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Australia Forum 2016

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Book of Papers

28–29 September 2016

2016 ePortfolio Forum: Connecting learning to the future

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Ready? Action! Building a portfolio of evidence in teacher education

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Abstract

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) was convened in 2014 and was asked to recommend how initial teacher education in Australia might be reformed to better prepare teachers for teaching (TEMAG, 2014, p. v). The subsequent report, *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* (TEMAG, 2014) outlined some clear expectations for teacher education and accreditation in the coming years. Of particular interest to this audience was the key direction that pre-service teachers should be required to develop a 'portfolio of evidence' during their initial teacher education program in order to demonstrate that they have reached 'classroom readiness' by the time they graduate. This, according to the report, would confirm their eligibility for provisional registration and then they would be required to add to this portfolio as a beginning teacher in order to achieve full registration as a teacher. This short paper reflects on the status of portfolios in teacher education and then examines the recommendations from the TEMAG report that relate to the portfolio of evidence. In particular, Recommendations 26 (a national assessment framework linked to the portfolio), 27 (connections with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2014)) and 28 (portfolio requirements during practicum) have significant implications for teacher education programs while Recommendation 33 (portfolio requirements for provisional teachers working towards full registration) will impact on induction in to the profession and ongoing professional development of teachers.

While the TEMAG report acknowledged that there are examples of excellence in Australian teacher education, it maintained that this innovation has been sporadic and therefore all teacher education providers will need to review their practice in accordance with the report recommendations. In the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania, we are examining all of our programs in line with the TEMAG report and consequently our implementation of ePortfolios across the teacher education courses. While we currently have some examples of innovative ePortfolio use, we don't yet have a clear and systemic implementation approach and therefore need to rethink how we can best enact the portfolio requirements emerging from the report. This paper, therefore, outlines the challenges that we face and describes the strategies we are considering in order to address the TEMAG recommendations.

Keywords: *teacher education, teacher standards, portfolio of evidence, TEMAG, ePortfolio*

Introduction

When the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report: *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* was launched in February 2015, it sent shock waves through the teacher education community. While it acknowledged that there were pockets of innovation in some teacher education programs, it was evident that the advisory group considered that initial teacher education in Australia lacks quality and rigor and, as a consequence, the quality of graduating teachers has been compromised (TEMAG, 2014, p. xi). A particular aspect of the report related to the notion of evidence for expertise and competence. According to TEMAG, it is not enough for pre-service teachers to simply participate in teacher education curriculum or even complete assessment relating to this curriculum. They actually need to collect evidence of their progress in order to demonstrate how they have achieved learning outcomes and how they meet teaching standards. The TEMAG report identified that a 'portfolio of evidence' is required for this purpose. Further, it suggested that it is the responsibility of teacher education providers to facilitate the pre-service teacher in this process by incorporating the portfolio as assessment consistently throughout teacher education programs.

Although the concept of portfolios in education is certainly not new, the mandate of systemic portfolio integration is an alert for teacher educators, especially when statements such as "programs that do not produce effective teachers should not continue to operate" (p. xii) indicate that compliance with the report is not an optional extra. Teacher education providers have now had over 12 months to contemplate this report and, while there isn't a deadline for portfolio inclusion, there is evidence that the recommendations from the report are now filtering through to policy, for example, the Teacher Capability Assessment Tool (TCAT) required for all pre-service teacher applicants in 2017 and the Literacy and Numeracy Test for initial teacher education (ACER, 2016) that must be passed prior to graduation. It is anticipated that all teacher education courses will be subject to providing evidence of an integrated portfolio at the next accreditation point and so it is essential that teacher education providers are proactive in redesigning their programs to meet this requirement.

This paper illuminates the pathway towards ePortfolio implementation in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. It describes the positioning of portfolios in teacher education and then outlines how the TEMAG report references a 'portfolio of evidence'. The practicalities of implementing this portfolio as an ePortfolio in teacher education are reflected on and then the strategies to meet the TEMAG requirement in the Faculty are discussed. While the 'portfolio of evidence' may be seen by some as a tick-box for government requirements, we consider that it will require teacher educators, preservice teachers and schools to substantially change practice and this will have significant impact on teacher education.

Portfolios in Teacher Education

Portfolios have strong and established foundations in teacher education. In the late 1980s, when assessment practices in education shifted to an outcomes based approach, portfolios were seen as an appropriate way to demonstrate achievement of learning accomplishments (Davies & Le Mahieu, 2003). Over the last few decades, this genre of assessment has become main-stream in teacher education. Portfolios are used routinely in teacher education to capture learning experiences, present evidence of learning outcomes and to showcase reflective practice (Fox, White, & Kidd, 2011). Further, the portfolio is a familiar device in a practicum context where pre-service teachers gather and present evidence of their experiences in a classroom environment.

While portfolios were traditionally paper-based collections of resources and documents, the ePortfolio (or digital portfolio) is now more relevant for teacher education purposes. Maher and Gerbic (2009) suggest that an ePortfolio is more of a technological innovation rather than a conceptual one. While the purpose of the portfolio is largely the same, using a digital format means that content can be stored, manipulated and transported with greater ease. Further, the content is no longer restricted to a linear, printed format and can include multimedia such as audio, video and hyperlinks. Additionally, the digital format facilitates communication to a wider audience as a link can be emailed as required. Although the practical implementation comes with challenges, certainly the concept of using ePortfolios is in step with contemporary teacher education.

Given the wide acceptance of portfolios in teacher education, it is actually not surprising that this mechanism has been recommended by TEMAG. It is, however, the degree of accountability that rests with the portfolio, the prescriptive assessment requirements and the external directives that will require teacher educators to reexamine the positioning of the portfolio in teacher education courses.

Action now: Classroom ready teachers

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) was established in 2014 by the Australian Government. The group consisted of eight educational experts who were asked to advise the then Education Minister (Christopher Pyne) on how initial teacher education might be improved and how pre-service teachers could be made 'classroom ready' by the time they graduated from their course. The *Action now: Classroom ready teachers report* (TEMAG, 2014) documented seven key directions for teacher education, offered five key proposals and made 38 practical recommendations for change. A number of items in the TEMAG report related to the concept of a 'portfolio of evidence' and these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: TEMAG items relating to 'portfolio of evidence' (TEMAG, 2014).

Item	Content
Key Direction 5: Evidence of classroom readiness	Pre-service teachers building a Portfolio of Evidence throughout their initial teacher education program to demonstrate that they reach classroom readiness and eligibility for provisional registration. Beginning teachers add to their Portfolio of Evidence to achieve full registration. (p. x)
Key Proposal 4: Robust assurance of classroom readiness	…Robust evidence will be required of providers to show that their graduates have the knowledge and teaching practices needed to be classroom ready, against a national assessment framework. Pre-service teachers will also be required to collect evidence that they have the skills and capabilities for both graduation and employment. Graduate teachers must be supported to reach proficiency once they enter the profession. (p. xiii)
Recommendation 26	The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership develop a national assessment framework, including requirements for a Portfolio of Evidence, to support higher education providers and schools to consistently assess the classroom readiness of pre-service teachers throughout the duration of their program. (p. xvii)
Recommendation 27	Pre-service teachers develop a Portfolio of Evidence to demonstrate their achievement of the Graduate level of the Professional Standards. (p. xvii)
Recommendation 28	Higher education providers and schools work together to assist pre-service teachers to develop and collect sophisticated evidence of their teaching ability and their impact on student learning for their Portfolio of Evidence. (p. xvii)
Recommendation 33	Beginning teachers build on their Portfolio of Evidence to reach full registration at the Proficient level of the Professional Standards. (p. xviii)

In a nutshell, the TEMAG report identifies that pre-service teachers will be required to develop a portfolio of evidence that is mapped against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the Graduate level (AITSL, 2014) from the beginning of their teaching degree. This portfolio will incorporate evidence of their knowledge, skills and capabilities acquired during their program of study. Further, a student's portfolio must also represent their teaching ability and their impact on student learning enacted during their practicum placements in school settings.

Implications of TEMAG for ePortfolios in Teacher Education

While a 'portfolio of evidence' doesn't necessarily have to be a digital collection, it is likely that most teacher education providers will use this opportunity to implement course wide ePortfolios with their pre-service teachers. The prospect of implementing comprehensive portfolios on a wide scale would simply be too difficult to manage if the resources were paper-based. The advantages of having digital portfolio materials that can be stored in an approved cloud space and then linked for sharing are extensive and this option is really the only viable strategy for effective and pervasive deployment of portfolios, as described by TEMAG. Of course, the challenge for teacher educators is to develop a strategy for implementing this arrangement.

Most universities provide a range of digital tools for staff and students and these tools have varying capacities for building e-portfolios. The options available range

through digital systems that have been designed explicitly for evidence based ePortfolios (e.g. PebblePad), existing functionality in a learning management system (e.g. Blackboard), generic tools repurposed for portfolio application (e.g. OneNote or PowerPoint) and web-based generic website building tools (e.g. WordPress). However, just because a tool has potential to be used for portfolio purposes, it doesn't mean that students will intuitively know how to use it to build an ePortfolio. Teacher educators will need to completely rethink course assessment strategies, unit alignment and the development of academic literacies across courses in order to build a comprehensive ePortfolio approach that is fitting for the TEMAG requirements.

As the education community ponders what might be expected in terms of the TEMAG 'portfolio of evidence', it is interesting to watch the rise of entrepreneurial ventures that purport to provide ePortfolio solutions for Australian pre-service and post-graduate teachers based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2014) according to the TEMAG requirements. An example of this is Edufolios (edufolios.org), a hosting service with a yearly subscription that provides an "edufolio" template with tabs listing the standards where students can add posts. A similar, although less ambitious example is a website "shell" constructed in Weebly that is available for $20.00 from the "Designed by Teachers" online market place (http://designedbyteachers.com.au). This approach may offer some options for preservice teachers, however it is unlikely that this type of resource will be a suitable to connect assessment tasks across a teacher education course.

ePortfolios in the Faculty of Education at UTAS

The Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania offers seven different initial teacher education courses and these are individually accredited every five years through the Teachers Registration Board of Tasmania, although other bodies maybe involved, for example, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) also accredits the early childhood courses. The accreditation process requires that each course is mapped against the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (AITSL, 2014) and therefore the 'portfolio of evidence' is almost certainly going to be a requirement for future iterations.

The application of portfolios in the Faculty of Education has to date been intermittent. While each course has clear outcomes about reflective practice and knowledge development, there is currently no explicit requirement that students develop a portfolio of evidence as a Faculty-wide mandate. There are, however, pockets of innovation where ePortfolios are clearly an integral part of the program, for example in the Bachelor of Adult and Applied Learning. In this course, the students undertake a unit called "Foundations of Professional Learning" in their first semester where the ePortfolio is initially established and then students progressively build on it throughout their course.

A particular challenge that the Faculty faces at the moment is that there isn't an obvious digital technology platform for ePortfolio construction nor do teacher educators have the option to request a dedicated tool. This means that the focus has been on identifying digital tools that are currently available to pre-service teachers and teacher educators in the Faculty to see what might be fit for purpose or at least

be suggested as an option for ePortfolio construction. A line of enquiry has been based on the availability of Office 365 for all staff and students in the University. While none of the digital tools provided in Office 365 are considered really adequate for systematic ePortfolio implementation, in 2016, the majority of first year pre-service teachers were introduced to OneNote as an 'eScrap-booking' tool for collecting content and reflections. The students were also encouraged to use OneDrive for cloud storage for their University content during their course. This will at least mean that they have practice at collecting and storing materials relating to their study.

In order to encourage existing ongoing ePortfolio work across the courses, the interim approach has been to inform both pre-service teachers and teacher educators about the importance of ePortfolios and particularly the implications of the TEMAG report. A generic web-based resource has been provided to describe the process of portfolio construction (see Figure 1) and explain the TEMAG requirements.
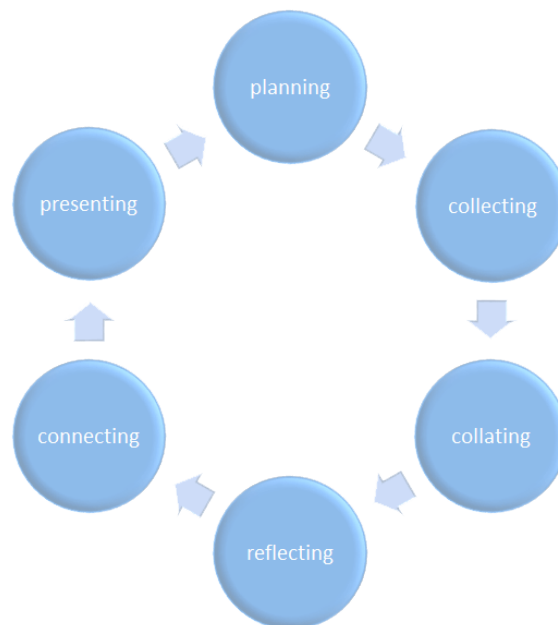

Figure 1: The cycle of ePortfolio construction suggested to pre-service teachers.

In terms of the digital tools to use though, this resource offers a 'bring your own device' approach to ePortfolio construction. It recommends a range of possible software options and links to web-based support materials but does not actually specify what environment should be used. The justification for this approach can somewhat be attributed to the lack of confidence in the tools that are currently available through the University. It is perhaps better not prescribe a portfolio mechanism when there is little conviction that this choice is suitable or even adequate. An advantage of this tack too, is that students are encouraged to be proactive in their ePortfolio development. They are entering a profession that is highly influenced by politics and Government decrees and they need to take responsibility for being aware of requirements and respond accordingly. By not have tools stipulated, they are being asked to consider the requirements and then decide what method will work for them. This is quite logical, given that the TEMAG

requirements extend beyond teacher education in to their employment as a beginning teacher.

Conclusions

It is evident that the TEMAG report has significant implications for the direction of teacher education and that the 'portfolio of evidence' will be a substantial task that will frame the design of courses in teacher education. It is obvious that teacher educators will be required to take responsibility for ensuring that the portfolio is embedded in course design and assessment and that courses that do not meet these requirements will not be accredited.

While it hasn't been specified that the 'portfolio of evidence' is a digital resource, ie. an ePortfolio, this should be taken as a given. It would be virtually impossible to manage an implementation of this magnitude in any way other than through electronic storage and digital documents. This means that teacher educators need to give considerable attention to how these materials will be created, manipulated, shared and stored. Further, teacher educators need to be mindful of the tools that pre-service teachers will use for this task and they will need to develop their own skills and confidence to mentor their students through this process.

In addition, the pre-service teachers themselves need to take on an ownership of the 'portfolio of evidence'. This resource will be a representation of their learning journey as a teacher and they need to be responsible for ensuring that it provides convincing evidence that they are qualified to teach and are indeed 'classroom ready'. They also need to recognise that this portfolio is only the beginning of their documentation. The TEMAG report flags that teaching is a profession under transformation and that accountability and professionalism will be an ongoing requirement for their career.

The TEMAG report heralds a change in the way that all teacher education providers design, implement and assess teacher education programs and the ePortfolio needs to be a central concept in this reform. This means that every teacher education institute needs to consider how they will embed the ePortfolio so that it becomes the frame for curriculum, rather than a peripheral activity that is added to existing programs. While this type of course reform is often undertaken behind closed doors, with one eye on other providers, the ultimatums presented in TEMAG report are perhaps too significant to face in isolation. The teacher education community may be best served to work collaboratively on this challenge in order to completely reinvent teacher education for these new and demanding expectations.

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Biography

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Jennifer Masters is an academic and a researcher who specialises in the use of digital technologies in education. She has an eLearning focused position in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania and is based in Launceston. Her research interests include creative and the applied use of computers, informal learning and social constructivism, mobile learning and notions of ethical digital citizenship. She has used ePortfolios in teacher education for many years as a device to represent the learning journey.