Portflow

The Student-Owned Learning & Assessment Portfolio

Pioneering portfolio-based assessment

How the Criminology team at Edith Cowan University rethinks assessment in the age of generative AI with Portflow



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ECU EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

1. Summary

Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia is rethinking how students learn and demonstrate their skills, as part of a university-wide curriculum transformation towards holistic, programmatic learning. The Criminology team in the School of Arts and Humanities was one of the first to put this into practice, using Portflow to introduce portfolio-based learning and assessment across all three undergraduate year levels. Some of their key takeaways:

1

Process over product

Portflow lets students document how their work came about, through drafts, notes, mind maps, and voice recordings. That gave lecturers more confidence in what students had actually learned, at a time when generative AI makes polished final work easy to produce.

2

Insight into engagement

Lecturers could clearly see throughout the semester which students engaged consistently. Students who only prepared last-minute stood out with “very, very thin” portfolios.

3

Evidence linked to program learning outcomes

Goals and subgoals in Portflow connected weekly classroom work to the skills in the program’s learning outcomes. Students selected their strongest eight of twelve pieces and explained what each one showed.

4

A basis for conversation

In oral assessments, students discussed their portfolio submissions and showed a clearer understanding compared to some of their written pieces.

5

Stronger participation

In the units that conducted a pilot with Portflow, classroom participation was stronger, and very few students dropped out.

2. Meet ECU and the Criminology team

Edith Cowan University (ECU) has eight schools offering around 260 courses, serving more than 31,000 students across three campuses around Perth. Within the School of Arts and Humanities, Criminology teaching focuses on social justice and the wider impact of crime and justice on society.

The program is small: five permanent lecturers during the pilot year, and around 30 new students starting the Bachelor of Criminology and Justice. Its reach is much wider though, because students from psychology, law, counterterrorism, and security also take Criminology units. One first-year unit alone had 179 students.

Two lecturers share their experience in this case study. **Dr Jamal Barnes**, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Justice, teaches global Criminology and international human rights. During the pilot, he worked with third-year students, some of them close to graduation.

Dr Piero Moraro, Lecturer in Criminology and undergraduate course coordinator, oversees the undergraduate program, including students' unit choices and progression. He was closely involved in restructuring the program and taught first- and second-year units, including introductory Criminology and a unit on prisons and their alternatives. Between them, their units covered all three undergraduate year levels.

Lecturers



Dr Jamal Barnes

Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Justice, teaches global Criminology and international human rights



Dr Piero Moraro

Lecturer in Criminology and undergraduate course coordinator, oversees the undergraduate program, including students' unit choices and progression



3. **The challenge:** polished (AI-)work that students could not explain

The rise of generative AI made a long-standing question urgent. Lecturers were seeing polished written work that students could not adequately explain. If a finished essay no longer showed what a student understood, how could assessment give lecturers confidence that students were learning?

The question went beyond AI. ECU wanted to treat learning as an ongoing process rather than a series of separate assessment tasks, connect learning across a whole degree and give students more opportunities to explain what they had learned, how they had developed and why that mattered.

ECU found an answer in the concept of holistic, programmatic learning. Instead of judging students on separate final products, lecturers look at evidence that builds up over time: drafts, finished work, reflections, and feedback, linked to the course learning outcomes. Learner agency and feedback literacy are central, and a portfolio is treated as a space to develop and experiment, not only a display of finished work.

To operationalise that ambition, ECU sought a tool that could serve as a place to collect that evidence and to provide insight into the learning process.



4. The solution: making the learning process visible with Portflow

Portflow, the student-owned learning and assessment portfolio, supports exactly that approach. Students collect evidence of their learning, link it to goals, and make their development visible over a semester and, eventually, a whole degree.

What makes Portflow an essential solution for ECU

Without Portflow, ECU and the Criminology team would not have been able to make progress in the following five areas:

1. **The process becomes evidence.**
Students can add many types of evidence, from written drafts and mind maps to photographs of group work and voice recordings. That turns the learning process itself into something lecturers can review, not only the finished product.

2. **Evidence is linked to learning outcomes.**
With goals and subgoals, students connect each piece of evidence to a skill drawn from the course learning outcomes and explain how it demonstrates that skill. That is the basis for holistic judgements: evidence from different activities, brought together around the same outcomes.

3. **Students own their portfolio.**
Students organise their evidence in collections, choose which pieces best show their learning and present the portfolio in their own way. This builds the learner agency at the centre of ECU's transformation.

4. **Development is visible over time.**
Because evidence builds up across the semester, lecturers can compare earlier and later work and see how a student's understanding grows. The same portfolio can continue across units, towards one portfolio for a whole degree.

5. **The portfolio fits into existing teaching.**
Portflow works alongside the LMS, so marking could stay in Canvas, and lecturers could start with a basic setup and add structure as they went.



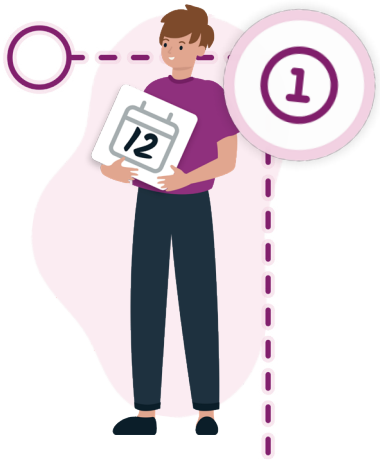
"Portflow is playing a crucial part in ECU's Curriculum Transformation Program: a university-wide transition towards holistic, programmatic learning that will enhance learner agency and feedback literacy."

Professor Katrina Strampel, Director, Centre for Learning and Teaching

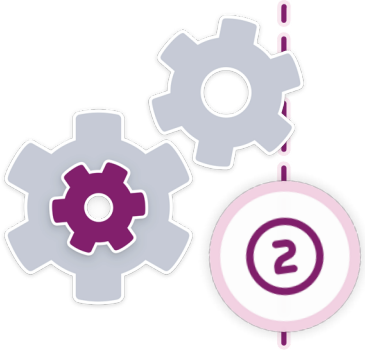
5. The implementation: careful preparation, then starting simple

When ECU began exploring portfolio-based learning, the Criminology team was already reviewing its curriculum and restructuring its units. That made the program a logical place to start. It allowed the team to build portfolios into the redesigned units from the get-go. The implementation followed a clear order: curriculum first, then a simple setup in Portflow, then weekly teaching practice.

Curriculum first: twelve months of preparation



Introducing a new platform was the smaller part of the change. In the twelve months before the pilot, the team worked with ECU's teaching and learning colleagues to revise the course learning outcomes and decide how portfolios and other assessment methods could help students demonstrate skills such as writing, digital literacy, and interpersonal communication. The school made this possible by giving lecturers time away from teaching to develop their units. Those skills later returned in Portflow as the goals students linked their evidence to.

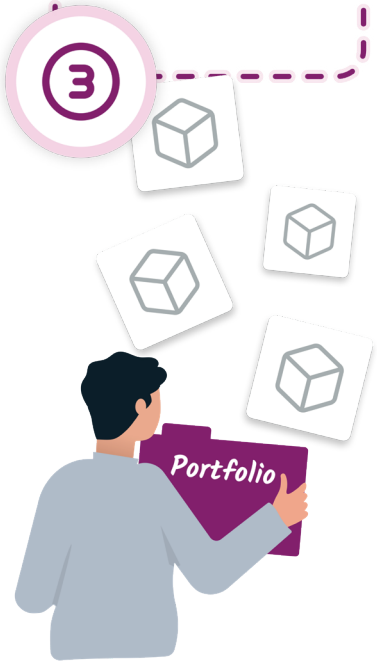


A simple setup in Portflow

With the learning outcomes defined, both lecturers kept their first setup in Portflow focused. Jamal used document uploads, goals, subgoals, scaffolding, and collections to help students curate their evidence, while marking took place in Canvas LMS. Piero began with a more basic setup while he got to know the platform himself.

Weekly activities as evidence

The portfolios took shape in weekly classes. In Piero's first-year unit, each class produced an artefact. Working in small groups of up to four students, they completed in-class activities leading to the production of artefacts they could then use as evidence of learning. They uploaded these artefacts to Portflow and, at the end of the semester, selected their strongest eight submissions out of twelve. To make room for these activities, students watched pre-recorded lecture sections before class, so classroom time could go to applying and discussing what they had learned.



Collecting evidence was only half the task. Students also had to explain how each piece demonstrated a particular skill. A photograph of a group activity, for example, needed an explanation of what the student had contributed or learned and why it mattered. This reflective step was challenging at first, for students and for lecturers defining their expectations. Clearer guidance and concrete examples from ECU's educational designers made it easier to manage.



A conversation about the evidence

In one of Piero's units, students also had to explain their evidence out loud. The portfolio came with a 'viva' (short for 'viva voce', or 'live discussion'): a 15-minute oral assessment in which students discussed three portfolio submissions with their lecturer or teaching assistant. They were asked to explain which topic the artefact referred to and what the artefact was about (e.g., a worksheet completed in class). Subsequently, students had to provide details on how they completed the artefact, which concepts they employed and what challenge(s) they faced with their group in completing the activity. Crucially, they also had to explain how each submission demonstrated a skill identified in Portflow. They also reflected on how those skills could be relevant to their future careers.

Helping students adapt

For students, the bigger adjustment was the new type of assessment. First-year students met portfolio assessment, goals and scaffolding as part of their introduction to university. Some third-year students were used to submitting polished work and needed reassurance that rough drafts and notes counted as valuable evidence. Jamal spent time in workshops explaining the assessment and its purpose. Once students understood what was expected, using Portflow itself was straightforward.





"It was really only pressing a few buttons, and once I showed students how to do it, how to upload documents, how to allocate subgoals into collections, it was a pretty straightforward process. I didn't encounter any major issues from myself or from students in terms of using Portflow."

Jamal Barnes

Their advice to other lecturers follows from this experience: explain the purpose clearly, give concrete examples of what students should submit and why, and keep the first setup simple. "Don't try to make this too complicated the first time you use it," says Jamal.

6. The results: more insight into engagement and understanding

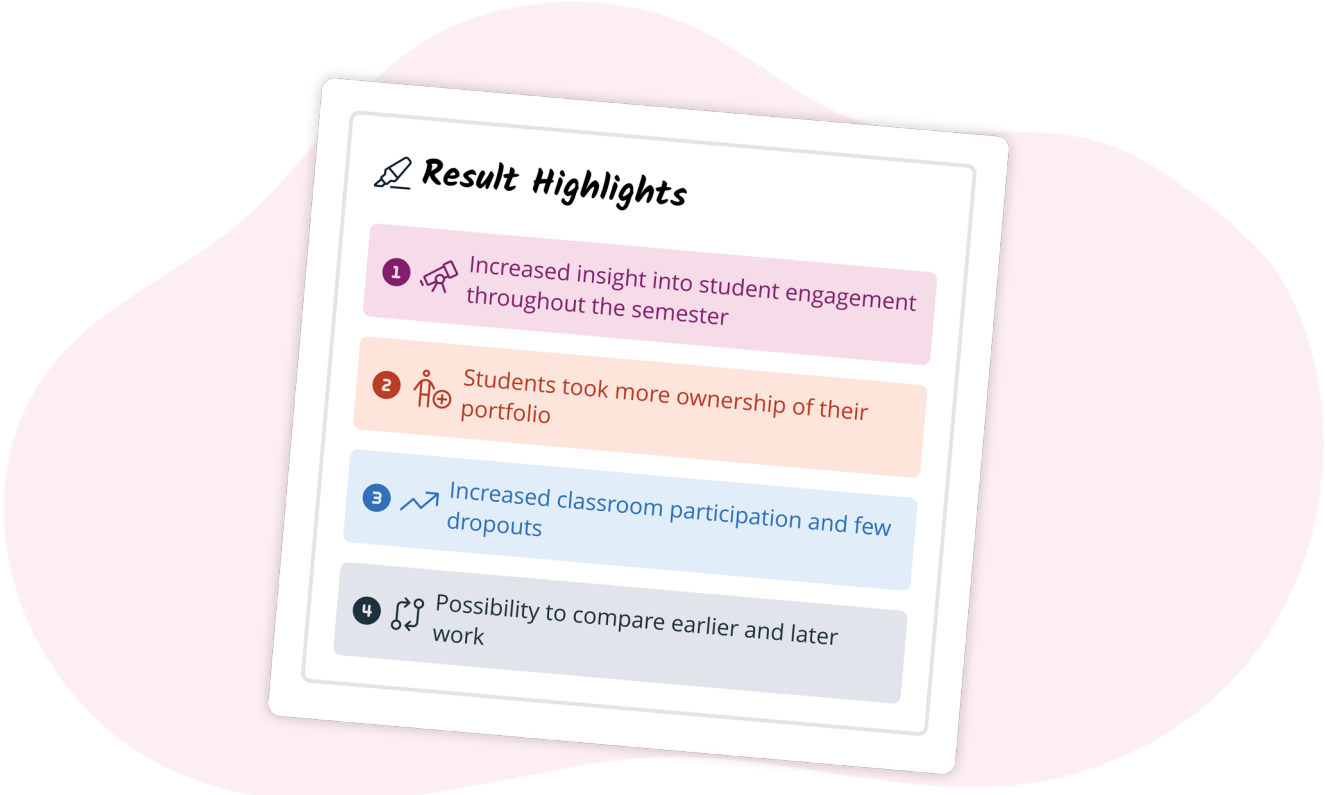
The clearest gain was visibility into how students engaged throughout the semester. By reviewing drafts and notes collected over several weeks, Jamal could tell students who worked consistently from those who focused mainly on the final assessments.



> "I could tell the difference between those portfolios and those other students that tried to get through the units by only doing the assessments because their portfolios were very, very thin."
>
> **Jamal Barnes**

Portflow also made it possible to compare earlier and later work. Lecturers could look for development in the evidence itself and in the student's ability to explain it, rather than judging only a final submission. Piero found that the portfolios showed the effort students put into their work and how their thinking developed.

In Piero's units, classroom participation was stronger, and very few students dropped out. First-year students became more receptive to the weekly activities once they understood what was expected of them. For Piero, that is the result that counts most: "If we keep our students engaged and coming to class until the end, that to me is usually a sign that I've done the right thing."



The vivas gave students practice in reflecting, explaining a position, and answering questions on the spot, and some students showed their understanding more clearly in conversation than in writing. Students also took ownership of their portfolios: they chose which evidence best demonstrated their learning, and some first-year students put considerable effort into personalising their cover pages and introducing themselves. Both Piero's and Jamal's units had a completion rate of over 90%.

These are observations from Criminology's first pilot year rather than measured university-wide outcomes, and they reflect the combination of curriculum redesign, classroom activities, portfolios and, in some units, oral assessment. Within that approach, Portflow is where the evidence is collected and organised.

> "Portflow made curating assessments easy, having all my information in one place streamlined this process and gave me the ability to be creative in how I presented my work."
>
> **Anonymous student from Jamal's class**



> "Weekly activities through Portflow, provided through the Tutorials, supported consistent engagement with the course content throughout the semester."
>
> **Anonymous student from Piero's class**

AI-resilient assessment: Looking beyond the final submission

For Criminology, this approach also offered a powerful answer to the AI question. For Jamal, it meant looking more closely at the process behind a submission. Rather than relying only on a finished essay or presentation, students uploaded evidence of their learning process to Portflow, including drafts, notes, mind maps and voice recordings. Secondly, Portflow makes the iterative process visible by supporting multiple versions of evidence while retaining visibility of feedback on each version. This gave lecturers greater visibility into how students engaged with the content and developed their understanding during the semester.

The team is careful about describing this as 'AI-resilient'. Students can still use AI, and the technology continues to develop. Whatever is 'resilient' now might not be in the future. "It's about how students use AI," Jamal explains. "So, it's about how students use it as a tool in an ethical way to engage in their studies."

In units where portfolios were combined with oral assessments, lecturers could also ask students to explain the evidence they had collected and the decisions behind their work. If a student relies entirely on AI to generate a portfolio, explaining that work in depth becomes difficult, if not impossible. The portfolio provides material for that conversation, while the lecturer's questions help establish the student's understanding.



7. The future: portfolios across the whole degree

With the pilot complete, Criminology and the wider university are extending their use of Portflow. The Criminology team has shared its experience with colleagues in the School of Arts and Humanities, including how it organised portfolios, which Portflow features it used and how the vivas worked. ECU's teaching and learning leadership is drawing on the same lessons in its work with other disciplines, including psychology and counselling.

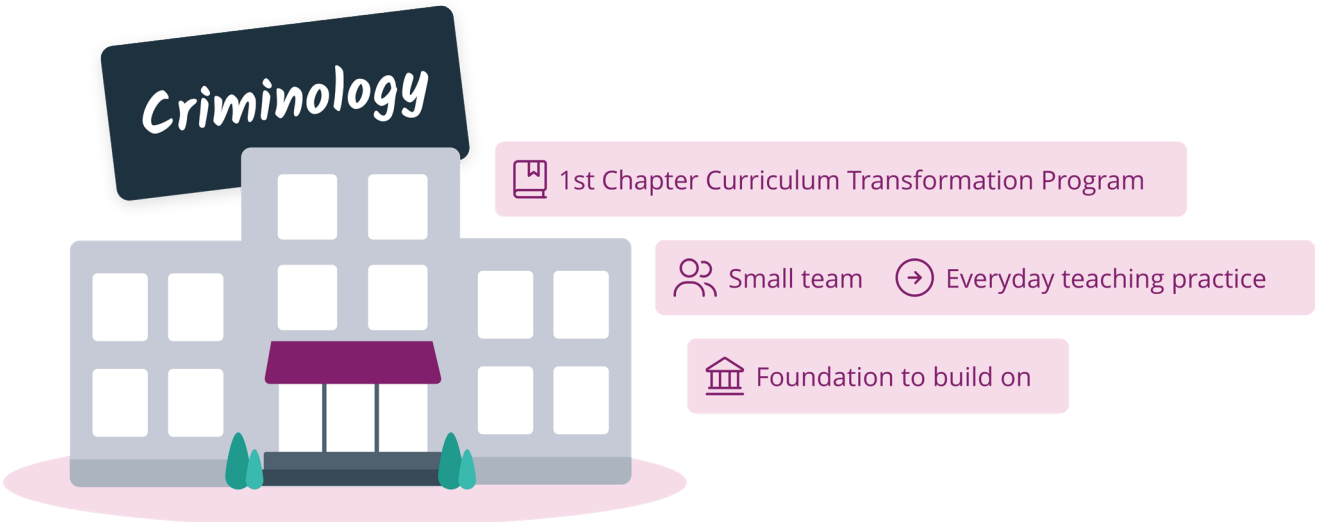
Piero and Jamal want to link portfolio evidence more systematically to course learning outcomes and capabilities, and to use portfolios and oral assessments more widely. The longer-term goal is to have one portfolio that grows throughout a degree, connecting learning experiences across units instead of separate portfolios for individual assessments.

For Jamal, success means students who can explain their own development:



> "The ability to explain what they've uploaded and how that has contributed to their learning. That includes being open to feedback. Also recognising if someone points out a weakness in their argument, they recognise that, and they're able to address it."
>
> **Jamal Barnes**

Practising these conversations throughout a degree also prepares students for professional situations and job interviews. Criminology's experience is one of the first chapters in ECU's wider story of its Curriculum Transformation Program. It shows how a small teaching team turned a university-level ambition into everyday teaching practice, and it gives other disciplines a foundation to build on.



In this case study, you've read how ECU has empowered students to take control of their own development with the help of Portflow.

Curious about how Portflow can also enable programmatic assessment and development-oriented education within your institution? Visit our website at **drieam.com/portflow.** Learn more about Portflow, explore all its features, and schedule a free, no-obligation demonstration with one of our product experts. We'd love to help you explore what's possible!



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