

10 essential questions to consider when choosing an eportfolio system

These 10 questions are designed to help ensure that your choice of an eportfolio system is considered and informed. Of course, you might question the partiality of a document created by an eportfolio system developer – as you should. However, we don't expect that this will be your only source of reference and we would genuinely rather you make an informed choice of a different system than an uninformed choice of PebblePad. We didn't get this far with unhappy customers!

1. *What type of system are you after?*

Things to consider:

- Do you want a system for storing and presenting the products of learning?
Do you expect that users will simply upload artefacts created elsewhere and organise them into collections or views called eportfolios?
- Do you want to promote independent learning through scaffolds and templates?
Would you like the system to help users to make plans, reflect on their experiences, and create meaningful records of their learning? Do you want a more complex, multipurpose system that might be described as a personal learning space?
- What will be valued most, the product or the process of learning?
Do you want standard eportfolios which grow into extensive CVs or Resumes, evidencing what the individual has done, or a range of records and eportfolios which, through their scaffolded structure, evidence how and what the individual has learnt.

2. *Will you build, buy or co-create your eportfolio software?*

Things to consider:

- Where does your expertise lie?
Are you better equipped for contributing code to an open source project, for building your own system, or for contributing ideas to an established community of practice?
- How will the software evolve over time?
Is there a clear development roadmap? Can you secure the funds or the people to ensure you keep up-to-date with user needs as they develop over time?
- Where will your support come from?
Is support included in your licence fees or is this an extra cost to plan for?

3. *Do you want to have the system internally or externally hosted?*

Things to consider:

- What are the real costs of self-hosting compared to having a fully-serviced provision?
What levels of service do you require from your host? Can this be guaranteed in a service level agreement? What are the like-for-like costs for the service you need?
- How secure are the assets and the data in the eportfolio system?
Is there a policy in place about who can access the data? How often is the data backed up and where to? How long would it take to recover from a failed server?
- Do you have the technical expertise to manage the hardware and software?
Can server and software updates be quickly and competently applied? Can issues such as authentication and integration be effectively handled?

4. *Who will use the system?*

Things to consider:

- Will the system be used only by students, or by teachers and other staff too?
Will the system be used to support staff processes such as appraisal, performance review and continuing professional development.
- Where, when and to whom will the system be available?
Will users be able to access it offsite? Can it be accessed by external users such as examiners, workplace mentors or employers? Will it be available to users after leaving or graduation?
- Can the system grow to meet your needs?
Will the system work equally well for small scale or discrete implementations as it does across the whole institution?

5. *Can the system support your institutional aims and processes?*

Things to consider:

- Is the system designed to support learning and teaching?
Are there obvious pedagogical principles underpinning the system? Are there tools for feedback, dialogue, iteration, peer review? How easily can your assessment processes be accommodated?
- Can the system support integration with other institution systems in a secure way?
Can users access the system with their normal credentials? Can they be automatically signed in from other core systems?
- Will the system support processes like APEL/RPL or other non-taught offerings?
Can you create accounts for potential students? Can the system support validation processes? Can the system help support learners at a distance?

6. *Is the system applicable across broad contexts?*

Things to consider:

- Does the system meet the needs of a broad range of users across the institution?
Can the system be utilised equally by academics, general staff, research students, and learners in different discipline areas. Can the system support informal learning as well as high stakes formal assessment?
- Does the system only support the creation of eportfolios?
Does the system also include tools for action planning, recording meetings and events, blogging, etc? Is there a way of tagging assets? Can users link evidence against competency standards or attribute frameworks?
- Can aspects of the system be tailored to meet the needs of different groups of users?
Can tutors design new scaffolds and templates to support activities such as laboratory work, clinical skills, group work and problem solving? Can the eportfolios themselves be templated?

7. *Can the system support assessment processes?*

Things to consider:

- Can tutors easily manage large amounts of submitted work without impacting on their personal use of the system?
Is there a function which allows work to be sorted by group or assessment activity? Is it easy to see who has submitted work and when it has been updated? Can large classes be easily organised into smaller groups?
- Does the system support a full range of assessment processes?
Does the system allow for blind marking, double-blind marking, summative and formative feedback, peer review, anonymous peer review, external examination, verification, and validation?
- Does the system support your quality assurance processes?
Can you lock submitted work to stop it being updated after a deadline has passed? Does the system offer integration with TurnItIn? Can you archive a copy of all work, grades and feedback for future reference?

8. *Is content private, secure, and owned and controlled by the user?*

Things to consider:

- Does the user have total control over who sees their content?
Can users select other portfolio users as well as external users and share only selected assets with them? Can users decide the kinds of things users can do including commenting, copying and collaborating? Can the user set time limits on permissions?
- Can an administrator access a user's content without their knowledge and/or permission?
Can an administrator use their privileges in the VLE/LMS to access a user's portfolio account? If so, what impact is this likely to have on a user's confidence in using the system authentically? If staff are also encouraged to use the system for their professional development would this intrusion impact on their use?
- Does a user continue to have access to their content after leaving the institution?
Can the system be economically licensed or supported for alumni? Can users easily export their assets in a format suitable for use in other systems? Do any professional organisations use the same system as the one your students have become familiar with?

9. What support is available to assist implementation, use and maintenance of the system?

Things to consider:

- Can you access expert advice on how to technically deploy and support the system?
Are there easy to follow guides regarding installation and integration? Is there a remote installation service available? How quickly can you access technical support?
- What support resources are available for all users?
Are there hints and tips built into the system? Is there a comprehensive online help system containing step-by-step instructions, images and video walk-throughs? Are there downloadable tipsheets for teachers and administrators to use?
- How are upgrades managed and what level of support is available if things go wrong?
Are upgrades free? How long does the system need to be offline for upgrades to be implemented? How easily can upgrades be deployed? Are you always informed in advance what to expect in each new release?

10. Are you confident in the longer term availability, viability and continued improvement of the system?

Things to consider:

- How important is an active community to you?
Are there regular online and face-to-face meetings? Is there an annual conference? Are there other means of sharing best practice between institutions?
- How long has the system been available and how well regarded is it?
Are existing customers happy to endorse the system? Is there a body of research which examines the system in use? How diverse is the user community?
- How confident can you be about the future?
Is there a well publicised development roadmap? Is there an Escrow agreement guaranteeing your access to the source code? Is the user community active in shaping the development of the product?

NB: In writing this document certain assumptions have been made about basic functionality supported by all leading eportfolio software, including uploading and storing files, creating presentations, sharing, commenting, personalisation of the interface, and integration with LDAP.

To view a summary of responses to these questions in relation to the Personal Learning Space, PebblePad, go to <http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/essentialanswers>