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#### Original Article

### **Assessing University Performance for Graduation** Purposes through Portfolios

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This is a study of the usefulness of portfolios in a university setting as an option to assess academic and professional achievements for graduation purposes. It is based on observations made of graduation requirements in the Department of International Liberal Arts at a private Japanese university where the majority of students do not continue in academia after graduation, but some have an interest in finding a career that will allow them opportunities to use English. The paper discusses the process of developing a "Graduation Portfolio" system, the contents of a suggested portfolio and the benefits of using portfolios as an optional assessment tool to fulfill graduation requirements, rather than producing only a graduation research paper. Also discussed is the impact of portfolio assessment on students' motivation to self-reflect and set goals, and how these activities could be monitored and assessed.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Portfolio, Curriculum development, Motivation

#### Introduction

Usage of portfolios for assessment began in the late 1980s, but while the idea of requiring university students to complete a portfolio is not new, they are not widely used in postsecondary education in Japan. Consequently, this study investigates the relevance and usefulness of portfolios as an alternative option to graduation research projects in a Japanese university where the graduation requirements state that students must complete a graduation research paper to show that they have met the academic requirements of the institution. We will therefore first discuss what portfolios are

and outline various types. Then we will describe the context in which graduation portfolios were suggested, and examine the planning needed to adopt portfolio assessment within that context. The paper will then move on to examine what portfolios could contain and how those contents could be assessed, particularly within small, private Japanese universities, in place of quasistandardized assessment, which Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi (2019) and Khouya (2018) note can be demotivating and unnecessarily stressful for both teachers and students. Moreover, this paper will demonstrate how educators can encourage students to create milestones in their education, self-assess, and work autonomously to develop practical skills through creating a "graduation portfolio".

#### **Defining and Categorizing Portfolios**

The notion of portfolios in education first arose

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in the late 1980s to early 1990s in the United States as a "personal, multi-tool" alternative to standardized assessments (Park, 2004, p. 1). While there is no consensus definition, it suffices for this paper to see them as a showcase of achievement and validation of one's mastery in a given field.

Researchers have identified many different types of portfolios, each with its own key features or purpose. Commonly, O'Malley & Valdez Pierce (1996, p. 37) identify three types of portfolios based on content. 'Showcase portfolios' display an individual student's best work, while 'Collection portfolios' include all work produced by a student, and 'Assessment portfolios' comprise "focused reflections of specific learning goals, that contain systematic collections of student work, student selfassessment, and teacher assessment". Conversely, Battacharya & Hartnett (2007, p. T1G19) categorize portfolios based on their purpose: assessment, employment, learning or teaching.

MacDonald, Liu, Lowell, Tsai, & Lohr (2004) discuss four types of portfolios. 'Academic portfolios' are a collection of work for use in academic institutions. 'Presentation portfolios' are used for employment or self-promotional purposes. 'Professional portfolios' pertain mostly to e-portfolios where linking of achievements for easy access is a key feature. Finally, 'Working portfolios' consist of a collection of achievements and reflections to exemplify one's improvement and competency in a particular field.

Lankes (1998, pp. 18-19) classifies portfolios as 'Developmental portfolios', which "document student improvement", 'Proficiency portfolios', which "prove mastery in a subject area", 'Showcase portfolios', which "[document] a student's best work accomplished", 'Teacher planning portfolios, which "acquire information", 'Employment skills portfolios', which "evaluate a prospective employee's work readiness skills", and 'College admission portfolios', which "determine eligibility for admission".

The broadest taxonomy comes from Melograno's study in 2000 (cited in Birgin & Baki, 2007, pp. 81-82), where they gave nine categories: personal, working, record-keeping, group, thematic, integrated, showcase, electronic, and multiyear portfolios. Therefore, portfolios can serve a

very wide range of purposes, even within the specific context of education. They can be used, for example, for student assessment, academic advising, institutional accreditation, departmental review, curriculum development, career planning and development, and alumni development (or lifelong learning) (Reese & Levy, 2009, pp. 3-4).

#### **Contextual Background**

In many universities in Japan, it is common to require students to complete a graduation thesis for which students write a 30,000 characters or 30-plus pages graduation thesis. Although, this may be conventional practice, it can be challenging for teachers to motivate their students, or for students to perceive such academic work as interesting, useful or relevant, often because they themselves do not choose the research theme (Moritoshi, 2019).

This paper is situated within one particular four-year International Liberal Arts Department in a small, private Japanese university in Okayama city, Japan. It consisted of 96 students as of the 2019 intake, divided unequally between Japanese Studies, Local Business and English Professional pathways. Initially, in line with the above common practice, the program required students to complete a graduation thesis of 30,000 characters or 30-plus pages in Japanese during students' junior and senior years. However, the teachers soon realized that the students were unable to meet the demands of such a large-scale research project, so this was reduced to 20,000 characters or 20-plus pages.

There was also a demand from the administration to take a "student first" approach in which academic staff were expected to be responsive to students' needs, including their low level of academic training. This created tension between competing demands. The faculty were being asked to develop students' research and academic writing skills to a sufficient level to meet the university's graduation requirements, yet students were unable and/or unwilling to complete the necessary work. This resulted in higher levels of stress for both parties. It was therefore suggested that the adoption of a "Graduation Portfolio" could resolve this tension by satisfying the research and academic writing requirements through a series of smaller, more manageable tasks spread over a longer timeframe, which students might also find more motivating, relevant and helpful in mapping out their studies.

Through the use of portfolios, students would have the opportunity to take greater ownership of the learning process, self-assessment of, and reflection on their education, collaborate with teachers or supervisors and give educators an overview of their progress across a course, or program as a whole.

#### Planning and Adopting a Graduation Portfolio

As with the development of any new course, curriculum or program, the adoption of graduation portfolios needs careful planning "to ensure clarity of purpose" for those involved at all levels (Mueller, n.d.). This is especially true in situations that encompass more than one course, program, or department. Pre-adoption requires developers to identify the type of portfolio to be used, the quantity and type of required or acceptable content expected from students, the assessment process and rubrics to be used, and most importantly how the graduation portfolio works towards the goals of the course, program, or department in relation to graduation requirements.

Since the purpose of a graduation portfolio is to demonstrate fulfillment of specified requirements of a department's program, it is important that the portfolio is designed in such a way as to facilitate the assessment of students' performance and gains. In line with Lankes (1998), this paper therefore advocates an assessment portfolio containing assignments that promote, showcase and evidence personal, technical, academic and/or professional development and proficiency in order to evidence a student's full range of knowledge, skills, competencies, achievements and perhaps even qualifications or certifications. Such portfolios would help each student to see their gains, development and achievements year-on-year and assist faculty in easily assessing the same, rather than only their ability to write an academic paper, even if it is one based on their theme of choice.

The assessment portfolio should incorporate assignments which quickly and easily assist teachers to accurately assess the extent to which a student has fulfilled each of the portfolio's assignment's learning objectives, whether they be knowledge-, skills- or development-focused. A self-assessment task, or "artifact", could also be set for each learning objective (Appendix 1) so as to develop each student's capacity for self-reflection. Regardless of the learning objectives implicit within the portfolio, the development of clear assessment and self-assessment rubrics will help to more smoothly and successfully add or transition to a graduation portfolio.

To fully assess gains, development and achievements across an entire program, portfolios should consist of coursework completed as part of the overarching program and evidence of extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the content and assessment of the portfolio must closely align with the course's, curriculum's, program's or department's goals in order to validly, reliably and equitably gauge students' overall performance throughout their time at university. Failure to do so might adversely affect students' perceptions of the portfolio itself and also of the course, curriculum, program or department that has adopted it.

Another reason to adopt a graduation portfolio system is that the information they contain can be used to evaluate individual courses, curriculum, programs, departments or staff.

In short, adopting a graduation portfolio system requires considerable planning of content and assessment to evidence the extent to which a student has fulfilled the prescribed graduation requirements. Furthermore, valid, reliable, equitable and practicable portfolios can facilitate growth across a wide range of knowledge and skills.

# Examining the Contents of the Graduation Portfolio

To ensure that the graduation requirements of a program are adequately fulfilled through a graduation portfolio, the contents must be discussed and selected by those involved, including students, course teachers, and curriculum developers. It is important that at this stage, all involved have a voice to maximize the validity, reliability, equitability, practicability, relevance and usefulness of the contents of a well-rounded portfolio.

Content should include coursework, formative assessments by teachers, and self-assessments by students for each semester of the supervisory period in order to evidence gains and development over time in objective-related areas. The contents should consist of a variety of task or assignment types and use different formats, for example documents, spreadsheets, charts, graphs, tables, presentation slides, illustrations, and if necessary, appendices to show a student's ability to produce a range of work using different software, technologies and communication skills. It should also offer students assignment options from which to choose, so that they can showcase their work in ways that they feel best evidence their gains, or meet their learning, academic or professional needs or interests.

Another component could be documented tutorial or supervisory sessions in which a short-, mid- and/or long-term study plan is jointly developed by the supervisor and student to ensure that students understand, and are able to fulfill, all of their program's graduation requirements. A Memorandum of Agreement (Appendix 2) signed by the student and supervisor would indicate that students need to activate self-reflection skills through discussion and planning, which is a component of self-assessment. This is similar to Tholin's view of self-directed planning, which emphasizes student contributions to their development in order to become self-aware learners (2008, p. 10).

The portfolio contents should also encourage increased practical knowledge and skills to better prepare students for their future. One way to achieve these would be through optional extracurricular activities such as internship, study abroad, or volunteer opportunities as viable, assessable components which Hart Research Associates (2013) have identified as important to employers. In their study of online surveys among employers, most acknowledged the importance of

a liberal arts background when viewing success in the global economy, but also believed that having a broad range of skills and knowledge along with field-specific skills and knowledge are the most important qualities for long-term success (p. 20).

Finally, one reason for dividing the graduation portfolio into sections corresponding to semesters (Appendix 1) is primarily to give a broader view of the progress students are making throughout their university education. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section with respect to assessment.

#### **Assessing Graduation Portfolios**

For a graduation portfolio, various assessments are required to ensure that all participants' voices are heard, including students. Therefore, this paper suggests four types of assessment to meet graduation requirements; artifact assessment, self-assessment, credit completion, and graduation portfolio completion.

Self-assessments can be completed in a variety of ways, but to assure students are including the desired information, a simple multiple-choice type of format regarding such things as the content, course goals, and the student's performance with an open-ended portion for personal goals and reflection on their individual performance would seem reasonable. The inclusion of the various question types and content can assist teachers in gauging the strength of correlation between students' perceptions of their performance and their expectations of the course.

The credit completion component may not have a high point value in the portfolio, but it is essential to students' education. Therefore, having students include an updated version of their academic transcripts, semester-on-semester, places a stronger emphasis on the need to gain course credits. It can also be used as a secondary observation tool for advisors to closely monitor a student's performance across the entire curriculum.

Each artifact or piece of work should be graded or otherwise assessed. The rubrics by which this is done need not be the same for each artifact but should be applied consistently by all teachers across a given course, such as, Technical Seminar for thesis writing, to ensure fair and equitable assessment between teachers. It would be helpful to get a consensus among all participants on the rubrics used, though this may not always be possible.

The idea of going through every document in each section thoroughly for each student may seem tedious for teachers, but each component should be graded in real-time by the moderating team to improve consistency in marking. This would allow students and advisors to see any gradual improvements or areas of concern that may require actioning. It would also suggest ongoing communication between teachers and students to encourage the development of students' critical thinking skills.

One way to enhance consistency in grading would be the way the scoring system for any artifact is presented and its relative weighting within the graduation portfolio as a whole. Read in conjuction with Appendix 1, Table 1 below shows an example of an overall portfolio scoring

system. As courses become less focused on general education and more towards specialized fields of study directly related to students' interests or needs, the point values increase. This is to ensure that students work to develop higher level skills as they near graduation.

Students should be required to include all necessary documents and achieve a sufficient score based on requirements specified by the department.

Most degree programs that require the completion of a thesis will likely include a presentation for students to defend their research in the final stages. Even here, the inclusion of a graduation portfolio can be incorporated if the students are required to discuss their overall performance, as evidenced by the portfolio, during the defense. This would also suggest the possibility for students to use the portfolio not only for graduation purposes but also as a showcase portfolio (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996, p. 37) to demonstrate their knowledge and

Table 1 Sample total point distribution for graduation portfolio

Section	Sub-section point distribution	Points
1 - Letter to Portfolio Assessment Committee	N/A	1
2 - Statement of Goals/Objectives	2.1 = 1 point 2.2 = 1 point	2
3 - Sample of work I - 2nd year Semester 1 with Memorandum of Agreement	3.1 = 2 points 3.2 = 5 points	7
4 - Sample of work II - 2nd year Semester 2 with Memorandum of Agreement	4.1 = 1 point 4.2 = 8 points 4.3 = 1 point	10
5 - Sample of work III - 3rd year Semester 1 with Memorandum of Agreement	5.1 = 5 points 5.2 = 15 points	20
6 - Sample of work IV - 3rd year Semester 2 with Memorandum of Agreement	6.1 = 5 points 6.2 = 10 points 6.3 = 5 points	20
7 - Achievements - 4th year with Memorandum of Agreement	7.1 = 10 points 7.2 = 5 points 7.3 = 10 points 7.4 = 15 points	40
All artifacts must be included and total 70 points to successfully meet the requirements for the Graduation Portfolio	Total	100

performance to future employers.

Regarding the timing of assessment, graduation portfolios should be graded in real-time, meaning that each assignment is marked as it is completed and submitted, rather than en masse at the end of the senior year's final semester, as is currently the case with graduation research papers. The former provides formative feedback to students as each semester progresses, which they can use to improve and grow across the entire supervisory period. Conversely, the latter provides summative feedback at the end of the supervisory period. At best, this delays students' growth and development until after graduation, as they are entering the labor market, which would be too late to make them more competitive. At worst, it stunts growth completely for lack of any timely feedback. Grading portfolios in real-time also greatly reduces the workload for supervisors at the end of the academic year because the grading is distributed across the series of (currently) two Basic Seminar and four Technical Seminar courses, rather than all at once at the end of the final Technical Seminar course.

The assessment process should require more faculty members to become involved as moderators in the assessment of students' performance, with each section of the portfolio requiring different moderators based on relevant skills, knowledge and experience. When incorporating extracurricular activities such as internships, study abroad, and volunteer opportunities, external, 'in situ' assessors would also come into play.

Finally, incorporating self-assessment activities for each artifact allows students "to discern patterns of strengths and weaknesses that can help them to become better learners" (Chen, 2008, p. 237). In short, the students would notice their own growth or need for growth.

#### Conclusion

There is an abundance of portfolio types and taxonomies for content. Through the discussion in this paper, it seems that the most suitable for a graduation portfolio would be an assessment portfolio incorporating components of developmental and proficiency portfolios as defined by Lankes (2008). Through the use of such portfolios,

students who are less likely to continue or succeed in academia are offered an alternative path to fulfilling the graduation requirements, one that encompasses a larger range of skills and knowledge transferrable beyond the classroom to their professions. The stricter, more academically rigorous requirements of a thesis may be too much for those not interested in pursuing a career requiring higher-level research skills. Although potentially useful to some, these may be seen by others as irrelevant and therefore demotivating.

Through proper planning and discussion among faculty to decide the components of their bespoke graduation portfolio, together with appropriate assessment rubrics, the inclusion of such a portfolio in a degree program can successfully work towards and evidence fulfillment of a program's learning objectives. Inclusion of self-assessments and memoranda could help to motivate students to take a more proactive part in the learning process and help them to take the initiative in decision-making and problem-solving. It could also improve their organizational and critical thinking skills through planning activities such as developing milestones throughout their university career. Through such planning activities, the quantity and quality of interactions between faculty and students, and supervisory support could also increase.

Assessing a system that incorporates information across many subjects and staff within and beyond the university may seem daunting, but with proper preparation and the development of rubrics for the portfolio that align with current course rubrics, the transition could be managed more smoothly. Artifacts would be assessed in real-time, allowing for more formative feedback. Incorporating portfolio presentations similar to thesis defense presentations brings the graduation portfolio in line with existing assessment practices.

The primary barriers to incorporating a graduation portfolio system into an existing degree program are firstly the willingness of the faculty and/or institution to take up new practices and secondly the time necessary to agree on the contents, format, and assessment processes. Most faculties are quite busy and have limited opportunities to assemble for extended periods,

which could severely delay implementation. However, the writers feel strongly that through cooperation and a determination to advance opportunities for students, incorporating the graduation portfolio system into a small institution's degree program can be an invigorating experience for those involved.

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#### **Appendix 1: Proposed Artifacts for a Graduation Portfolio**

#### Section 1 - Letter of Portfolio Submission to the Portfolio Assessment Committee (1 point)

#### Section 2 - Statement of Goals/Objectives (250 words) (2 points)

Section 2.1 - Placement/Entrance Assessments (1 pt)

Section 2.2 - Official 1st year grades and acquired credits (1 pt)

#### Section 3 - Sample of work I - 2nd year Semester 1 Memorandum of Agreement (7 points)

Section 3.1 - Self-assessment of performance (2 pts)

Section 3.2 - Choose two of the following: (5 pts)

- Two book reports in English (250 words each)
- Three book reports in Japanese (1,000 characters each)
- Sample of research writing (Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, Tables/Figures/Appendix, References)

#### Section 4 - Sample of work II - 2nd year Semester 2 Memorandum of Agreement (10 points)

Section 4.1 - Self-assessment of performance/experience (1 pt)

Section 4.2 - Choose one of the following: (8 pts)

- Basic Seminar II Research Paper (2,500) must be revised and completed properly in English
- Essay on experience participating in the Semester Study Abroad in English (1,250 words)
- Essay on experience participating in the Semester English Immersion Program in English (1,250 words)

Section 4.3 - Official 2nd year grades and acquired credits (1 pt)

#### Section 5 - Sample of Work III - 3rd year Semester 1 Memorandum of Agreement (20 points)

Section 5.1 - Self-assessment of academic progress (5 pts)

Section 5.2 - Choose two of the following: (15 pts)

- Sample of work on Technical Seminar I research design and process + reflective essay (500 words)
- Sample of work on an event/presentation/project related to international relations and/or English (need approval) + reflective essay (500 words)
- Personal milestones for years 3 and 4 (400-500 words each)

#### Section 6 - Sample of Work IV - 3rd year Semester 2 Memorandum of Agreement (20 points)

Section 6.1 - Self-reflection of academic progress (5 pts)

Section 6.2 - Choose two of the following: (10 pts)

- Two or three samples of work with reflective essay on Technical Seminar II data collection and results in English (two pages)
- Sample of work on an event/presentation/project related to international relations and/or English (need approval) + reflective essay in English (two pages)
- Semester internship in relation to international relations and/or English (prior approval necessary) + reflective essay in English (two pages)

Section 6.3 - Official 3rd year grades and acquired credits (5 pts)

#### Section 7 - Achievements - 4th year Memorandum of Agreement (40 points)

Section 7.1 - Japanese and English versions of Professional Resume (10 pts)

Section 7.2 - Self-assessment of academic and personal achievements throughout four-year

program (5 pts)

Section 7.3 - Completed Graduation Thesis in English (minimum 4,000 words, excluding Title page, TOC and Abstract) (10 pts)

Section 7.4 - Choose one of the following: (15 pts)

- Collection of two of the following
  - a. Minimum Eiken level 2 certification
  - b. TOEIC 750 certification
  - c. IELTS 6 certification
  - d. Cambridge FCE certification
  - e. Semester Study Abroad completion
  - f. Semester English Emersion Program completion
- Fifteen hours of community service in relation to international relations and/or English (prior approval necessary) + reflective essay (500 words)
- Semester internship in relation to international relations and/or English (prior approval necessary) + reflective essay (500 words)

**Supervisor** / **Position** 

Date

## Appendix 2: Memorandum of Graduate Portfolio Agreement for 3rd Year Semester 1 have chosen the Through discussions with my supervisor I \_\_\_ following artifacts to include in Section 5 of the Graduation Portfolio in consideration of graduation. The following has been reviewed and agreed upon with my supervisor. **Course of Study** Intercultural **International English** Communication **Business Professional** Sample of Work III (3rd year Semester 1) (choose two) + Self-assessment of academic progress **Assignment** Japanese English • Self-assessment of academic progress for years 1 and 2 O Sample of work with reflective essay on Technical Seminar I research design and process O Sample of work on an event/presentation/project related to international relations and/or English (need approval) accompanied by reflective essay O Personal milestones for years 3 and 4 (One or two pages each) Student Name / Student Number Date