

Preparing Post- Qualifying Portfolios

A Practical Guide for Candidates

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1 What is a Portfolio?

The term 'portfolio' brings to mind a variety of different things, ranging from the collection of materials which art students carry to show their practical abilities to a person's holdings of stocks and shares. Like an artist's portfolio, a portfolio in social work is a collection of materials that provides evidence of a person's practical abilities. When artists open their portfolios the viewer has a direct experience of their work as an artist. A good art portfolio will illustrate the whole range of abilities - water colours, ink sketches, pastels, abstracts, still lifes, landscapes, portraits, etc. Similarly, a good social work portfolio depicts a range of skills and competences and is designed around the materials it has to accommodate being large and flat to accommodate artwork. .

It differs from a file or a report in being just such a portable demonstration of practical abilities, not merely evidence of your knowledge of a subject.

Artwork is relatively easy to display in a portfolio (though a sculptor might disagree!) It is more difficult to design a portfolio which allows its author to demonstrate interactional abilities. In social work, knowledge, values and skills do not 'lie flat'; they are dynamic and three-dimensional, so a social work portfolio has to find imaginative ways of illustrating these kinds of abilities in a format which is essentially a two-dimensional, static snapshot. The purpose of this guide is to help you make the best of your portfolio and help programmes to develop and monitor their systems for candidates submitting portfolios.

2 What is meant by a 'good' portfolio

To find out what *turns a portfolio into a **good** portfolio* we contacted some practice teaching programmes in England and Wales which use a portfolio system to assess practical abilities. The factors identified are relevant to all post qualifying programmes which use assessment by portfolio.

We interviewed experienced markers of portfolios (referred to as **readers**) who had recently marked one which they thought combined the very best elements. This guide attempts to distil these qualities, drawn from the interviews and from our own experience as readers.

A good portfolio, readers said, was able to draw from past and present **evidence current at the time it was gathered**. Practice teaching portfolios were more likely to be good if they drew from **more than one experience of a student placement**, but the past evidence should be gathered at the time and not retrospectively.

In contrast to conventional methods of assessment, portfolios enable you to demonstrate your ability in the work place, allowing credits for different types of learning, both in formal courses and work-based learning, to be accumulated over time at your own pace.

Art students do not produce a portfolio all at once, but compile it over a period of time, selecting some examples and discarding others. The same principle should guide portfolios in social work particularly when collecting evidence of anti-discriminatory practice. The themes of **power and oppression need to be integrated into the whole portfolio** and not just confined to one particular section, so, it is important that the portfolio is given a final polish which brings it together as a whole.

The factors which readers identified as helping to make a good portfolio fell into three areas:

- the content, structure and presentation

- the processes of putting a portfolio together

- contextual factors which can help or hinder your work on the portfolio.

We will look at each of these factors in turn.

3 How to compile and present your portfolio

The content of your portfolio will be dictated by the guidelines that you are working with and, in particular, by your understanding of what the programme expects you to demonstrate. Whatever the guidelines state, your portfolio must provide evidence of your practice and learning and demonstrate your awareness of the processes involved..

At first sight, it may seem that the focus is on skills. However, in line with CCETSW's requirements, post qualifying programmes will expect you to demonstrate more abstract elements, such as an understanding of your values and the way they influence your practice. You should also demonstrate knowledge and the way you use it in practice. Taken together, these values, skills and knowledge constitute competence, and your portfolio will consist of evidence that you have met the required competences.

Checklist for a good quality portfolio

Include an introduction

An introduction helps the reader to 'place' you and the work your portfolio demonstrates. The reader needs to be attuned to your portfolio, perhaps by a pen picture of yourself and your setting, along with an overview of what you hope the portfolio will demonstrate, how you have gone about the task and why you have presented the evidence in that way. A clear table of contents for the whole portfolio and a summary of any material that is referred to frequently should also be provided.

Example from a portfolio for childcare

If you are a social worker in child care and you refer to several different children and their families throughout the portfolio, a section in the introduction can be given over to brief pen pictures - then the information does not need to be repeated but can be referred to throughout the portfolio.

It can be useful to ask yourself, *what would I like to know about if I were about to read someone else's portfolio?* This may guide you in deciding what to include in your own introduction. For example, is it possible to use materials that are useful in your practice so that they are not solely written for the portfolio; for example, could you use a brief prospectus about your agency that you have written for clients or students as part of the introduction?

Clearly present and organize your work

Your portfolio should be clearly organized with a layout which is easy to read. Some portfolios were stuffed into binders that were too small, readers said. You should therefore produce a portfolio that 'looks good' as well as having good material in it. This means thinking about binding in relation to number of pages, layout on the page, line

spacing, size of print, etc. It helps if the portfolio is divided into sections by some type of divider, with each section prefaced by a brief statement giving whatever background and contextual information is necessary.

Signpost your work

Make sure your portfolio is 'reader friendly' by signposting its contents. This will ensure that your important points are not lost and help the reader to make links between different parts of your portfolio and CCETSW requirements.

Example of signposting from a practice teaching portfolio

In a practice teaching portfolio, you could signpost a teaching exercise you have used by including it as an appendix to the relevant section of the portfolio. You might state: "My work with Student A, using the 'information exercise' (see appendix 1) was employed to help the student to This indicates my approach to helping students critically appraise their induction to the agency."

Cross-reference your work

To help the assessors see the points you want to demonstrate, cross-reference your completed portfolio. Having your portfolio read by mutual arrangement with a colleague who is also submitting a portfolio may help you make the links. However, you should avoid elaborate cross-referencing which makes a portfolio difficult and frustrating to read.

Be selective

'Biggest does not mean best'. A portfolio will become very unwieldy if it contains too much material and this is unhelpful for you and the reader. Think as carefully about what not to include as what to include. You need to select those examples of your practice that best depict the knowledge, skills and values you wish to evidence. A small number of succinct illustrations make a bigger impact than a lot of undigested materials.

Check the guidelines for any requirements prescribing the length of the portfolio as a whole or sections of it. If no guidance is given, ask to look at a range of successful portfolios to see what has been expected. Most importantly, ask your mentor if you have access to one.

Give specific examples of your work

Carefully described and evaluated examples of your work are the best way to communicate the quality of your practice. The reader wants to read about what and how you practise in the specified areas, not about generalized good intentions.

Example from a practice teaching portfolio:

"When I examine a student's practice competence, I use a variety of different methods. I will now review some of these. With student A, I used direct observation while she was interviewing a black, male elder about day care. It worked well in some respects . . . etc. . . . but two other elements were less satisfactory . . . etc. The next time I used direct observation I experimented with . . . the results were . . . etc".

Give past and present examples of your work

Using evidence drawn retrospectively is like art students trying to paint a picture as they would have painted it a year ago. A picture painted then can be compared with one painted now, but that is very different from trying to paint it as if you had painted it previously.

Evidence of competence for a portfolio has to be gathered at the same time as you are teaching a student social worker in an agency or working with a client or group. In fact, the more the evidence for the portfolio can be part of the work itself, the less difficult it is to compile.

"Portfolios are not about doing things differently for the post qualifying award," said a reader of practice teaching portfolios. "It is the type of things you should have been doing anyway."

A number of 'snapshots' of your practice abilities at different times should be presented to the reader, so collect material as you are working, rather than trying to gather it afterwards. This requires good planning, foresight and some luck but will reduce the burden of preparing your portfolio.

Include your working notes

Include a few typical examples of the kinds of notes you have made to illustrate and support your practice; e.g. notes you took after a couple of practice tutorials with a student, sessions with a group, interviews with an offender, etc. Explain what use you make of these kinds of notes and how they support your practice or your practice teaching.

Show your contribution to collaborative work

Post qualifying awards are offered as an individual award, so readers of portfolios need to be clear about materials developed in collaboration with others. Describe briefly how this worked and your specific contribution. Materials can be borrowed so long as you acknowledge their source, and evaluate what use you have made of them.

Give other people's perspectives

Other people's perspectives provide another valuable source of evidence to present to the reader. How do people who come most closely into contact with your practice view it, e.g. a service user, colleague from a different agency, or a student on placement with you, etc.?

Example from a group work portfolio

"...as part of the process of running groups in our day centre we always invite users to evaluate them afterwards. This has been very successful. When I conducted the most recent group I collated the evaluation forms and these indicated the following points about my practice . . . etc."

Respect confidentiality

Your portfolio should respect the confidentiality of others by anonymising references to, for example, the names of clients, carers, colleagues or students. Make clear to reader in the introduction that this has been done.

Include a section on anti-discriminatory practice

The post qualifying programme will expect you to include a specific section on anti-discriminatory practice, power and oppression in the portfolio. Also, you will be expected to show understanding of the nature and theories of racism and discrimination as manifested both personally and institutionally in the delivery of services and to demonstrate ability to reflect critically on your own practice and development in this area. You must also make sure that power and oppression is a theme which runs throughout.

Some programmes require portfolios to address at least two forms of oppression. The ones you intend to address can be stated in the introduction together with your approach as a theme running through all of the portfolio and separate paragraphs/sections or a combination of different styles of presentation.

Do not confine yourself to one dimension of discrimination. One way of doing this is to consider issues of power and oppression in terms of your relationship with your clients, organization and other agencies. If preparing a practice teaching portfolio make sure this includes your power in relation to the student.

Give evidence of your own learning, including mistakes

The portfolio is not just an opportunity to demonstrate competence in practice, but to show how you have learned from these experiences. You should include examples where things did not go well and how 'mistakes' helped you to learn about your practice. This demonstrates an interest in your own professional development.

One reader of portfolios remarked, "There's nothing wrong in making mistakes." Another reader said, "You should write down what happened, not what you think you want somebody to read."

Example from a mental health portfolio:

"In working with Celia after her psychotic episode, I attempted to gain her confidence by the following . . . but it did not work as I had planned because . . . After our second discussion she told me that . . . and I changed my approach to . . . This seemed more acceptable to Celia, as indicated when she . . ."

Show knowledge of theory and practice

A portfolio is a demonstration of your practical abilities (as a practice teacher, etc.), not a series of essays stitched together. However, it should not be divorced from theory. You do need to show a knowledge of the relevant literature and the way in which this informs what you do.

Example from a social work methods portfolio:

"In using the problem exploration stage of the model, I drew upon my understanding of the following aspects of theories of learning.... and this is how they influenced the work I did with this particular family at this stage in the method...."

At the post-professional level, readers will be expecting you to refer to some published literature and theoretical material in your portfolio. This is easier if you include a bibliography at the end of your portfolio - check with your programme or mentor to see if there are any suggested or required ways of laying out a bibliography.

Show ability in self-evaluation, the key theme

Readers of portfolios consistently emphasize as the key theme the need for students to demonstrate an ability for self-evaluation. "The ability to move from description to evaluation is critical," said one reader. In assessing portfolios, readers are not only looking for the ability to do a particular task, but also for the candidate to demonstrate that they understand the basis for action, and that the candidate is able to evaluate their own practice.

The following examples of two kinds of portfolio look at the kinds of questions you should be asking yourself, and providing some answers to in your portfolio:

Example A (from a child care portfolio)

What exactly did I do in this particular instance to help the child and its family?
How did I find out whether this did help the child and its family?
What impact did I have on the child and family?
What did I do which did not help the child and family?
What have I learned from what did not help the child and family?
Why did I use this particular method to help the child and family?
How have I responded to the individual needs of this child and family?
How did this piece of practice relate to my understanding of theories of child care and child protection, and agency policy and procedure?

Example B (from a practice teaching portfolio)

<p>What exactly did I do in this particular instance to help the student's learning?</p> <p>How did I find out whether this did help the student?</p> <p>What impact did it have on the student's practice?</p> <p>What did I do which did not help the student's learning?</p> <p>What have I learned from what did not help the student's learning?</p> <p>Why did I use this particular method to help the student's learning?</p> <p>How have I responded to the individual learning style of this particular student?</p> <p>How did this piece of practice teaching relate to my understanding of theories of practice learning?</p>
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The ability to raise these kinds of questions in your portfolio will show your development as a reflective practitioner, manager or practice teacher.

Readers said that this was one of the most important aspects of a good portfolio.

4 The stages in preparing a portfolio

Most readers found that most students lacked experience in compiling portfolios. This form of assessment was unfamiliar and could feel alien. The act of compiling a portfolio is a skill in itself which needs to be learned. Building upon the experience of people who have compiled successful portfolios can help to overcome inexperience. It is therefore useful to have an understanding, in advance, of the kinds of processes or stages that are involved in preparing a portfolio. Below are ways of going about this task which help towards the successful completion of a portfolio.

Gathering, sorting, sampling, editing

Compiling a portfolio can be broken down into a number of overlapping stages, but which follow the following sequence:

Gathering materials

'Materials' is a broad term to describe anything which could be included in your portfolio. So, they include:

- descriptions of what you have done
- evaluative reflections on these
- particular exercises and activities you have used or experienced
- audio and video-tapes of your work
- other people's reports concerning your work
- charts, graphics, notes, etc.

Not everything will be included in the final, edited portfolio, but you need to gather enough to be able to make a suitable selection.

Sorting

While gathering materials, you will be sifting and sorting them into rough categories. It helps to keep a file divided into the various sections suggested by the programme's guidelines. At this stage you are making some preliminary choices, rather than making any final decisions about what to use or where you will use it.

Sampling

Sampling is the ability to select those pieces of evidence that are best able to demonstrate your competence in a given area. You can't keep everything that might be relevant, so you will even be sampling as you gather material. However, once your file begins to get fat with materials, you will need to make some very conscious decisions about sampling. As you begin to identify points and themes which are duplicated, you will need to start to select specific examples which best illustrate the particular points you want to make.

Editing

Sampling leads to final editing. When you have got more material than you need and you have already begun to 'thin' it by sampling, you need to make last decisions about what to include and where to put it. It helps to have somebody else read through your final version with a fresh eye, to check that it is comprehensive, yet not repetitive.

Following the process described above means the job of compiling your portfolio is spread over a period of time and that is as immediate as possible.

Finally, when you have assembled your portfolio, look carefully for:

- duplication of materials, ideas or evidence;
- sections that are too expansive and give too much detail about one aspect of your abilities;
- aspects that are not well explained and perhaps need to be expanded.

Variety of Modes and Sources of Evidence

As in the case of an artist who uses different media (oil, water colour) and styles (expressionist, portrait) to give the viewer a broad picture, a variety of samples is likely to be more successful in helping to convey the broad picture of your work. A portfolio which does not rely solely on written pieces, but also includes graphics, charts, questionnaires, audio work, mentors' reports and video work, is likely to convey a more rounded picture.

In addition to these modes of evidence, draw on a variety of sources for your evidence; don't just rely on your own observations.

At an early stage in the preparation of your portfolio identify different types of material and ask yourself if the range of different types is broad enough. How might you present different materials that give evidence of your abilities?

Deadlines

You may be given deadlines for completing each section of your portfolio. If not create your own so that your progress can be marked at each stage avoiding work falling on you at one time.

A Coherent 'Whole'

A good portfolio, readers said, showed no evidence in the final product of the piecemeal process of assembly. Paradoxically, the outcome of a careful, step-by-step process of collecting materials is likely to be a good portfolio which does not look 'step-by-step'. Final editing process is important in achieving this sense of coherence (see para above on editing).

Individual circumstances

You need to think about your own circumstances. What kind of gap is there between your opportunities for learning, practising, and gathering evidence? With a management portfolio, for example, you may have training inputs, be managing a team and compiling a portfolio all at the same time. How does this timing and the submission date for your portfolio affect these various processes?

Feedback

What kind of feedback can you expect from the programme about your portfolio, especially where further work is required? The requirements will let you know whether the portfolio can be referred in specific sections and how many times you are able to re-work it. Programmes for their part should develop clear, detailed systems for giving feedback to the authors of portfolios.

5 Support for Compilers

Post qualifying programmes and agencies can provide a number of resources which help individuals to compile their portfolios. A range of factors, relating to programmes, agencies, and your own motivation may influence your ability to produce a good portfolio. Some of the most important are identified below.

Support from the Programme

A Mentor

Many post qualifying programmes offer the services of a mentor (sometimes called a tutor) to help interpret the requirements of the programme and meet them in your portfolio. Readers considered formal and informal support from mentors to be a significant factor in completing a 'good' portfolio. You should therefore ask how much advice you can expect before submitting your final portfolio. In particular, will it be reviewed in a draft form?

Some people completing portfolios have suggested that the role of the mentor may not be clear enough. Certainly, the role and function can vary greatly from one programme to another. To clarify relations with your mentor, ask for a written agreement, which might specify: frequency of meetings; how much advice the mentor is able to provide, and - most important - details about the mentor's role, if any, in examining your portfolio.

Provision of Clear Guidelines

Readers thought that clear regulations and guidelines spelling out the expectations of a portfolio are essential. These help to prevent a programme from 'moving the goal posts' and prevent your understanding of the purpose and expectations of the portfolio from being at odds with the programmes. Of course, guidelines are only useful if you read them carefully before enrolling on a programme.

Do the guidelines spell out how you will make a link between the evidence you provide in the portfolio and the required competences for any Award, (e.g. those required by CCETSW for the post qualifying award), or are you responsible for making these connections?

Using the Guidelines

If the programme provides detailed guidelines, it pays to read them, and to follow them. This may seem obvious, but readers mentioned portfolios where there was no evidence that the guidelines had been read. A good portfolio showed evidence that the author of the portfolio had made good use of the guidelines. If you do deviate from the guidelines, let the reader know that this is your decision and give good reasons why.

Training and Access to Exemplars

Some programmes provide training on how to compile a portfolio. This reinforces written guidance and might give you access to examples of portfolios which are considered to be of high quality (exemplars), so you can see for yourself what the programme considers to be a good portfolio.

Read the guidelines before you start to prepare your portfolio and consult them regularly. If there are aspects of the guidelines that you don't understand consult your mentor.

Agency support

Your agency's support is critical, particularly in providing time, administrative and senior management support and support for mentors:

Time

How does the agency free you to be able to compile and complete your portfolio, and is there an explicit or an implicit policy about this? If a specific amount of time is made available, what happens to the other work which does not get done in this time?

Administrative support

Most post qualifying programmes will expect the written parts of a portfolio to be typed rather than hand-written. It follows that the availability of secretarial and clerical support influences the quality of a portfolio, so what kind of priority will typing your portfolio carry if resources are scarce? Even when you have eased this pressure by compiling your portfolio over time, the final editing always requires substantial time for typing. The word processor has raised expectations about the standard of presentation and, as one reader noted, "those with their own computers have a head start."

If you are relying on someone else to type your portfolio ensure that you leave enough time for revision, editing and typing. It can help to plan these dates in your diary well in advance.

Having senior management 'on board'

It is difficult for senior managers to keep in touch with all practice developments, especially in large agencies, but it is important for the compilation of portfolios - and the activity to which it refers - to have the blessing and understanding of someone at senior management level. Without this anchor, the activity which the portfolio is reflecting (for example, practice teaching) can drift off the agency's map.

How involved is your line manager in helping you with your portfolio?

Support for mentors

Readers also thought that the agency's support for mentors is a significant factor. What kind of training and support does your mentor receive for his or her work?

Personal motivation

No matter how great the support from programmes, mentors and agencies, putting a portfolio together is going to take time and effort. Often it will require real determination. It is important to be aware that a portfolio is a much more personal statement than, for example, a series of essays. People who have completed portfolios have described a mixture of feelings – creativity, vulnerability, challenge and reward – when compiling them. The need for reflection and self-evaluation reinforces this sense of the personal.

Ask yourself:

Why do you want to do the portfolio? It helps you to be aware of your own answer to this question, especially the degree to which your motives are intrinsic or extrinsic. In other words, how interested are you in the compiling of the portfolio for its own sake, or purely as a means to an end? There is no right or wrong motive, but your answers to these questions will help you develop a strategy to keep you on course.

6 Portfolio technology is developing

Post qualifying programmes are learning from their own experiences of using portfolios, and this guide is a reflection of some of that growing understanding.

Many readers spoke of early portfolios which bulged with documentation, made unwieldy by their authors' insecurity about what to include. One reader described them as "Frontier Portfolios". More prescriptive, tightly written guidelines are helping to reduce this insecurity, so that programmes are as one reader said "moving away from a cottage industry to a more professional system of production."

One final question--"Does my portfolio accurately represent my work."

Have you drawn your evidence from different sources?
Have you used a variety of modes (written, taped, graphic, etc.) to demonstrate your work?
Are the samples you have selected specific and typical?
Have you balanced the need for detailed descriptions with the requirement for clear analysis and evaluation?
Do you weave themes of power and oppression throughout the portfolio?
Have you reflected on what you have learned from things that went wrong as well as things that went right?
Is the portfolio clearly signposted for readers to find their way around?
Is there evidence of a theoretical basis for the practical abilities your portfolio demonstrates?

Positive answers to these questions give a clear indication that you have compiled a good portfolio.

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