, lifelong learners with an open mind and an inquiring spirit

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 <b>技能</b> Skills	Have the necessary information literacy and IT skills, as well as numerical and problem-solving skills, to function effectively in work and everyday life
 <b>創意</b> Creativity	Be able to think critically and creatively
 <b>溝通</b> Communication	Have trilingual and biliterate competence in English and Chinese, and the ability to articulate ideas clearly and coherently
 <b>群體</b> Teamwork	Be ready to serve, lead and work in a team, and to pursue a healthy lifestyle

HKBU is dedicated to delivering WPE that nurtures students to become responsible citizens and caring leaders who possess discipline knowledge and generic skills to succeed in meeting the challenges, and taking the opportunities, of the twenty-first century. In this regard, WPE is not just a concept or goal, but a systematic approach that permeates the University's three major endeavours: quality education, quality research and service to the community. With the outcomes-based approach to student learning fully incorporated into the curriculum, HBKU operationalises our WPE ethos for undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research postgraduates students via three sets of Graduate Attributes (GAs). Hence numerous opportunities, both within and outside the academic curriculum, are provided to deepen students' educational experience to attain the GAs. In this connection, it is deemed necessary to record the development of various learning experiences and generic skills of our students alongside the reporting of students' academic achievements.

### ***The Need for Student Learning EPortfolios***

Gathering evidence of student learning is at the forefront of today's higher education initiatives. There is a pressing need to collect direct evidence of student learning for quality assurance and enhancement to address the issue of accountability to public funds. For HKBU, an important element of quality assurance is to show evidence that our students are attaining the GAs as they progress in their study (Chong et al. 2015). This is not only central to the entire implementation of the outcomes-based approach to student learning stipulated by our funding agency, the University Grants Committee (UGC), following the sector-wide curriculum change from a 3-year to a 4-year undergraduate degree, but gathering evidence also ensures the University's continuous commitment to excellence in learning and teaching.

At HKBU, most of the direct evidence of student learning, such as reflective journals and other written work by students are often submitted to, and kept by, individual faculty members or units organising the activities. Under the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum, which offers students more flexibility in their choices of general education courses and courses within and outside their majors, a common platform is required for students to keep a record of their learning experiences holistically and communicate with their teachers and peers. However, knowing that ePortfolios are a good way of providing such a common platform does not mean the implementation can be automatic or even done easily. The concept of using ePortfolios in education is still relatively new. To many faculty members, ePortfolios are entirely within the education discipline and do not apply to other academic areas. Hence convincing the entire University to adopt ePortfolios for student learning cannot be achieved in a one-step implementation, rather, pilot projects on ePortfolios have to be started to let the ideas gradually develop with our community.

### ***Initial Efforts in Using ePortfolios to Enhance Student Learning***

The earliest adoptors of ePortfolios at HKBU were certain faculty members in the Department of Government and International Studies (GIS) within the Faculty of Social Sciences. For a number of years, GIS has been offering a successful 4-year 'sandwich' programme in which students spend the entire third year in Germany or France (depending on which major they have chosen) to deepen their language skills and enrich their cultural understanding of the respective countries. As such, students in this programme have to become fluent, both in written form and orally, in German or French within the first two years of study at HKBU, so that they are well prepared to spend the year abroad at the partner institutions. The coordinator of the German stream, in particular, recognised the potential of ePortfolios to assist students in honing their language skills while they are on the HKBU campus, as well as documenting their learning experiences during their time in Germany. Working together with the unit that provides elearning support at HKBU, the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning, GIS colleagues in the German stream started experimenting with electronic journal writing in the 2011–12 academic year. At this initial stage, no specific ePortfolio platform was adopted, instead various functions were used in the learning management system, Moodle to mimic an ePortfolio. The aim was to confirm whether students would embrace such a concept and whether they would indeed benefit from developing their own electronic journals to document their learning journeys.

The experiment went well and the response from both staff and students on the German stream was very positive. The experiment and results were shared within the HKBU community and externally at international conferences to the effect that

in the ensuing academic year, other colleagues came on board and an ePortfolio pilot project was conducted. The remit of the pilot team was to experiment with selected ePortfolio platforms with the aim of recommending a suitable one for adoption by HKBU eventually. The Mahara ePortfolio platform was on the list as it could integrate with Moodle fairly easily. During that period, the University decided to adopt the Blackboard Learning Management System as a second platform, primarily for outcomes assessment purposes. Blackboard has a built-in ePortfolio system, consequently, the Blackboard ePortfolio was also put on the list for pilot testing. Incidentally, around the beginning of 2013, the UGC provided seed funding for HKBU to set up communities of practice (CoPs) with the aim of further enhancing teaching and learning. The pilot team took the opportunity with a successful application, leading to the establishment of the CoP on Student Learning ePortfolios. The seed funding also supported another CoP on Teaching ePortfolios to document teaching practices and showcase teaching innovations. With work progress and dissemination practices of these CoPs, the University community became more familiar with concept of ePortfolios, both for students and teachers.

### ***Current Utilisation of ePortfolios to Enhance Student Learning at HKBU***

The above-mentioned European Studies programme offered by the GIS Department has incorporated ePortfolios as a standard practice for its students to document and reflect on their learning experiences during the year that they are away from the HKBU campus. Apart from this programme, the following outlines further sub-projects under the umbrella of the ePortfolio pilot.

#### ***CoP on Student Learning ePortfolio***

Colleagues within this CoP are from diverse academic disciplines that have either used ePortfolios as an assessment tool or see it as a viable option for their respective disciplines. Preliminary pilot work has been done by members of this CoP with colleagues leading the GIS programme requiring their students to record their learning activities and reflections using ePortfolios during their off-campus study year. This CoP piloted the use of both Mahara and the Blackboard ePortfolio systems and found both to be suitable hence could not make a definitive recommendation.

### ***Graduate Attributes (GAs) Ambassador Scheme***

To help student actualise the seven GAs, the GAs Ambassadors Scheme was established in early 2012 with a generous donation from Professor Albert Chan, the President and Vice Chancellor at the time. The idea is to provide a group of motivated students with training and support so that they can plan and lead activities to assist their fellow students recognise and attain the GAs. Despite the short history of the Scheme, evidence collected from various activities (via ePortfolio and other evaluation methods) suggested that both the ambassadors and their fellow students welcomed the opportunities to work on and reflect upon their achievement of the GAs. It has been demonstrated that the use of ePortfolios can help the GAs Ambassadors re-conceptualise their key learning experiences in this Scheme and student narratives in the ePortfolios could also serve as qualitative assessment tools to ascertain students' attainment of the GAs. This Scheme has also experimented with both the Mahara and Blackboard ePortfolio systems.

### ***General Education (GE) Outstanding Students Award Scheme***

To reward students who have excellent academic results in GE courses and their active participation in GE activities and community services, the General Education Office established a "GE Outstanding Students Award Scheme" and encouraged students to showcase their strengths, achievements and reflection on GE and related non-academic experiences through ePortfolios.

### ***School of Chinese Medicine***

Due to the good efforts and experience sharing of the CoP on Student ePortfolios and GAs Ambassadors Scheme, plus GIS' pioneering success in incorporating ePortfolios into its European Studies programme, HKBU's School of Chinese Medicine adopted the ePortfolios in the 2014–15 academic year to allow its students to record and document their clinical learning experience while they were away fulfilling their practicum requirement. Interestingly for these students, as their practicum was conducted in a region in Mainland China where Internet access was limited, while they welcomed the introduction of electronic journal writing, the Internet provision had to be enhanced by a good margin before they would embrace the entire ePortfolio concept as multi-media materials could not be accommodated.

## **Piloting ePortfolios—Experience from a Sub-Project**

### ***Implementation of Student ePortfolio in the GAs Ambassadors Scheme***

To promote the 7 HKBU GAs within and outside the HKBU community, the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning (CHTL) established, in 2012, this student ambassadors scheme to recruit students to support and organise various promotional events. Various training workshops were provided to help students develop certain soft skills, such as teamwork skills, communication skills and project management. Based on their choices of the GAs to promote, the students were grouped into various GA Teams. Having considered the possible positive influences of learning portfolios to independent learning (Mahoney 2007), lifelong learning (Chen 2009) and self-regulation (Yastibas and Yastibas 2015), a team of four students were convinced and they believed that it was a good idea to promote GAs by participating in the ePortfolio pilot project.

The pilot project was carried out in 2013–14. The major purpose was to explore a possible way to implement ePortfolios in a co-curricular programme in order to effectively assess students' attainment of institutional learning outcomes or GAs. An initial idea was to make use of assessment criteria of the institutional GAs rubrics as guidance for student reflection. It is believed that the criteria and descriptions in the GAs rubrics could help guide students to develop structured reflection and ePortfolios. In addition, since ePortfolios could further enhance student learning by supporting the university's academic advising (Chen and Black 2010), the design of this pilot project also considered ePortfolios as a tool to help students set their personal/learning goals, reflect their selected learning experience, and discuss their future action plans.

Unlike the situations in academic programmes, this pilot ePortfolio project was not discipline-based which meant students were not required to write reflection on the specific discipline knowledge or professional skills they learned. Instead, the students set the learning goals which were aligned to their selected GAs from the outset, then they reflected on the attainment of their learning goals and the related GAs after organising and/or participating in selected activities. As such, students had the autonomy to make the decisions to include any learning experience, including learning activities in both academic and co-curricular activities, that they believed were meaningful and constructive to their learning goals.

To achieve the above objectives, the pilot project was designed in three stages: (1) training workshops, (2) building ePortfolios, and (3) showcases and modification.



### ***First Stage: Training Workshops and Consultation Meetings***

The first stage of this project included two training workshops (1.5 h each) and some individual consultation meetings (15–30 min each). Since the ePortfolio tool (Mahara) and writing skill for reflection were new to HKBU students, it was necessary to arrange a hands-on workshop to introduce these new tools and concepts. Suggestions on the possible structures of ePortfolios and the submission requirement were also provided. Another workshop about goal setting and study planning was also arranged, which aimed to explain the GAs rubrics and help students connect their learning goals with relevant GAs rubrics. A few individual consultation meetings were arranged for some students who had struggled in setting goals or choosing GAs rubrics. Some students also sought advice on their study plans and appropriate activities in order to achieve their goals.

### ***Second Stage: Building ePortfolio***

After identifying the learning goals and starting to participate in the relevant learning activities in September 2013, students were required to write their reflections based on their current learning experiences and build their ePortfolios on a monthly basis. Feedback was given verbally in individual consultation meetings or in written form on the Mahara ePortfolio system.

At the end of the semester, most of the students had developed very comprehensive ePortfolios which were organised in sections (including self-introduction, learning/career/personal goals, reflection, and future actions). They selected suitable work and attached them as artefacts to support their development of certain skills. In addition, some reflective write-ups showed some interesting experience. For example, a Year 2 Translation student mentioned her successful experience of solving a classification problem in translation study, by using an etool that she learnt from a computer course unrelated to her major. She believed that there are always some connections between different disciplines; and having identified these connections, one could develop different creative solutions for problems. Another Year 4 European Studies student wrote in her ePortfolio that she was very happy to realise her new strength of organising concepts and theories in visual form. Furthermore, this new found strength was recognised by her teachers and peers. This showed that students actually benefited through the process of reflection and building ePortfolios.

However, some difficulties were also encountered. Some students did not follow the rubrics criteria when they prepared the reflection because they could not understand the criteria properly. The project tried to address this weakness in the third and final stage.

### ***Third Stage: Showcases and Modification***

The final stage was students' showcases which aimed to provide students with the opportunity to present their work and seek comments from different perspectives, teachers and peers. The first showcase event was arranged in the University Library, entitled "How does the eportfolio enhance independent learning and reflective learning?—A show case of student learning portfolios". The setting was informal so as to encourage interaction with the participants. Participants were asked to rate the session using a feedback questionnaire, and the session scored 4.57 for overall quality (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree); this was very encouraging to the students.

After the first showcase, the students started to modify their ePortfolios according to the comments from the audience. As mentioned in previous section, one weakness of their work was the structure of reflection. Students were supposed to prepare their reflection based on the GAs rubrics criteria so that they could demonstrate their achievement of that GAs. As such, consultation meetings were arranged to help them address this issue. The students further enriched their ePortfolios by adding some reflection on their previous learning experience in the University. For example, some of them reflected on the learning experience of a year-long exchange programme and HKBU Model United Nations event to ascertain attainment of relevant skills based on the cross-cultural competence and problem solving rubrics.

The second showcase was arranged at an academic conference, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) 2014 Conference. With the support of the CHTL, two student representatives, Elaine and Panda, prepared an academic poster presentation in this conference. The topic was "Assessing Cross-cultural Competence in Co-curricular Programmes: A Case Study of Using ePortfolio and Institutional Rubric", which demonstrated how a student's narratives in an ePortfolio and institutional rubrics could be used as outcomes assessment tools to evident students' competences in problem-solving and cross-cultural environment adaption. By using their ePortfolio as examples, they demonstrated to the audience how they had used a selected GA rubric's criteria as guideline for reflection. They also explained how their teachers would assess their work with the same assessment rubric. Finally, they concluded the presentation by addressing the benefits to students and HKBU (see summary in Table 11.1).

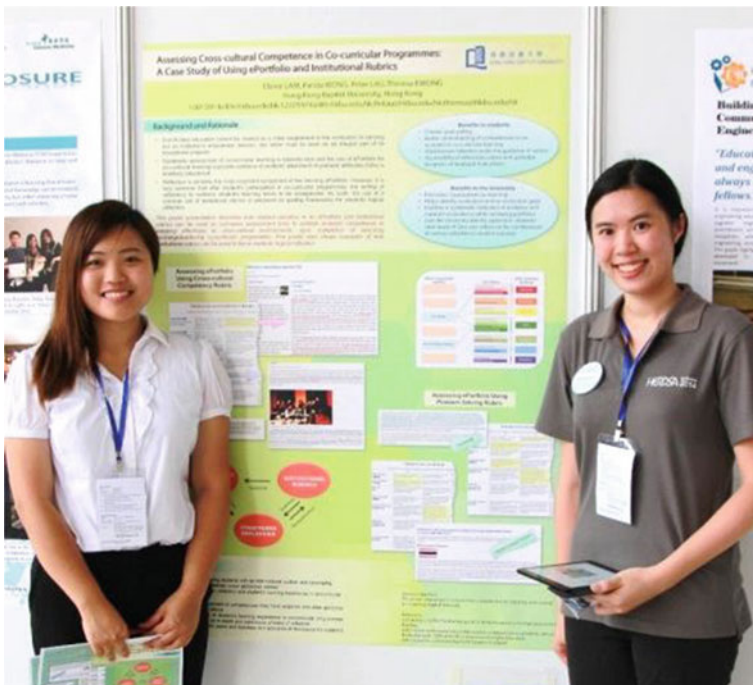
This poster presentation was very successful, winning them the HERDSA Best Poster Prize in this conference (see Photos 11.1 and 11.2).

### ***Continue Developing Learning ePortfolio***

More than one year after this pilot project, Panda still regularly updated her ePortfolio in the Mahara system. She set new learning goals for 2015 and kept

**Table 11.1** Benefits of using institutional rubrics in preparing ePortfolio

Benefits to students	Benefits to university
Clear goal setting	Promotes “assessment as learning”
Better understanding of competences to be acquired in co-curricular learning	Helps identify curriculum and co-curriculum gaps
Well-framed reflection under the guidance of rubrics	Enables a systematic collection of evidence and maintain consistency while reviewing portfolios
Accessibility of reflections online and possible reception of feedback from others	Helps the university identify patterns in students’ attainment of GAs and reflect on the contributions of various activities to student success



**Photo 11.1** Elaine (right) and Panda presented their poster at HERDSA 2014 conference. *Photo source* HERDSA 2014 conference website (<http://conference.hersda.org.au/2014/>)

writing reflections on her learning experience in both academic courses and co-curricular programmes. Furthermore, she built an ePortfolio to apply for an outstanding student award of the University. Hence Panda has developed a strong ownership to her ePortfolio. This actually echoed Siemens’ (2004, p. 6) view on a successful institution-level implementation of ePortfolio, i.e. the effective use of ePortfolio needed to be driven by the learners and their “understanding of applicability and use”.



**Photo 11.2** Elaine, as the representative, received HERDSA Best Poster Prize in 2014. *Photo source* HERDSA 2014 conference website (<http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2014/>)

## Discussion and Moving Forward

The pilot of using ePortfolios to enhance student learning has been successful as shown by the various sub-projects being established and carried out to fruition. Most notably, two academic units, the Department of Government and International Study and School of Chinese Medicine, have ascertained the value of using ePortfolios to help students record and showcase their learning sojourns while they are away from the HKBU campus. However, as discussed above the integration of student learning across curricular and co-curricular areas is imperative for deepening student awareness of their learning experiences, both within and outside the campus. Hence ePortfolios should be maintained and evaluated over the course of an entire college career and beyond but not on an ad hoc basis. To this end, a position paper to formally establish a Student Learning Electronic Portfolio (SLeP) system starting with freshmen on their entry to the University was submitted to senior management towards the end of 2014–15.

The position paper proposes to introduce the SLeP to support students in the academic advising and mentoring and aims to help students record reflections of their learning experiences at HKBU holistically. Many established ePortfolio programmes in higher education institutions worldwide are introduced during first-year

orientation and cultivated throughout the entire educational experience. These programmes often focus on introducing ePortfolio to assist with the advising of students in their first two years prior to declaring a major. While introducing the ePortfolio in academic advising or mentoring programme is a natural starting point for first-year students, the success of a broader and longer term SLeP implementation depends on its integration into the HKBU curriculum and in co-curricular activities related to milestones within the undergraduate learning career. Instead of being a one-time activity never referenced outside academic advising, the position paper envisages that students will continue with their ePortfolios as they transit into their majors. As students continue their learning journeys from freshman to senior years, their learning process and attainment of GAs will be built from one year to another, so students can reflect on their own learning experiences. Intrinsic motivation to maintain the SLeP will become more salient if it is reinforced and reiterated by multiple people and in a variety of contexts over time.

Adoption of new elearning endeavours is a form of organisational change, and often tied to the culture of an organisation. Hence issues such as the timing, dissemination, familiarity and the organisation's readiness for change all come into play. In 2014–15, a quality assurance audit was conducted on HKBU, and then in 2015–16, the ascension of a new President and Vice Chancellor took place. To exacerbate the situation, the University has to decide on a single learning management system as the dual-platform model was deemed resource-intensive for our institution. Thus while the University community may be ready for change, a lot of changes are already happening and the establishment of a SLeP system has not been given top priority. To date, there is still no decision on the SLeP.

Yet despite the uncertainties mentioned in the previous paragraph, the outlook for using ePortfolios to enhance student learning remains sternly positive at HKBU. Enhancing student learning and collecting evidence that learning has indeed taken place, and that the university is adding value to the process, is top priority for institutions around the world. Universities and colleges worldwide have deployed ePortfolios for a variety of purposes, for student-centred learning and reflection, and for the purposes of institutional accreditation and outcomes assessment, etc. Hence the various sub-projects started under the pilot will not come to an abrupt end; the "seeds" planted thus far for ePortfolios, due to the good and hard work of the various colleagues will germinate and continue to grow. Given sufficient time and continuous nurture, the concept of SLeP will take hold and its formal establishment will become inevitable at HKBU in due course.

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