



# CASE STUDY

Consider Me: Streamlining admissions at the Royal College of Art

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

**STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW  
COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.**

## THE CONTEXT

The Royal College of Art (RCA) provides students with unrivalled opportunities to deliver art and design projects that transform the world. A small, specialist and research-intensive postgraduate university based in the heart of London, the RCA is a high-performing institution, a radical traditionalist in a fast-paced world.

The RCA's approach is founded on the premise that art, design, creative thinking, science, engineering and technology must all collaborate to solve today's global challenges. The RCA employs a cadre of around 1,000 professionals from around the world, spanning professors, researchers, art and design practitioners, advisers and visiting lecturers, to teach and develop students in around 30 academic Programmes.

The RCA began a number of projects to transform student experience, including the introduction of a new Student Information System (SIS) to support the student journey from application to commencement.



**Figure 1.** Student Information System projects

The Portfolio sits within the application stage of the project. As portfolio submissions are a more complex aspect of the process, a specialist product was needed to meet the desired requirements. PebblePad was selected and design and development of the portfolio tool was led by a working group at the College (AWG).

## THE PROBLEM: SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF APPLICATIONS

The initial aims outlined by the AWG required the portfolio tool to:

- Ensure parity across all Programmes.
- Include Programme specific portfolio requirements.
- Allow for a range of file types and sizes to be uploaded.
- Maintain a face-to-face or personal feel.
- Include accessibility at the heart of design.
- Facilitate easy review and recording of results.
- Provide access to a widened group of reviewers.

The RCA wanted to reduce the focus on interviews and increase the focus on assessing the products, projects and outputs of an applicant; interviews were to be used for clarification rather than by default as in previous years. PebblePad was seen as a flexible tool which allowed us to gather this content in a user-friendly way and also allowed us to review and collect the data of application effectively.

As is the nature of art and design, all applicants must submit a portfolio of work for assessment as part of the admissions process. The overarching aim of this new portfolio submission tool was to:

- Provide an excellent accessible user experience for both applicants and academic reviewers.
- Give applicants the best opportunity to succeed.
- Streamline the review and offer process.

## THE APPROACH

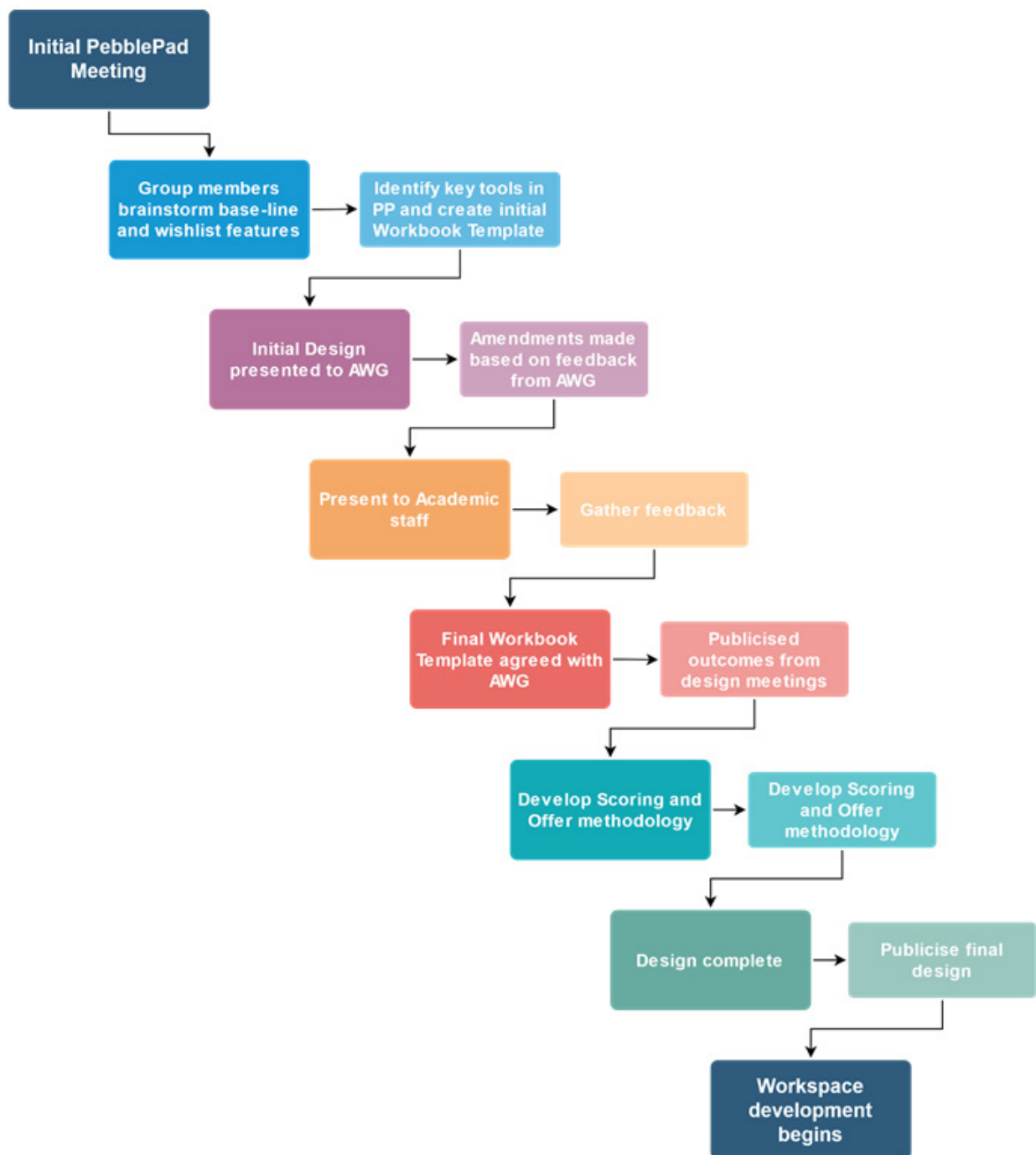
The process from concept to product was completed in multiple stages involving staff from across the College.

### Stage 1: User Accounts

Unit4 Student Management (SIS product) used PebblePad's API to facilitate user account creation and email notification. The integration allocated users to a Group in PebblePad which matched their chosen Programme. This gave automated, immediate and simple access to PebblePad for applicants. It ensured all applicant accounts in SIS matched those in PebblePad, making user matching easy.

### Stage 2: Design Process

The design process began with the AWG and included focus groups with Academics to build a Workbook, which was the applicants' Portfolio, with as many necessary and desired features as possible. The design process involved multiple rounds of template design and feedback.



**Figure 2.** Portfolio design process

After the first templates were built, three focus groups were held with academics to gather feedback and feature requests. Templates were adjusted and presented to the AWG where they were finalised.

We ensured this process was as transparent as possible by publishing all feature requests alongside the actions taken so that academics could better understand the final design features chosen.



### Stage 3: Creating Components

All Workbook templates have 6 pages; 2 instructional and 4 activity based.

All pages were designed with accessibility and easy navigation in mind.

1. *Programme Welcome Page* included a welcome video by the Head of Programme (HoP) with an explanation of what they think makes a portfolio stand out and what they look for in a prospective student.
2. *Instructions Page* which included written and video instructions on how to use PebblePad to complete their submission. This also included basic statements about plagiarism and attribution in group projects.
3. *My Portfolio Page* had 5 spaces for applicants to upload files to meet the written guidelines provided by the HoP. Applicants provided a written title and basic details and then used an Evidence area to upload files providing a description of the project or files.
  - Post-Graduate Research (PGR) Programmes (MRes, MPhil and PhD) used the first space exclusively for the applicant's proposal and the remaining 4 spaces were used as directed by the HoP.
4. *My Motivation Page* was a standardised 300-word written statement for all applicants to complete.
5. *My Journey Page* required the applicant to upload a two-minute video of themselves discussing a topic outlined in written guidance. To ensure this task was accessible to all, the media upload feature was used to allow an applicant to submit a written or audio file if the task was not accessible due to a learning difference. It was clearly stated that the content of the video was assessed and not the quality of the final product to ensure applicants could use the technology available to them. It was felt that this provided a level playing field for all applicants, irrespective of their situation or location.
6. *My Reference Page* required an applicant to provide a reference. If they could not upload a file they were instructed to send it to the admissions team.

### Collection of Programme specific components

Each Programme was able to add in specific components in 3 tabs.

The *Programme Welcome* page required a video specifically for use in the portfolio and had a tight deadline for delivery. Each video needed to be around 90 seconds long and the AWG had to provide clear guidelines about what should be included, such as framed questions, standard shots of student life at the RCA, and School specific shots to gain a better feel for the Programmes. All videos included subtitles and clear audio to ensure they were accessible.

*My Portfolio* and *My Journey* pages required written guidance for applicants to follow which would be Programme specific.

A final PebblePad template provided spaces for HoPs to add their own guidance alongside brief instructions from the AWG on how to give clear and concise guidance.

#### Stage 4: Workbook Templates and Workspaces

The RCA has over 30 Programmes, including some with multiple distinct pathways so we needed 75 Workbooks in all. We customised the PebblePad dashboard so applicants only saw the relevant portfolio when they first logged in.

75 Workspaces were then created, and the appropriate Workbooks were added as a Resource.

Synchronised Groups were used to populate Members in Workspaces. For a Group to be created by the API, a test application had to be submitted; this then automated the process of syncing all real applicants into their particular Group and Workspace.

An open assignment was created with auto-submit and applicants had to use the Mark Page as Complete function (part of the Progress Tracker) to signify their portfolio completion.

#### Scoring and Offer Status

Previous years' scoring against assessment criteria was maintained. We used the Scorecard feature for staff to assess applications against College-wide criteria. This allowed staff to benchmark offers to be made to applicants.

Feedback Comments and Feedback Statements were used to create a standardised Offer Status for Academic reviewers to record their decisions, which was then downloaded and shared with the Registry team for processing.

#### Accounts / access to Academics

Staff accounts were synchronised using LDAP (Active Directory) and then the appropriate academic staff were added on the Managers tab in the Workspaces. Registry staff were added as Moderators on all Workspaces.

The Tutor role was used in multiple ways, ensuring correct permissions were given to academic staff. In most cases the Tutor role was modified and in PGR Programmes Personalised permissions were used to allow for Approvals at Level 1, 2 and 3 to be completed by different members of staff.

Once the process was complete, PebblePad enabled the modified dashboard for all groups and a test was completed for each Workspace to ensure the user journey was seamless and ready for launch.

## THE RESULTS

Applications were opened on the 18/10/2019 and closed on 20/11/2019. In the first few weeks there were more applications on SIS than Active Users in PebblePad, but this later equalised as more users logged in or edited their Workbooks.

Within Round 1 there were:

- Over 4000 active users in PebblePad
- Over 29,700 total logins

24 hours before the deadline for Round 1 we saw over 18,100 total logins, of which over 2,400 were unique and around 1000 users online at one point during the day.

At the end of Round 1 there were:

- Over 3000 completed portfolios ready for review

This is a rise of more than 400% over completed applications for the same period in 2019/20.

## LESSONS LEARNT

To assess the success of the current system setup and processes we gathered feedback from academics and collated a list of common enquiries from applicants. We have built this feedback into the 21/22 application design.

The following are some of the lessons we have learnt and how we plan to tackle them.

### Language

There were issues with the language used in PebblePad, such as 'Evidence' or non-editable phrases on blocks which created confusion for applicants where prior guidance had been given. We aim to work with PebblePad to amend some of the activities and the way they function to develop a more flexible system.

### User Behaviour

Users found uploading files easy, however ordering them in the Evidence section was difficult and it took some time for them to learn how to do this.

Applicants used the guidance in different ways to create unique portfolios, with the 'Your Journey' video displaying the most variation. Some examples included applicants editing their video to run at 1.5 speed, some used most of their video to create a very involved intro and others added animations.



To overcome this the design and guidance will be updated to be as clear and specific as possible.

### Submission

Many applicants showed great concern when finalising their submission due to 'Auto-Submit'. This was originally utilised to reduce applicant intervention needed to submit and to allow them time to amend their submission prior to the deadline. However, numerous enquiries were solely on this issue, so we shall revert to 'Share for Assessment' to avoid this confusion.

### Workspaces and Management

Having a large number of Workspaces was excellent to streamline user experience for applicants as they only saw Workbooks that they needed to complete. The same was true for academic reviewers where being able to see only the Workspaces they should interact with meant there were fewer clicks to complete tasks. However, for data processing this was less than ideal due to the time-consuming nature of working across so many Workspaces.

### Academic decision making

The first issue we faced was that all assets added to Evidence areas opened in new tabs on each occasion, which led to a very large number of tabs being open and the inability to easily navigate back to the main Workbook page. Downloading the entire submission was one way around this, however a number of factors made this an incompatible solution; some Workbooks held very large files which took a long while to download and some Workspaces neared 300 submissions. Alongside this, when new tabs were opened the page did not display the name of the applicant, so it was difficult to track who the evidence related to.

To indicate their final decision staff had to choose a Feedback Statement. However, without an area to leave notes for second reviewers, some staff used Feedback Comments which meant that some applications had no viable offer when we downloaded the decision. Feedback Comments were also made against single files rather than the Workbook, which meant this was not collected on download. Additional guidelines were put in place to ensure the final Feedback Comment was a viable Offer Status for Registry to process. The further refined process must be accompanied by additional training for all academic reviewers.

### Data Processing and Reporting

Due to the number of applications to review, a weekly download of the offers/results was required to manage the processing workload for the Registry team. Academic reviewers modified offers after moderating decisions, so having clear tracking of all decision changes was required. The Feedback report had to be run on each Workspace once a week and the results managed and tracked against each week.

This work took a full day to download and merge into a tracking sheet for the Registry team to action. We are hoping that ATLAS 2.0 will allow for an API to create a link between the two systems to negate this manual process.

Academic reviewers found it difficult to review Feedback Comments and Scorecard results as no report displayed both of these side by side, and the Submissions page does not highlight the most recent Feedback Comment made. We are working with PebblePad to discover ways we can make this possible, as well as reporting across Workspaces to increase the ease of access to results.

Overall the system was user-friendly for applicants to complete the tasks required of the new portfolio submission, with the main drawback being limited reporting features.

## IN BRIEF

- Consulting with staff is key to building effective templates for portfolios. Be transparent with what the system is and isn't capable of and provide clear answers/updates to the process and changes.
- Flexibility in design is needed for portfolios for various Programmes in specific subject areas.
- Provide active help on the system and make it intuitive by design; manuals and guidelines are seldom read.
- Portfolio management and data processing needs to be well planned and mapped with SIS processes.



# AN EXPERT TEAM

YOU CAN DEPEND ON

## GET IN TOUCH

There are an awful lot of things that make PebblePad unique. Not least the fact that it's a platform designed by educators for educators. Indeed, the PebblePad team is bursting to the seams with innovators and practitioners, all of whom learnt their craft in teaching roles. If you want to talk to a team who really understands your world, get in touch.

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