

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This final report discusses the research undertaken with the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP) to build on the initial examination of the use of ePortfolios in Australian higher education, in order to determine how the emergent community of ePortfolio researchers and practitioners might be further advanced. The report documents Stage Two of the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP2), to specifically explore the current scope of national and international ePortfolio communities in order to identify the factors that have contributed to their success and sustainability.

The principal aims of the project have been to establish, facilitate and encourage an Australian Community of Practice (CoP) for those engaged in ePortfolio practice in Australian universities and to introduce a regular Australasian conference to provide a forum in which to explore and discuss ePortfolio research and practice. The project has been funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and, as such, has required an explicit focus on the needs of the higher education sector. Nevertheless, the project has continued the momentum achieved through Stage One of the Australian ePortfolio Project, which had highlighted that there was a strong interest in the adoption of ePortfolios both across and between institutions and education sectors. The AeP2 project has enabled the development and consolidation of embryonic relationships between the tertiary and the vocational education and training (VET) sectors, as well as relationships between the various disciplines and professions.

1.2 Background

The final report from the Australian ePortfolio Project, released in October 2008 (Hallam, Harper, McCowan, Hauville, McAllister, & Creagh, 2008), outlined the broad range of issues and challenges, as well as the significant opportunities, that faced the higher education sector in terms of ePortfolio practice. This underscored the need at one level to establish an environment to support policy development not only within and across institutions, but also in the education and employment sectors, and at another level to ensure that those individuals who were interested in ePortfolio learning could engage in effective practice. The AeP final report argued that it was important for the different stakeholders — learners, teaching staff, IT and teaching and learning support staff, academic managers, professional bodies and employers — to have a broad understanding of the benefits and value that ePortfolios could bring to learning, teaching and career development processes, so there was scope for an ePortfolio culture to become an integral aspect of the academic environment. These different stakeholders needed to be conscious of the potential of ePortfolios, which, when integrated into current and future eLearning strategies, could contribute to student-centred learning, transparent learning outcomes and the relevant employability skills for graduates.

The AeP report also noted, however, that while the research findings had revealed a strong interest in the exploratory use of ePortfolios by university students, there was, in fact, little cohesion within individual institutions. Academic staff expressed their desire to escape from their sense of isolation and to work more collaboratively across disciplines and across institutions to further their own knowledge and understanding. It was felt that there was scope to develop a community of practice that could provide opportunities for communication between educators with shared interests and ideas, and could encourage scholarship and research.

At the end of 2008, the AeP project team was granted further funding by the ALTC to address the idea of an ePortfolio community of practice for the higher education sector. The principal objectives of the AeP2 project were to:

- Establish, facilitate and encourage an Australian community of practice (CoP) for ePortfolio researchers and practitioners.
- Introduce a regular Australasian conference to provide a forum in which to explore and discuss ePortfolio research and practice.

1.3 Scope of the study

Interest in the concept of communities of practice has been growing in the education sectors in recent years, drawing on the theories of Lave and Wenger (1991), which proposed that learning is 'situated', and thus linked to the processes of participation in communities of practice, which may gradually increase in the degree of engagement and complexity. In Stage One of the AeP project, it was found that 'compared with the diverse examples of ePortfolio communities that have been established [internationally] ... Australia has as yet seen very little activity' (Hallam et al., 2008, p. 128). At that time, activities were limited to a small number of mainly university-based ePortfolio symposia, forums and workshops; the establishment of a discussion group within the Education Network Australia (edna) online network; and activities in a range disciplinary communities within the ALTC Exchange. Anecdotal evidence gathered during the initial AeP project had indicated that there was considerable interest in both face-to-face and virtual forums for collaboration, but it was felt that, to date, little was directly known about the key factors of communities that might be suitable for an Australian academic context.

The AeP2 project was therefore established as an applied research project, charged with the responsibility to build on the strong interest in ePortfolios raised during 2008 and to introduce some community activities to continue the dialogue about ePortfolio research and practice in Australian education. The project extended from December 2008 to July 2009, with the principal tasks being to:

- Critically review the academic literature that discusses and analyses current community of practice activities.
- Survey the delegates to identify the key issues associated with their perspectives of communities of practice.
- Conduct interviews with the facilitators and active members of ePortfolio communities of practice internationally to identify the main principles of good practice.
- Develop a forum within the ALTC Exchange to support an ePortfolio community of practice as a virtual community group.
- Host the AeP2 symposium (9–10 February 2009) as a face-to-face forum for stimulating interest in and engagement with an evolving community of practice.

Accordingly, the project team was able to maintain the significant national and international profile gained during the initial AeP project and disseminate information about ePortfolio practice to a broader audience.

1.4 Structure of the report

This report discusses the research activities that represent the different components of the AeP2 project. Chapter 2 contextualises the project through a review of the literature to consider the academic writings on communities of practice in general and ePortfolio communities of practice in particular. The inclusion of a conjectural overview on CoPs has been necessary to assist in relating theoretical perspectives to the research findings. Specific attention is paid to the concept of the community lifecycle, which helped the project team better understand the different phases of community activities. Five main themes were considered in the literature review:

1. Aims and objectives of CoPs
2. Typical – or indeed unique – characteristics
3. Critical success factors for flourishing communities
4. Challenges faced by CoPs
5. Issues impacting on community sustainability.

These five themes were utilised to provide the focus and the structure for the AeP2 research activities.

The research methodologies are reviewed in Chapter 3 to consider the approaches used for data collection, including a survey, semi-structured interviews and case studies. The body of the report then presents an analysis of the different stages of the research project.

Chapter 4 provides a review of the diverse community activities undertaken under the auspices of the AeP2 project: the development of the AeP2 Toolkit with the series of six concept guides (see Appendix 1) for ePortfolio stakeholders, the AeP2 ePortfolio Symposium, the AeP2 ePortfolio Showcase, the AeP2 Technical Issues and Opportunities meeting, the industry study referred to as the ALIA/AeP2 LIS ePortfolio Pilot Study, and the embryonic ePortfolio Practice Group within the ALTC Exchange. The AeP2 project therefore reached out to a wide range of stakeholders to stimulate discussion on the pedagogical aspects of ePortfolios, the issues of technical standards and interoperability, the features and functionality of the various ePortfolio software platforms, and the use of ePortfolios in professional education and career development. These activities brought interested parties together in both face-to-face and virtual contexts.

Chapter 5 has a local perspective, presenting the findings from the survey of the broader AeP community, to identify the respective understandings about an ePortfolio community, the level of current or anticipated engagement with CoPs and the general needs, wants and expectations for an online ePortfolio community as a forum within the Australian higher education sector. These topics are then broadened in Chapter 6, which provides the synthesised findings from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with the managers and/or facilitators of existing ePortfolio CoPs (based in Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA)) using the five key themes examined in the literature review and the concept of the CoP lifecycle to guide the discussions. Each individual community of practice is subsequently profiled in a series of case studies that are incorporated into Chapters 5 and 6.

1.5 Summary

This introduction has presented the context for the AeP2 project by giving an overview of the aims of the project, the scope of the research and the structure of the report that discusses the findings. Importantly, the project has built on and widened the interest in the initial project, which provided a range of stakeholders with a detailed examination of the issues and challenges associated with the use of ePortfolios by university students in Australia. Two of the ten recommendations presented in the Stage One report highlighted the need to consider strategies that might establish greater cohesion and to encourage the sharing of practice and research; these two recommendations represented the foundations for the AeP2 research activities to identify the factors required for the organisation of a sustainable ePortfolio community in Australia and the introduction of a regular conference or forum where ePortfolio learning can be explored and discussed.

The research process commenced with a literature review to examine the concept of communities of practice, together with the factors that contribute to the success of a sustainable community. These theoretical perspectives then informed and guided the research activities themselves.