

## Assessment Fact Sheet: Portfolios

This fact sheet describes the use of portfolios to enhance the process of learning and professional development. Topics covered in this fact sheet include:

- definitions, applications and features of portfolios
- the strengths and limitations of portfolios

### What is a portfolio?

A portfolio is defined as an organised collection of evidence that provides a record of the nurse's ongoing professional practice, learning and development. It can contain details of professional education and practice experience, current and past work roles and responsibilities and other related activities.<sup>1</sup> Within the nursing profession, there is growing acceptance of the utilization of portfolios as portable and visible records of professional contribution and credentials<sup>2</sup>, and as an acceptable means for logging continuing professional development (CPD) activities.<sup>1</sup>

Applications of portfolios

The term 'portfolio' has various applications depending on the context of use and for this reason the term can be confusing.<sup>3</sup> Portfolios used within nursing contexts have two major applications; portfolios can be used in both the formative promotion of learning (developmental) and summative assessment.<sup>4</sup>

There are a variety of situations where developmental portfolios can be advantageous. For example:

- when applying for a promotion or new position
- at performance appraisal and
- to keep a log of continuing professional development activities (CPD) required for demonstrating continuing competence.

### Summative portfolios are used:

- within formal assessment procedures
- to evaluate performance
- to award grades within an educational program<sup>5</sup> or revalidation process.<sup>6</sup>

## Strengths and limitations of portfolios

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolios are viewed positively within the nursing community with the reported benefits of promoting self-reflection, autonomy and accountability for learning.<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• Portfolios can record a range of competencies and personal attributes.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>• Portfolios have high face validity.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• Portfolios are reported to be highly authentic and to promote deep learning by:<sup>9,10,11</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· facilitating personal knowledge management;</li> <li>· documenting an individual's history of development and growth;</li> <li>· functioning as a planning and goal – setting tool; and</li> <li>· assisting individuals in making connections between learning and practical experiences.<sup>8,12</sup></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is limited evidence that portfolios can measure competence with reliability or validity.<sup>6,7</sup></li> <li>• The standard of outputs can vary significantly because portfolio compilation relies on individual motivation and experience.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>• Portfolios may favour certain learning styles and preferences.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>• Portfolios can be time consuming to compile</li> <li>• Portfolios can be difficult and time consuming to maintain and assess because the material included by the individual may be selective and subjective.<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>

## Features of a portfolio

Portfolios can be presented in many different formats:

	Paper	Hybrid	Electronic
<b>Description</b>	Products are paper-based	In addition to paper products, may include photos, PDFs, video, audio files	Created in electronic format
<b>Storage requirements</b>	Binders or folders	Binders or disks/ memory stick receptacle for other materials	Online or on local computer

A broad range of items which record or demonstrate professional development or competence may be included in a portfolio. Four components, listed below, are common to the most portfolio templates:

- a personal details section
- a record of professional and academic achievements
- a record of professional experiences or employment history
- evidence including certification of continuing professional development activities (eg. attendance at workshops, conferences, study days, in-service education).

Additional items include:

- personal learning plans or objectives
- records of performance review or appraisal
- records of annual competency attainment
- reflective practice entries or essays
- professional memberships
- presentation of specific learning activities/course assessments
- publications
- research activities
- testimonials, photos, cards and letters.

Decisions about what to include in portfolios largely depend on the purpose of the portfolio and available resources. The following principles should be considered when selecting material:

- a portfolio should be more than a collection of certificates and checklists
- contents of the portfolio should be concise and selective
- the significance that each portfolio item holds in relation to ongoing professional development or competence should be clear.

## Ethics of portfolio use

A portfolio is a personal document however individuals may choose to share content with colleagues and employers. For this reason, except where it pertains to employment or academic history, portfolio users should de-identify information that relates to clients, colleagues or organisations.

## Recommendations for those designing portfolios

- The application of the portfolio must be determined and articulated to all stakeholders including individual nurses, their employers and educators.<sup>7</sup>
- The design and content of the portfolio should be determined by overarching objectives and reflect the underpinning pedagogical goals of self reflection; synthesis of theoretical learning with professional practice; lifelong learning through the identification of professional goals and key experiences.<sup>13</sup>
- The provision of templates can assist in making explicit the evidence requirements and limits of the portfolio. Most users want to know what kind of information they are expected to provide. This must be balanced with ensuring users have adequate freedom to determine their own content.<sup>4</sup>
- Portfolio guidelines should stress quality not quantity and allow where possible different forms of evidence that reflect the varied learning styles
- If the portfolio is used as an assessment tool, a marking guide is a minimum requirement to ensure assessor bias and assessor training in the use of portfolios should be provided,
- Compliance rates are highest if portfolios are sequestered or assessed.<sup>7</sup>

## References

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