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Enhancing Flexible Assessment Through ePortfolios: A Scholarly Examination

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Abstract

In contemporary educational settings, the demand for flexible assessment practices has gained prominence due to students' diverse learning needs and preferences. Portfolios have emerged as a versatile tool for facilitating personalised and adaptable assessment processes. This paper investigates how ePortfolios can cater to students' flexible assessment needs. By examining the benefits, challenges, and implementation strategies associated with ePortfolios, this paper highlights their potential to enhance assessment practices, foster student engagement, and promote lifelong learning. As part of implementation strategies, we provide examples to support teaching staff and institutions in translating the underpinning principles and theory into actionable practice.

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Introduction

Flexible assessment has gained recognition as an essential element in contemporary education, allowing for personalised approaches that accommodate diverse student needs (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has argued that in the age of AI and assessment reform, it is 'critical' that assessment design allows for "'rich portrayals' of student learning" (Lodge et al., 2023). We therefore argue that a broader, more holistic definition of flexible assessment is needed for the current post-pandemic, AI-driven, digital age. We propose that ePortfolios are key drivers to delivering the principles of such a holistic, flexible assessment approach for students.

We define flexible assessment as providing students with the freedom to express their understanding and skills authentically and creatively as per the CAST Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines (<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>), which emphasise multiple means of engagement, action and expression (CAST, 2024). Boud's 'sustainable assessment' concept also forms a fundamental basis for our work. Sustainable assessment goes beyond traditional evaluation methods and emphasises integrating lived experiences, informal learning, and lifelong learning into the assessment process (Boud & Soler, 2016).

In this paper, we delve into the application of ePortfolios as a solution to meet students' flexible assessment needs while fostering active student engagement and supporting sustainable assessment practices. By integrating the principles of sustainable assessment and flexibility into our approach, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on enhancing the educational experience for today's diverse and dynamic student population. While not referenced within Boud's definition of sustainable assessment, we also recognise the challenges in relation to implementing ePortfolios and the need for sustainable teaching and technological support practices as part of any implementation approach. With this in mind, we have organised our paper to provide strategies and examples alongside thematic principles of flexible assessment with ePortfolios. We highlight some critical challenges and potential ways to mitigate these as part of an implementation approach.

Literature

Assessment: Flexibility, authenticity and sustainability

Australian Skills Quality Authority ASQA (2015) defines assessment flexibility in relation to the individual: it reflects the students' needs, competencies, and context and draws from "a range of assessment methods" relevant to the context, curriculum and student. While such definitions of flexibility are implemented in the vocational education context, underpinning vocational assessment principles at their heart are related to validity and equity, which are becoming equally important priorities within the Higher Education context. Higher education uses flexible assessment to mention concepts of agency (Boud & Soler, 2016), inclusivity, authenticity, and engagement (Student Learning & Academic Registry, n.d.; University Of Sussex, n.d.) and choice and empowerment (Wanner et al., 2021).

Boud (2000) advocates for sustainable assessment, which he suggests "encompasses the knowledge, skills, and predispositions required to underpin lifelong learning activities" (p. 151).

He emphasises that for individuals to become active agents in learning networks and adopt a lifelong learning approach, they must focus on their judgments about their learning experiences.

In addition to sustainable assessment, we also reference concepts related to building authenticity – authenticity in assessment practices (authentic assessment), authenticity in supporting and honouring diverse student experiences, and - where possible - considering authenticity in terms of what makes an ePortfolio ‘ePortfolio-like’ in its underpinning design and pedagogy (Sutherland, 2021). Villarroel et al. (2018) perceive authentic assessment as realism which involves:

linking knowledge with everyday life and work, contextualisation characterises situations where knowledge can be applied in an analytical and thoughtful way, and problematisation invokes a sense that what is learned can be used to solve a problem or meet a need. (p.841)

This understanding of authenticity is well summarised as the integration of what happens in the classroom with employment. Such a perspective aligns with the idea that assessment should not be a mere summative exercise. Assessment should also support students in building their self-assessment skills and evaluative judgment, essential components of lifelong learning and active participation in a learning community. Therefore, our approach to flexible assessment encompasses the assessment of formal learning experiences and the integration of informal and lived experiences to foster metacognition and prepare students for future assessments (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Boud & Soler, 2016).

Definitions of flexible assessment in Higher Education also typically mention authenticity (LTE Online – previously listed as Registry citation) (Student Learning & Academic Registry, n.d.; University Of Sussex, n.d.) as well as providing choice that supports equity and inclusion (Student Learning & Academic Registry, n.d.; University Of Sussex, n.d.), Flexibility and choice - along with principles related to metacognition (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014), self-assessment and self-regulation - are key components of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a set of teaching and learning principles and strategies. As assessment forms part of teaching, the UDL guidelines (CAST, 2024) imply that assessment should be flexible. UDL heavily encourages strategies and processes that support deep and lifelong learning, or ‘learning how to learn’ skills – concepts heavily aligned with those argued by (Boud, 2000).

At this stage, we want readers to think that when assessing complex thinking, one can go through imaginary levels of memory, analytical, and transfer skills (Villarroel et al., 2020). This can also be viewed or imagined as Bloom’s taxonomy levels. We also want to raise here the connection of meaningful feedback to the authenticity of the assessment (Payne et al., 2023)

In essence, assessment should be flexible enough to capture formal and informal learning experiences and to support students with metacognition and effective lifelong learning (sustainability). If assessment tasks within courses hinder lifelong learning, they fail to contribute to sustainable assessment. Such a definition of flexible assessment thereby aligns with one that supports TEQSA’s suggestion of ‘rich portrayals’ (Lodge et al., 2023).

Benefits of ePortfolios for flexible assessment

ePortfolios, as electronic collections of artefacts capturing evidence of learning over time in diverse formats and contexts (Chen & Light, 2010), support sustainable and flexible assessment principles. They offer several benefits in terms of supporting flexibility and personalised assessment:

- **Comprehensive Representation:** including reflections, multimedia materials, and assessments, providing a holistic representation of a student's learning journey (Mihai, 2021).
- **Individualised Learning Experiences:** empowering learners to showcase their skills, knowledge, and achievements in diverse and meaningful ways (Winchell, 2018).
- **Metacognition and Reflective Thinking:** ePortfolios promote metacognitive processes, reflective thinking and self-assessment, enabling students to take ownership of their learning (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Boud, 2000; Boud & Soler, 2016; Clarke & Boud, 2018; Martínez Lirola, 2018; Watson et al., 2018).

Clarke and Boud (2018) argue the need for both formative and summative approaches to assessment and that these ideas are not incompatible. They highlight the flexibility of the ePortfolio to cater to both summative and formative assessment methods that can be leveraged as part of a deliberate pedagogical and implementation approach.

Utilising ePortfolio to enhance flexible assessment

We now discuss how ePortfolios can be implemented to cater to students' creative and flexible expression in alignment with flexible assessment. Our discussion is structured thematically and ordered chronologically to provide insights into planning for authentic and creative assessment activities within an ePortfolio implementation process. In next few subsections, we expand on following themes:

- Fostering authenticity and meaning
- Encouraging multi-model expression
- Providing developmental, reflection and self-assessment opportunities
- Facilitating interaction, collaboration, and feedback
- Supporting long-term growth and reflection.

Fostering authenticity and meaning

One of the central tenets of our approach is the promotion of authentic and meaningful assessments. Engaging students in assessments relevant to real-world contexts can motivate them and enhance their overall engagement in the learning process (Mebert et al., 2020). By actively curating their portfolios, students become more invested in their learning trajectories (Chen & Light, 2010). To ensure that students perceive ePortfolios and the ePortfolio process as meaningful, educators should introduce and explain their reason for use, aligned with unit and program learning outcomes (Krause, 2006; Villarroel et al., 2020).

ePortfolios serve as a versatile platform for students to showcase varied and personalised forms of work, such as projects, assignments, and reflections. Students can thereby demonstrate the application of their skills and knowledge in authentic settings, allowing their personalities to shine through in what can be considered a genuine representation of their learning journey. As Sutherland (2021) notes: “The authenticity of a portfolio will be enhanced if the personality of the author is evident and the developmental claims align with the purpose of the portfolio and are supported by evidence and reflection thus making it more portfolio-like.”

Incorporating reflective elements further adds authenticity to the work presented via ePortfolios (Yang et al., 2017). Such practices align closely with the concept of assessment for inclusion (Tai et al., 2023). A simple way that students can demonstrate personality and authenticity while also reflecting is through developing a professional vision, professional values statement or professional philosophy page within the ePortfolio. The student may be encouraged to review their professional and personal experiences to make sense of their professional identity to frame the statement/page. Such activities can make the portfolio meaningful to their learning journey. The following section presents some examples of portfolios that can foster authenticity and meaning.

Example 1

[Professional philosophy template](#) (sample ‘student’ copy)

[<https://v3.pebblepad.com.au/spa/#/public/zbHM4G9s5zzxrpkh6bZ48kg4yw>]

The template demonstrates a good practice example of how an activity to support and scaffold students to build their professional philosophy and values could be undertaken. The image demonstrates a template that provides prompts and space for students to reflect, add notes and attach further media or supporting files related to About Me/Professional statement, Professional experience, and Professional values. The template has been created in PebblePad; however, such activities and prompts could be completed using simple tools such as OneNote, a series of journal entries or discussion posts shared with peers, or even within a simple word processing document.

Figure 1

About Me/Professional Statement Within the Professional Philosophy Template

About Me / Professional statement

Provide a brief statement (e.g. a few paragraphs) about yourself and who you are professionally and personally (this may also include who you'd like to be). Consider the tone that is most relevant to the purpose and audience of your portfolio - for example, in a highly academic or business oriented field, there may be a focus on statistics or using third-person language; in health sciences or people-oriented industries, using warm and welcoming language can help demonstrate your approachability and show a focus on a person-centred approach. The tone you use helps you to build a relationship with your reader and to show your personality.

Use the **+Add evidence** button to attach files if/where relevant - for example, you could attach a CV, photo, or a video version of an About Me statement/Professional and personal statement instead of a written response. These files will automatically be added to your asset store repository so you can use them again later when developing a creative portfolio.

Hi I'm Kate. I'm a Senior Learning Designer, and have particular interests in student experience, ePortfolios, accessibility, equity and inclusion in online learning, and staff development. I personally made a move into this field as I am able to combine my interests and expertise/past experience in education, mentoring and media production into the one role.

[+ Add...](#)

Figure 2

Professional Values Field Within the Professional Philosophy Template

Professional values

Consider your own professional values and where these have come from. Consider your underpinning principles or what a professional philosophy might look like here make some notes. If you are unsure, use this as a chance to review any industry standards or professional registration/accreditation standards. You can include links or attach files if relevant (this is optional).

Some prompts to help you here are:

- Why did you choose to study this profession?
- Do you have any family or other life experiences that have encouraged you to study and forge a career path in this industry? Or particular interests or strengths that have encouraged you to pursue this profession?
- Do you have a particular specialisation in mind or areas where you feel you can bring a point of difference or unique viewpoint? Why is this?
- What kind of general and specific professional values do you hold? This may be towards work, towards your approach to dealing with people, towards the field in general. Do these come from any particular place, or can you find mentors, authors or others with similar philosophies or values to refer to?



Example 2

[Post-secondary Adult and Continuing Education \(PACE\) Specialisation Portfolio; Emmanuel Macias, Portland State University](https://pebblepad.com/spa/#/public/GctzZ7s6xkZzx8pjpZttsGy7zZ)

[<https://pebblepad.com/spa/#/public/GctzZ7s6xkZzx8pjpZttsGy7zZ>]

This student portfolio is an example of how a portfolio may encompass samples of work and learning while also demonstrating personality and creativity and the author's unique professional and personal values. The portfolio includes a 'Guiding principles' page where the author highlights their educational philosophy. Educators can encourage students to bring their own voice to their portfolios as a way to build their own narrative journey and stand out from the crowd with employers.

Encouraging multimodal expression

Flexibility in modality can support student motivation and autonomy. Multimodal assessments can allow students with mixed expertise with academic conventions to participate: either by flexibly demonstrating that they have met the requirements or learning outcomes as per Checkpoint 5.1, (CAST, 2018: refer to Checkpoint 5.1; University of Melbourne, 2023b) or by tailoring the task to be more relevant to their future professional goals and settings (CAST, 2018: refer to Checkpoint 5.1; University of Melbourne, 2023b). ePortfolios can support multiple means of expression and communication in diverse and creative ways, empowering students to showcase and express their learning using various modalities such as text, images, videos, and multimedia presentations (Barrett, 2010).

Educators can further enhance the multimodal nature of the assessment by providing choices in how students respond to assessments within the ePortfolio. Such choices could include allowing varied presentation formats, diverse evidence and artefacts, or the freedom to select a topic or response (CAST, 2018: refer to Checkpoints 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 7.1 and 7.2).

Example

[Providing Choice for Students in Assessment](https://le.unimelb.edu.au/news/articles/providing-choice-for-students-in-assessment)

[<https://le.unimelb.edu.au/news/articles/providing-choice-for-students-in-assessment>]

The University of Melbourne news article 'Providing Choice for Students in Assessment' (Learning Environments, 2023) includes an example in practice of a multimodal assessment for the First Nations in Education subject, written and coordinated by Dr Melitta Hogarth. Within the assessment, students complete an Acknowledgment of Country with the flexibility to create their response in either text or media formats. While the format here is within a PebblePad workbook, any student-owned portfolio should allow incorporating a range of media, but students may need to be trained. Educators should review the learning outcomes and purpose of assessments to see what flexibility in format could be supported. Include clear instructions around accepted length and format and rubrics that support learning outcomes and relevance rather than specific formatting conventions.

Providing developmental, reflection and self-assessment opportunities

Self-assessment is a powerful tool that can actively engage students in their learning journeys. When students take control of their learning, they become more deeply involved in the educational process (Slepcevic-Zach & Stock, 2018). Reflective practices and self-assessment using ePortfolios support agency and individual meaning-making and promote metacognition—the ability to reflect on one's learning and skill development (Watson et al., 2018). Continuous reflection helps students build self-directed learning skills (Song, 2021; Walland & Shaw, 2022) and evaluative judgment.

Incorporating self-assessment can involve having students document their progress, self-rating their own skills or confidence levels and areas for improvement, setting goals for future learning, and using reflection frameworks to encourage regular introspection. This approach tailors the learning process to each student's needs. Combining self-assessment with peer and instructor

feedback further enriches opportunities for flexible feedback and the development of evaluative judgment.

Example 1

[Self-assessment Rating of a Nursing Standard Within PebblePad](https://v3.pebblepad.com.au/spa/#/public/zbHM4G9s5zzxf5GWfh6y9nz7wy)

[<https://v3.pebblepad.com.au/spa/#/public/zbHM4G9s5zzxf5GWfh6y9nz7wy>]

The following example within PebblePad demonstrates how students could self-rate against a professional standard and attach evidence. The example could be further improved by providing ideas to students on what the standard looks like in practice and how to evidence the standard, including peer review activities to review each other's responses and evidence and provide constructive feedback. The image demonstrates a self-rating response to a Nursing professional standard. The text prompt encourages the student to attach a written justification and further evidence that supports their self-rating. The student can return to re-rate/re-assess themselves and attach further evidence and justifications as their competency improves over time.

Figure 3

Self-assessment Rating of a Nursing Standard Within PebblePad

1.2 develops practice through reflection on experiences, knowledge, actions, feelings and beliefs to identify how these shape practice

Tip for teachers/editors: Change the labels on this numeric block to change its descriptors: e.g. low competency to high competency, a likert-style low confidence to high confidence, beginning to proficient, etc. Alternatively, relate the numbers to a known rubric and provide the translation for students within the text hints here. You can change the numeric range within block properties to change the number of levels (default is 1-5 but can display a range difference up to 20).

Tips for students: Use the **+Add evidence** button to add a justification for your rating, and to attach relevant evidence that aligns to this competency. This may include samples of work (e.g. assessments, work placement activities), media (e.g. a photo or video of you performing the skill/competency) or other evidence.

Beginning

1	2	3	4	5
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 Proficient

ePortfolios and ePortfolio thinking benefit curriculum development as they align well with and can even be a catalyst for broader programmatic assessment and programmatic level learning design across a course. Embedding ePortfolios across the course in a deliberately designed way allows for summative, formative, and developmental learning opportunities (Clarke & Boud, 2018) and supports students in increased and repeated reflection and self-assessment opportunities and connected learning (Elliot et al., 2022). Such approaches also allow for inclusion and assurance of strategies such as regular feedback. Developmental or progressive activities such as re-reflecting professional values at multiple points in a course/program can also be considered and integrated. Clarke and Boud (2018) and the University of Melbourne (University of Melbourne, 2023a) provide ideas on how to go about programmatic design for ePortfolios and key stages or touchpoints that can support a programmatic approach to help with developmental work and

enable students to build the relevant portfolio practices such as reflection and curation over time (University of Melbourne, 2023a).

Example 2

[ePortfolio Innovation Lab: A Hackathon for Collaborative and Programmatic Learning Design](#)

[<https://bit.ly/eP2023ProgrammaticDesignWorkshop>]

The example included involves programmatic design resources from a workshop conducted as a part of the ePortfolios Australia ePortforum 2023 facilitated by Leanne Ngo, Kate Mitchell, Kashmiri Dave and Keith Heggart titled “ePortfolio Innovation Lab: A Hackathon for Collaborative and Programmatic Learning Design” (Ngo, Mitchell, Dave & Heggart, 2023). Educators can use these resources to plan broader approaches and programmatically map opportunities to embed ePortfolios across a program.

The resources include:

- ePortfolio Programmatic mapping document
- Links and summary points from workshop
- Slide deck: ePortfolio forum 2023 - Programmatic approach
- ePortfolio mapping examples.

Facilitating interaction, collaboration, and feedback

ePortfolios offer various avenues for collaboration, peer and instructor interaction, and feedback. Peers can provide constructive feedback on each other's work, fostering a sense of community and shared learning. Instructors can offer timely feedback and guidance. By creating a continuous feedback loop that enhances student engagement and fosters growth (Acosta & Liu, 2006) – such as via progressively scaffolded or iterative assessment – instructors can ensure feedback is targeted and dialogic. Students can potentially guide the nature of feedback based on their self-assessment and areas of focus, indicating where instructor feedback should focus. This way, feedback can be relational and dialogic (Payne et al., 2023).

Additionally, as ePortfolios hold affordances for incorporating multimodal assets, they may support opportunities for multimodal feedback, which, if undertaken in the right way, holds promise for student perceptions of feedback clarity and in humanising feedback through building positive emotion, connection and belonging (Fenton et al., 2023; Payne et al., 2023). Instructors may choose to decouple or delay the release of marks from feedback to encourage students to engage with the feedback first, and some ePortfolio technologies can support such processes (Clarke & Boud, 2018).

Example

[Maximising Engagement and Feedback Literacy](#)

[<https://le.unimelb.edu.au/news/articles/Maximising-engagement-and-feedback-literacy-with-peer-review>]

The news article, 'Maximising Engagement and Feedback Literacy' (University of Melbourne, 2022) features a case study of peer review combined with ePortfolios within the Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Melbourne.

Supporting long-term growth and reflection

ePortfolios have the unique advantage of capturing students' academic and creative-reflective journeys and their progress and growth over time.

The ePortfolio serves as a longitudinal record and a tool for fostering long-term reflective practice and creative expression. Students can witness their growth and progress as they add to their portfolios. This active engagement in curating their portfolios enhances student motivation, persistence, and interest, aligning with UDL principles of providing multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018) and the principles of sustainable assessment and lifelong learning (Boud, 2000). Active engagement in curating their portfolios enhances student motivation, persistence and interest relevant to providing multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018).

Encouraging an active, iterative, and interpretive process of self-reflection using ePortfolios, where students regularly look back to inform their future learning endeavours, can also help students develop a personalised identity through narrative (Nguyen, 2013). Such an approach is possible when ePortfolios are embedded longitudinally across the course or program curriculum.

Providing opportunities for students to flexibly reuse their assessment products and artifacts for future portfolio building (such as a graduate or professional portfolio) prepares students for future assessments and lifelong learning. It facilitates the incorporation of lived experiences—a vital aspect of sustainable assessment (Boud, 2000).

Example

[Personal and Political change portfolio](#) (Nicholls, 2021)

[<https://v3.pebblepad.com.au/spa/#/public/ydRGhbWktr9swZG8wbd4sybdmy>]

As part of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) contest and displayed on the Exemplary Student Portfolios (University of Melbourne, 2021) website, students submitted digital portfolios based on the theme "Personal change and political change". Stephen Nicholls' portfolio reuses samples of work from past study units (such as his 'Say Gay' tarot cards developed for an Arts in Education unit) in order to demonstrate how his work and his educational philosophy connect to personal and political change. He then reflects on his overall progression and development through his studies and how his educational philosophy and understanding of Indigenous knowledge and inclusive education have changed while undertaking the education program. His portfolio demonstrates the ePortfolio as a developmental reflection, the culmination of a learning journey, and a site of creative art installation that allows his authentic self to shine through. If using an aligned, coordinated, programmatic approach to ePortfolio implementation, there should be multiple points to encourage students to reflect back on past work and what it means for their future. Look at using capstone units to return to and amend early philosophy/About me pieces and to reflect on previous work to incorporate into a graduate portfolio.

Further context regarding the contest as well as portfolios of other contest winners are available via the [Exemplary student portfolios](https://le.unimelb.edu.au/showcase/exemplary-student-eportfolios) (University of Melbourne, 2021) webpage [https://le.unimelb.edu.au/showcase/exemplary-student-eportfolios].

Challenges and considerations

Despite the benefits of flexible assessment, we recognise that implementation of ePortfolios for assessment presents challenges, which we categorise into two overarching themes, logistic and pedagogical.

Logistic challenges

Selecting the appropriate technical infrastructure and platform is important for integrating ePortfolios into the educational ecosystem (Klenowski, 2009). The sustainability of practices is a key concern, including the time, administration and labour investments required from educators, students and support teams (Elliot et al., 2022; Lin & Hartsell, 2015; Slade et al., 2022). Crafting assessments that allow for choice and flexibility demands considerable time from teaching staff in the development phase and subsequent grading and feedback processes.

Pedagogical challenges

Ensuring the validity, reliability, and standardisation of assessments within ePortfolios is a paramount pedagogical challenge (Barrett, 2010). The very nature of assessment in ePortfolios requires special attention to prevent it from hindering the reflective process or compromising the authenticity of students' reflections (Boud, 2000). A critical aspect often overlooked is the students' and staff's digital literacy skills, along with the effectiveness of the support mechanisms in place to facilitate their seamless adoption of ePortfolios (Lin & Hartsell, 2015).

Mitigating challenges

Ideally, these challenges should be mitigated as part of a thoughtful implementation approach. To mitigate challenges effectively, stakeholders at all levels (including faculty leadership and technology support teams) should work collaboratively to lead and employ a coordinated approach to ePortfolio implementation (AAEEBL Digital Ethics Task Force, 2022; Elliot et al., 2022).

Institutions should consider slowly scaling up practices over time, first prioritising efforts on non-technical, pedagogical solutions (Krause, 2006) such as cultivating high-quality student reflections (Elliot et al., 2022). Institutions and department heads/strategic leadership should also consider and look at ways to recognise and support the visibility and load of ePortfolio labour for both staff and students (AAEEBL Digital Ethics Task Force, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating ePortfolios within assessment amplifies student engagement and resonates with the core theme of flexibility in education. As we have explored throughout this

paper, ePortfolios unlock a wealth of possibilities that dovetail seamlessly with the principles of flexible assessment.

By providing a multifaceted approach to assessment, ePortfolios usher opportunities for authentic assessment, reflection, self-assessment, collaboration, feedback, multimodal expression, and long-term growth. When skilfully harnessed, these facets converge to create a profoundly meaningful and engaging learning experience for students. Their educational journey becomes more than just a series of assignments; it evolves into a personal odyssey characterised by motivation and a deep sense of ownership.

The synergy between flexible assessment and ePortfolios provides a promising path for an evolving conception of assessment in Higher Education, signalling a shift towards a more student-centric, authentic, and engaging educational paradigm. Through this paper and further research, we aim to contribute to ongoing dialogue and implementation support on enhancing the educational experience for today's diverse and dynamic student population.

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