

# Towards an Institutional PLE

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## Abstract:

Although they are most often associated with informal learning PLEs in their broader sense (the ad-hoc, serendipitous and potentially chaotic set of tools that learners bring to their learning) are increasingly important for learners in the context of formal study. As a result they represent a conceptual rather than a functional shift in how institutions should support learning through their digital systems (Wilson et al. 2006).

PLEs pose a number of serious questions for educational institutions that are attempting to provide digital services and technology enhanced learning to their students and staff: how should institutional systems interact with personal learning environments (Sclater, 2008), how do teachers and students negotiate the tools and mash-ups used in study (Severance et al. 2008), and how can students and teachers collaborate in what can be a complex semi-private space (Razavi and Iverson, 2006)?

In this paper we outline the approach that we are taking at the University of Southampton UK in redesigning our teaching and learning infrastructure into an *Institutional PLE*. We do not see this term as an oxymoron. We define an Institutional PLE as an environment that provides a personalised interface to University data and services and at the same time exposes that data and services to a student's personal tools. Our approach is similar to the iPLE described by Casquero et al (2010), but we have emphasized co-design with students and staff, and ambitious enterprise-level integration. Our goal is to provide a digital platform that can cope with an evolving learning and teaching environment, as well as support the social and community aspects of the institution. We believe that this is the first time that this has been attempted at the scale of an institution like Southampton.

As an institution we have already made significant progress with open data through our open data initiative<sup>1</sup>, however there are a number of key challenges to including this new approach throughout institutional processes. Political challenges include creating a culture of transparency, openness and access (open by default rather than closed by default), and overcoming the reluctance to enable student choices (we see this as empowering students but it also increases the complexity of support, and can create an uneven student experience).

Technically the key challenge is in opening up many different proprietary (and occasionally bespoke) systems, enabling single sign-on across those systems, and supporting personalization and aggregation in a scalable way (the University

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<sup>1</sup> Southampton Open Data: <http://data.southampton.ac.uk/>

supports approximately 30,000 staff and students, and the system must be able to deal with many thousands of independent requests per hour).

We have recently completed the consultation and co-design stage of our development, and are aiming at an initial beta release of the new Southampton Learning Environment (SLE) in the Summer (to be initially run in parallel to the existing University portal). Our co-design process (large-scale student survey, smaller focus groups and independent interviews) has revealed a preference for a small number of key services in our initial launch (including email and timetabling). These will be built using an extensible App Store model and we are planning a student competition over the Summer to explore the student-creation of new Apps built on top of our open-data infrastructure. The Co-design has also resulted in a heavy emphasis on groups and community and perhaps the biggest departure from other approaches is that we foreground these in our own interface and make them the lens through which students and staff access all of the data and services of the institution.

In this paper we will present the results of our consultation and co-design exercises, share the principles that we have negotiated (with staff, students and management) to guide the creation of our Institutional PLE, and present our beta-environment. Our hope is to create a new type of institutional environment that is more open and flexible, works with the individual PLEs of staff and students, and yet also allows the institution to add value to their collective experience.

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