Flying Start NHS®:

Completion of work-based learning portfolios: rationale for the development of criteria and guidance for completion for NQPs

FLYING START NHS® was first launched in 2006 to support Nurses, Midwives and Allied health professionals (NMAHPs) make the transition from student to Newly Qualified Practitioner (NQPs). It introduces NQPs to life-long learning through continuing professional development by undertaking a learner-led development programme. NQPs, with the support of a local mentor, work through ten web-based learning units and record their learning outcomes in either a paper or electronic portfolio. Previous independent evaluations have highlighted inconsistencies in mentor and NQPs’ understanding of what defines completion. In addition, there appears to be a huge debate in the literature as to whether portfolios should or should not be assessed.

The aim of this project was to:
- identify stakeholders’ understanding of what completion is and how they judge completion including what criteria they currently use
- review of examples of completed portfolios
- review literature and other areas on how portfolios are reviewed and identify key points from current debate.
- develop criteria and guidance for completion for NQPs
- develop criteria and guidance for sign off for mentors, line managers and NMAHP Directors

Survey of NHS Board leads, mentors, managers and NMAHP directors

An online survey was carried out in order to gain a better understanding of what Flying Start ‘completion’ is and how completion is judged. The link was sent to NHS board leads asking them to complete the survey and also pass the link for this survey on to their Flying Start mentors and line managers, and to NMAHP Directors. We received 126 responses:

NHS Board Lead 14.2% (n=17)
Flying Start Mentor 36.7% (n=44)
Line Manager 47.5% (n=57)
NMAHP Director 1.7% (n=2)

Although there was some variation in responses it would appear that all NHS Boards encourage NQPs to complete Flying Start and in half of Boards (50%; n=7) completion is mandatory. Most
respondents (82.5%; n=104) indicated that they normally check that staff have completed Flying Start.

Many provided details of who checked that completion had been achieved and this was most commonly (in order of frequency):

- mentors (n=23)
- managers (n=8)
- manager and practice educator (n=5)

Other responses, and the most commonly cited, were that varying combinations of mentor, senior charge nurses or team leads managers, practice educators, KSF reviewers and university colleagues reviewed portfolios and judged that completion had been achieved.

However, descriptions of specific or objective criteria were not given, and a subjective assessment of whether completion had been reached seemed to be relied on by many although there were many mentions of reviewing the concluding activities.

Few respondents gave details of how completion was judged. There appeared to be no standardisation of the evidence required for completion to be judged as having been achieved and there appears to be a lack of criteria guiding the assessment of completion.

Variations in who and how completion was checked, processes around completion and criteria appears to occur within boards as well as between and in some cases there was mention of the award of completion certificates but not how completion was judged.

**Literature review key points**

The literature review considered current evidence about the use of portfolios and their assessment, and a summary of the key points is provided below.

**Definition and purpose**

The term portfolio can be defined as a collection of evidence (in a range of formats appropriate to the circumstances) that shows that learning has taken place. The type of evidence collected in a portfolio can vary widely, as can the breadth and depth of this evidence. Two major portfolio approaches were identified (Barrett 2009; Andre 2011):

- process orientated or learning portfolios
- product orientated or achievement portfolio
In the literature reviewed, there were conflicting reports about whether the different purposes of portfolios can be combined without compromising the meaningfulness of the contents. However, portfolios should encourage growth, and not just to report or support it.

Reflection is at the heart of any evidence that is part of the portfolio, but there is much debate as to whether reflection can or should be assessed.

**Uses of portfolios**

Portfolios are seen as tools to increase learners’ self-awareness, to foster learners’ ability to learn independently and to encourage learners to reflect on their own performance. From this perspective, the real value of a portfolio is in the reflection and learning that is documented therein, not just in the collection of work. However, some have questioned the quality of reflections documented in portfolios and of individuals being required to share their reflections.

A recurrent finding in the literature was that, for portfolios to be successful, learners and mentors should be clear about the learning objectives and benefits of using portfolios. This includes clear guidance e.g. purpose, content and structure.

Provision of this guidance can help to help alleviate uncertainty about the process and aims of the portfolio and reduce the inclusion of unnecessary evidence and increase the quality of evidence of achievements. Using a simple method for guiding completion and evaluation of the portfolio will keep the process manageable and viable, support participation in the processes and benefit those participating in the process.

**Assessment**

Knowing the portfolio will be assessed is a motivating factor for student completion although several studies and reviews found that learners often see keeping a portfolio as an additional burden. But they are unlikely to engage in developing a portfolio voluntarily without the stimulus of assessment.

However, the literature suggests that assessment could be detrimental to the fundamental principle of reflective learning which promotes self-awareness and encourages the learner to be open and honest about their learning and development needs.

Using portfolios for both assessment and learning creates a conflict and it has been suggested that the assessment process can be detrimental; to the principle of reflective learning. Learners must
feel comfortable displaying honest reflections and imperfect work if they are to have a true sense of their progress.

Crucially, assessment of the portfolio needs to be guided by the purpose of compiling it and learner-tailored feedback is needed. This feedback on portfolio-based assessment promotes lifelong, self-directed and reflective practice.

**Conclusion**

There are ongoing debates in the literature about the use of portfolios and whether they can or should be assessed. However, their use as evidence of learning inherently involves some type of judgement or assessment, and assessment has been identified as a motivator for completion.

Where portfolios are successful, contributing factors to this success are the provision of:

- clear and simple guidance about the purpose, content and structure
- learner tailored feedback
- assessment/ review guided by the purpose of the portfolio

**Review of what others do**

Information on how portfolios are used and assessed was collected from the reviewed literature, websites such as the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC), Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and from Flying Start NHS Board leads. Examples of completion criteria, reflective accounts and portfolios were gathered.

**Outcomes**

Based on the above information and through discussion with NHS Education for Scotland staff and NHS Board leads, guidelines on completion and the use of portfolios was developed. The guidelines are based on the following principles:

1. There are four key principles to apply to completion of Flying Start NHS ®:
   a. The learning outcomes of all 10 Learning Units must be achieved
   b. A portfolio of evidence must be available (either electronically or paper based) demonstrating sufficient evidence of the learning being applied in the workplace
   c. There must be evidence of development over time, i.e. the learner has demonstrated increased confidence and capability over the course of twelve months
   d. All 10 concluding activities must be completed with clear objectives identified for the learner’s personal development plan for the coming year
2. The NQP is required to keep a portfolio demonstrating sufficient evidence of the learning being applied in the workplace
3. However, portfolios should be unique to the individual - belongs to them and should not be formally assessed

4. NQPs must produce evidence of completion, including concluding activities, achievement of learning outcomes and application to practice. This evidence needs to be reviewed in order to judge completion

5. Clear and simple guidance about the purpose, content and structure of the portfolio is required

6. Assessment (or review) of the portfolio/evidence has been identified as a motivator for completion. Review of evidence should be guided by the purpose and the learner should receive tailored feedback