

# COU8101 - Counselling Skills and Applications and the Graduate Certificate/Diploma/Master of Counselling

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## **TITLE: ePortfolio for a graduate counselling skills course**

**PARTICIPANTS:** There were 109 students enrolled in COU8101 in S1, 2021, and all were invited to participate in this project. The Course Examiner was Dr Elisa Agostinelli.

**CONTEXT:** Include any necessary contextual information. This should include the course information learning and/or teaching problem(s), challenge and/or alignment with the Academic Plan that motivated your participation in 2020 Tech Dem.

Counselling accreditation requirements emphasise that students engage in progressive monitoring and evaluation of their work, on becoming reflective practitioners, engaging in professional/personal development, and having a portfolio of work in placement. In addition, we believe a program-wide portfolio strategy may help enhance employability.

An eportfolio will assist in student's cognitive engagement by enabling them to see the development of their expertise and knowledge over time and to determine what is displayed and to whom, particularly if students use it as a digital CV. It will also provide a platform for social engagement if used as a means of introducing students to one another's virtual space. The eportfolio will assist students in developing agency in that while we expect it will be integrated into coursework, it can be used by the students for more than coursework, in that it can contribute to develop (and articulate) development of a professional identity.

The School's Academic Plan First Year experience lists the culmination of a portfolio of competencies from their studies as an employability goal:

*"Our plan is designed to enhance students' employability, not just through embedding new content throughout our curricula and delivering innovative learning experiences for our students, but through the creation of individual student portfolios. These portfolios will be populated from the students' first semester at USQ, demonstrating how the courses they have completed are contributing to their developing skill set, culminating in an eportfolio that showcases their professional competencies. This activity will not only benefit students by highlighting to prospective employers students' growing skill sets, but this enriched student experience should be augmented across the psychology and counselling disciplines as measured by positive course health check data and University QILT data, specifically in terms of enhanced skill development." (School of Psychology and Counselling Academic Action Vision Plan 2020 Final).*

Our primary motivation for this project was to create program-level resources and staff guidance, as well as piloting the integration of it into a course and exploring the benefits of its inclusion. The Course Examiner for COU8101 was originally Dr Nancey Hoare but this changed to Dr Elisa Agostinelli before Semester 1, 2021 commenced.

## **Aim of the initiative**

Counselling accreditation requirements emphasise that students engage in progressive monitoring and evaluation of their work, on becoming reflective practitioners, engaging in professional/personal development, and having a portfolio of work in placement. With the introduction of a program-wide portfolio strategy to help enhance students' employability (based on the School of Psychology and Counselling's Academic Action Vision Plan 2020), COU8101

Counselling Skills and Applications (a first-year course in the graduate programs) was identified as the logical course to pilot the integration of an eportfolio.

The School of Psychology and Counselling's Academic Plan First Year experience lists the culmination of a portfolio of competencies from their studies as an employability goal. Teaching staff were looking for an online portfolio platform solution to suit counselling students enrolled in the program (who in the past have struggled with technological complexity). In Semester 1, 2021, COU8101 students were invited to trial the creation and maintenance of an eportfolio using the CampusPress platform.

COU8101 students use the counselling lab to practice skills they learn each week, and for Semester 1 they were encouraged to use an eportfolio to reflect on their learnings, their skill application and development, receive feedback from their class colleagues, and to store documentary evidence (e.g., de-identified SRS and other "client" feedback, completed skills checklists, completed assignments). It was anticipated that some students could potentially use the content published in their eportfolio as evidence to support future job applications.

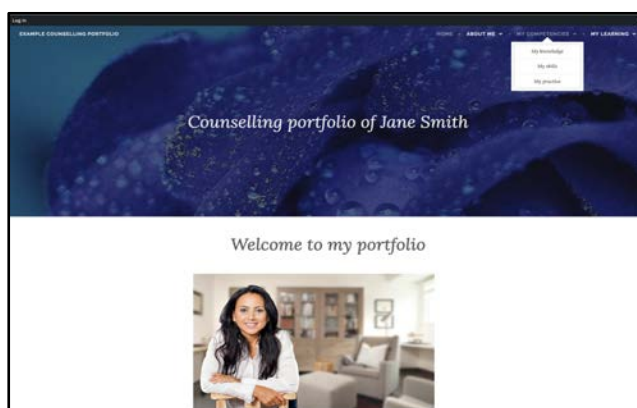
## Educational Technologies

ePortfolios provide a space to record, reflect, and display student journals, competencies and knowledge. This project focused primarily on COU8101 Counselling Skills and Applications students' creation of an eportfolio. The overall aim of this project was to socialise students to eportfolios and build their understanding of the value of using an eportfolio to solidify their professional identities, enhance their employability, showcase their professional competencies to potential placement providers and employers, and build their digital literacy skills to facilitate the creation of their own business website.

The course eportfolio strategy was designed within a secondary goal in mind, that of the development of a program-wide eportfolio. The aim of embedding it into a larger design means that students can familiarise themselves with the eportfolio at the course level and can begin building a larger eportfolio to support record keeping and employability goals. In addition, staff will be able to add reflection and employability tasks to enhance the learning and employability goals that the eportfolio supports.

In preparation for this initiative, the Program Director and Course Examiner designed a counselling portfolio template using CampusPress which provided students with the following menu structure <https://create.usq.edu.au/counselling-portfolio/>:

- a Home page (front page of the student portfolio);
- an About Me menu with links to 3 pages titled 'My approach', 'My special interests' and 'My Curriculum Vitae';
- a My Competencies menu with links to 3 pages titled 'My knowledge', 'My skills' and 'My practice'; and
- A My Learning menu with links to 2 pages titled 'My blog' and 'My assessments'



## Online engagement framework


Redmond et al's (2018) Online Engagement Framework informed the design of the eportfolio initiative to enhance student engagement as per the following elements:

- **Emotional and cognitive engagement** through the creation of an eportfolio to enhance students' integration of learning (e.g. personal learning goals with course learning goals) and support greater self-directed learning throughout the course, and to enhance reflective learning opportunities and facilitate student recognition of learning progress over time and student perception of enhanced self-awareness;
- Increase students' **social engagement** as a result of student and staff comments on students' eportfolio content, and inclusion of professional recommendations and endorsements of student competencies;
- Encourage greater **collaborative engagement** of students through the provision of shared activities and the eportfolios providing an enhanced means for students to get to know each other; and
- **Behavioural and motivational engagement** through the creation of eportfolio content that enhances students' professional identity and confidence for employability, and students recognising the value of an eportfolio in establishing a CV and presenting a rich collection of content that assists in one's employability.

## Project approach

There was a soft launch of eportfolios in COU8101 in S1 with the main goal being to socialise students to the value of eportfolios and introduce them to the idea of developing their own eportfolio. Teaching approaches used throughout the semester included:

- Students received a link to their own eportfolios in Week 5 and were informed of this via a StudyDesk News forum post.
- The Course Examiner posted a series of announcements as illustrated below.

**Online Portfolio Site PDF of slides on portfolio information**  
by Elisa Agostinelli - Wednesday, 17 March 2021, 9:57 AM

Dear Students,

You may have noticed a new section on your COU8101 StudyDesk called "Online Portfolio Site" and a link to the Create@USQ portal <https://create.usq.edu.au>. The USQ is conducting a trial of a new eportfolio platform called Wordpress, with COU8101 selected as one of eight courses to trial this new eportfolio.

In Week 5, you will receive an email with a link to your own eportfolio website, so here is a little more information to get you started.

The USQ and the School of Psychology and Counselling are very focused on helping students to increase their employability. The eportfolio project supports student employability by assisting you to:

- build your professional identity,
- reflect on how your university learning and experiences align with the competencies and training standards required by the Counselling profession,
- extract evidence to demonstrate your knowledge, skills, experiences, and achievements to potential placement providers and/or employers (e.g., very useful for writing job applications and preparing for job interviews),
- identify skills gaps through reviewing and reflecting upon your learning and to formulate plans and strategies for continuing professional development, and
- build your digital literacy skills (e.g., one day you may want to create your own business website).


By using an eportfolio, you will be continually creating a useful product that curates a range of artefacts and showcases you as a professional. The eportfolio not only captures *what* you have learned, but also allows you to reflect on *how* you have learned. Reflective practice is a vitally important part of being a counsellor. Your eportfolio can be used for your reflective practice. Here is a link to a short video about reflective portfolios: <https://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/03/03/reflective-portfolios/>

The Create@USQ website has some information and resources, including some short videos:

- What is a portfolio <https://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/02/28/what-is-a-portfolio/>
- Why create a portfolio <https://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/02/28/why-create-a-portfolio/>

Your eportfolio uses the Counselling eportfolio template <https://create.usq.edu.au/counselling-portfolio/> which has been created especially for counselling students. It contains categories aligned with the ACA and PACFA training standards, so you can start using your eportfolio to provide evidence of how your learning maps onto those standards.

Your use of the eportfolio is optional and not attached to any of your COU8101 course assessments, but we hope that you are willing to try it out.

 [Counselling students presentation.pdf](#)

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 **More information about the Portfolio**  
by Elisa Agostinelli - Friday, 2 April 2021, 10:20 AM

- What is a portfolio? <http://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/02/28/what-is-a-portfolio/>
- Why create a portfolio? <http://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/02/28/why-create-a-portfolio/>
- Reflective portfolios <http://create.usq.edu.au/blog/2021/03/03/reflective-portfolios/>

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- Julie Lindsay (Associate Director, Digital Learning Innovation) and Neil Martin (Digital Pedagogy Curriculum, Digital Learning Innovation) from USQ's Academic Division presented information about the eportfolio to COU8101 students during an online tutorial in Week 6 (31st March 2021).

At a program level, Nathan Beel promoted the idea via a program StudyDesk announcement post, flagging the eportfolio idea in November 2020. In March 2021 Nathan posted again giving advance warning of the eportfolio opportunity, and in the same month, created and posted videos of two counsellors showing their webpage and describing the decisions in content design and the impact of their site. In May 2021, Nathan set up an ePortfolio Community of Practice, which has received more than 40 students requesting to be part of it. Three Zoom meetings were scheduled but only one student came to only one of the meetings.

To spark interest, Nathan has been setting up his own eportfolio and sharing examples of updates with the students (see [Dr Nathan Beel Portfolio – Counselling portfolio of Nathan Beel \(usq.edu.au\)](https://usq.edu.au)). He has also invited students individually for 30 minute meetings to help them begin setting up their own eportfolios and discussing their own aspirations for setting them up. Three out of the five students invited attended, had previous IT knowledge, and in the meeting, they asked questions, set up or showed their pages, and agreed that they would contact at least one other student to meet with them to pass on the knowledge.

The next strategy to be tried is to piggyback online tutorials to invite those already attending to stay for another 15 minutes to discuss and progress their own eportfolios.

The ePortfolio Strategy for the program was geared towards helping students recognise the potential value for their professional development and potential careers. In Semester 2, 2021 Nathan has started adding eportfolio to reflective recommendations in COU8103 study content.

## Evaluation method

Ethics approval was granted to evaluate the use of eportfolios in COU8101 as part of this Technology Demonstrators project (approval H21REA087). Data was collected using an online survey which closed on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2021. The survey was available to all 109 students enrolled in

COU8101, regardless of whether or not they had used the eportfolio template on CampusPress. The survey asked students whether or not they accessed their eportfolio, their reasons for accessing or not accessing their eportfolio, and, if they did access it, how often they accessed it, how useful they found it, how satisfied they were with it, and how confident they felt using it. 19 students responded to the survey.

### **Project impact**

To date, approximately 60 students have expressed interest in becoming part of the ePortfolio Community of Practice at the program level.

Of the COU8101 S1 cohort, 19 students responded to the online survey (17% response rate). Of these responses, three students indicated that they did access their eportfolios, while 16 students of respondents did not. The main reasons for not accessing the eportfolios included students being unsure of how to use it and unsure of its benefits and purpose, needing to put studies first, being too busy, and its use in S1 was not compulsory.

Students who did not access their eportfolios reported that they might be influenced to use an eportfolio in the future if it was graded as part of a course, if they could use it during the uni breaks, or pre- or post-semester, if they were looking for work, if it was embedded in compulsory tutorials, and if there was more information on how to use it.

Of the three students who accessed their eportfolios, one accessed it once, one accessed it twice and the other three times. Their main reasons for accessing it was to give it a go, to see what it had to offer, and to see if it would be of benefit. The two ratings for usefulness were “slightly useful” and “moderately useful”, with the ratings influenced by not really giving it a chance and not yet having fully explored it.

The satisfaction ratings were “slightly” and “very” satisfied, with the ratings influenced by having barely used it and it seeming like it would be helpful and a good asset. The confidence ratings were “not at all” and “slightly”, with the ratings influenced by not knowing how to use it and not yet having spent much time working out how it worked.

Overall feedback from the COU8101 students focused on making eportfolios “incredibly simple” because (a) students are busy and the extra work might turn people off using it; (b) there needs to be a discussion with students about the real world benefits and applications of an eportfolio, (c) students could see value in embedding the eportfolio in course assessments and coursework, and (d) students needed access to clear and concise instructions about the use of an eportfolio. For example, the following student comments reflect this:

*“I think there may be more interest if the ePortfolio was promoted with the focus on real world application.”*

*“Producing a very quick and easy to read fact sheet about its use and benefits.”*

A number of students suggested that if compulsory tasks were embedded in tutorials and some eportfolio content was assessable (with marks going towards their final grade), then there would be greater uptake of using an eportfolio, as described:

*“Having it as part of a course or even a compulsory online tutorial to allow time to go through it and ask questions in real time.”*

*“Having more information about it inbedded [sic] into compulsory tutorials would have given me the space to explore its benefits”*

*“Embed course assessments that assist us to develop portfolio and prepare for professional Registration and employment”*

Some students did see the value an eportfolio that they can use upon graduation, therefore any portfolio platform that USQ provides must have the functionality of being exportable in a format that can be imported to a compatible platform (e.g., CampusPress is compatible with WordPress):

*"On the surface it appeared to need a lot of time. Between full time study and work, I didn't prioritise this as I was told it wasn't a site we could take with us when we graduate. I had to prioritise my time and since it would only be a practice site I didn't see it as serving me in the short term."*

*"I actually really liked the idea. I could see how this could be useful as a tool to add to across the years I may be studying, so at the end I had a wonderful portfolio to enter the job market with, however I was advised in an info session you can't take the site with you, then it made more sense to work on my own privately. If there was a way to use the site post studies (even if the payment for the site is transferred to the student for example) - sort of an alum perk perhaps?? then I could see great value in the project."*

Regarding the effectiveness of the eportfolio and CampusPress platform, due to low engagement of students in S1, the effectiveness of the technology is uncertain. While it looks like the eportfolio has great potential to be a valuable resource for student development and professional preparation, if students have difficulty engaging with the technology, and/or if it costs too much time and energy for both staff and students to establish and maintain, then its usefulness is questionable. Clearly, the ePortfolio Strategy Team need more time in trialling the introduction of an eportfolio to the program and specific course, and evaluating staff and students' use of the CampusPress platform.

Staff involved in this trial have identified the following barriers or challenges faced during S1, 2021. These included:

- **An intimidating learning curve**  
Nathan and Nancey had initial learning attempts and abandoned these quickly once they ran into problems. Nathan felt confident once he had returned to it with the aid of Neil Martin (Digital Pedagogy Curriculum, Digital Learning Innovation). Once sufficient momentum was gained, Nathan felt it became fairly user friendly.
- **A late start in terms of the timing of the CampusPress pilot**  
Nathan had agreed to the pilot on the understanding that it would be ready to launch before the semester commenced. The late start missed opportunities for both staff and students once the semester workload was underway.
- **The learning bumps**  
Two of the three students who did try to create their eportfolio ran into issues that the teaching staff could not resolve. Once Nathan alerted the CampusPress pilot facilitators these were quickly resolved, however, students may not have the same confidence to seek help.
- **The voluntary nature and time conservation**  
Students are strategic in time allocation and will go with the least costly wins. For example, one student reported, "If I need to do a self-reflection and I can use MSWord or learn how to use WordPress, I will use MSWord. I'm familiar with that." If it was made mandatory, at least in an early course, then this could increase students' willingness to continue using it, once the initial reluctance has been overcome.
- **Staff knowledge**  
Given the goal is to eventually implement a Program-wide eportfolio initiative, the eportfolio strategy will need to be integrated across all courses in the program which, therefore, requires Course Examiners and teaching staff to become familiar with the eportfolio platform, feel competent using it, and see its value in the development of the students.
- **Marking**  
As staff members, we are reluctant to mandate a technology for which we do not know what impact it will have on lecturer's time in marking.



- **Less is more**

The teaching and support team scrambled to make resources available in a timely fashion, but we wonder whether there might have been so much information that it just looked too hard for students. In other words, the challenge is to find the right balance between providing sufficient information that is targeted and concise versus providing too much detail that might turn students off.

## **Recommendations**

As a result of the S1 experience, we have agreed to continue to work with CampusPress as the eportfolio platform for counselling students. We will keep any of the support material created in S1 to continue the roll out for S2, and look forward to further development of the portal at <https://create.usq.edu.au/counselling-post-grad/> which is now providing bespoke support resources specifically designed for USQ's counselling programs.

There are a number of enhancements that need to be made in preparation for S2 and subsequent counselling course offerings, including:

- We need to ensure the URL to the CampusPress @create portal in course StudyDesks is changed from the graphic with an embedded URL used in COU8101 in S1 to a StudyDesk URL link (using text) to ensure that StudyDesk analytics can be collected regarding student views.
- We need to integrate eportfolio creation in first-year, first-semester courses and make this mandatory for all students, and introduce new or revised learning tasks and/or assessments that require the use of the eportfolio in all courses within each postgraduate counselling program.
- We need to explore the possibility of having portfolio pages with no published content not being shown in the menu tabs of the portfolio until a page has been populated with content.
- We need to develop a screenshare of a Course Examiner providing a step-by-step walkthrough for students, showing them how to set up their portfolio as part of an assessment task, including advice on how students are supported in completing a blog post as an assessment task.
- The Program Director and Course Examiner need to be provided with the necessary permissions that allow them to access a student's dashboard to assist with any eportfolio troubleshooting.
- We need to provide students with a clear rationale at both program and course levels, outlining the reasons why students should be developing a portfolio, and the value it will bring to them as a counselling professional and addressing employers' expectations.

The COU8101 project team recommend the following with regard to using the CampusPress platform supporting eportfolios at USQ:

- Develop an evidence-based guide on how to successfully design and implement a program and course-based eportfolio which is informed by existing scholarly literature on eportfolios in higher education (rather than having individual academics reinventing the wheel).
- Continue to develop the infrastructure at USQ to support a CampusPress rollout for both the program and course levels. This includes the provision of professional development for Course Examiners involved in teaching courses that require the integration of portfolio-based learning tasks and assessments, preferably with a 6 month lead time before the commencement of the first semester where a portfolio is to be implemented. Also include as part of this PL scaffolded workshop-style sessions to support Course Examiners in creating their own eportfolio and learning how to populate the eportfolio with content, categories, tags, etc.
- Recommend that USQ adopt the domain of portfolio.usq.edu.au to replace the current create.usq.edu.au domain, which is not representative of the nature of a portfolio creation and support website.
- To effectively integrate a program-based portfolio into curriculum, there needs to be some

kind of mandatory requirement in at least one early course within a program to encourage and support students' creation of an eportfolio. We believe a compulsory assessment will help leverage students' motivation to undertake the steep learning curve required in establishing their portfolio. This also needs to be reinforced throughout an entire program where students are encouraged to build content on their eportfolio as part of learning activities in course modules that address core knowledge and skills within professional standards and USQ's graduate attributes and competencies, and requires students to map these throughout their portfolio pages and blog posts.

- Consider integrating student eportfolios as part of the professional placement program, where it is used as a resume for placement host organisations, and where students record learning journal entries as well as placement hours and tasks undertaken/completed while on placement.
- Program Directors and Course Examiners need to maximise learning analytics data to support the evaluation of a portfolio strategy. Ensure that the link to USQ's portfolio portal in StudyDesk uses a Moodle URL to make sure that all clicks are reported. Course Examiners also need more detailed analytics provided from CampusPress platform.

## **Appendices**

[Online Survey questions](#)

[Hub for Counselling Post Grad Student Portfolios](#)