

## 5. Developing a national ePortfolio community of practice for the higher education sector in Australia

### 5.1 Overview

The following two chapters present the core research findings for the second stage of the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP2), which sought to investigate the context for establishing and sustaining an effective community of practice (CoP) to support ePortfolio practice in Australia. It is hoped that the findings from the AeP2 research might help inform the development of a sustainable ePortfolio CoP for those involved in Australian higher education.

As noted in Chapter 3, the major research activities encompassed a national survey around the expectations for an ePortfolio CoP, interviews with people who were already participating and had the role of community leader or facilitator, and a series of case studies to profile successful CoPs.

- The national online survey provided insights into the expectations of ePortfolio stakeholders in Australia for the development of a CoP to foster and support ePortfolio practice. Respondents, principally from the higher education sector, helped frame their understanding of a proactive CoP that could accommodate the current context of ePortfolio use in Australia.
- Interviews with community facilitators and administrators enabled the research team to analyse the operations and activities of current ePortfolio CoPs. ePortfolio CoPs were identified across the US, the UK, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia. The interviewees proved to be a rich source of data to provide insights into their experiences with a CoP and to highlight the common and divergent characteristics, critical success factors, challenges and issues that could be encountered in ePortfolio communities.
- Case studies from a number of ePortfolio CoPs further assisted in ‘bringing to life’ these experiences and to provide the colour and texture of existing ePortfolio CoPs.

This chapter provides an overview of the demographic picture of the survey respondents, leading into a discussion of the research findings from the perspectives of the use made of online and/or social networking sites, current participation in communities of practice and the desired models for an Australian community of practice to support ePortfolio use in higher education. In Chapter 6, a number of ePortfolio communities of practice are examined to develop a clearer understanding of the issues and challenges associated with such entities in both Australia and overseas. Further depth and richness is provided by the series of case studies that are interspersed throughout the two chapters.

### 5.2 Communities of practice in an Australian context

In order to identify the characteristics required for the development of a community of practice amongst ePortfolio users, it was important to target a representative selection of active ePortfolio users in the higher education sector in Australia. The relevant information was gathered using an online survey that was distributed by email to a list of individuals who had been associated with the Australian ePortfolio Project during Stage One and/or Stage Two of the projects (2007–2009). The survey questions were mainly aligned with the key themes about CoPs in general and about current ePortfolio practice in particular, as identified through the literature review.

#### 5.2.1 *Demographic profile of the survey respondents*

Around 850 names were included on the list of people with whom the research team had had contact through both stages of the Australian ePortfolio Project. However, as the target respondents were also requested to forward the email request to other people who might be interested in the research,

there was, in fact, no clearly identifiable number of potential subjects for the survey. In response to the email distributed to these contacts, a total of 154 individuals completed the survey. Most respondents identified themselves as residing in Australia (n=141), with all states and territories represented, although the main breakdown came from the eastern states – Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Thirteen respondents identified themselves as residing outside of Australia or intentionally left this question blank. The international respondents reported that they were associated with institutions and organisations in either New Zealand or the Netherlands.

Responses given to the demographic questions indicated that of the 154 people who completed the survey, the majority were aged between 40 and 60 years (82%). While around almost one third of respondents (n=47) had been using ePortfolios for over two years, a quarter (n=37) had only been exposed to ePortfolios for less than six months. The remaining respondents had been using ePortfolios for periods of between six months and two years.

The majority of respondents came from the higher education (HE) sector (70%), with 9% drawn from the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the remainder representing schools, employer groups, professional associations or cross-sectoral organisations. Within these sectors, the professional roles of the respondents were predominantly academic staff (n=54), followed by those working in eLearning (n=31) and management (n=15). It should also be acknowledged that a small number of respondents (n=11) indicated that they were students or used the ePortfolios in their learning. Figure 5.1 presents the professional contexts of the respondents' roles in their work with ePortfolios.

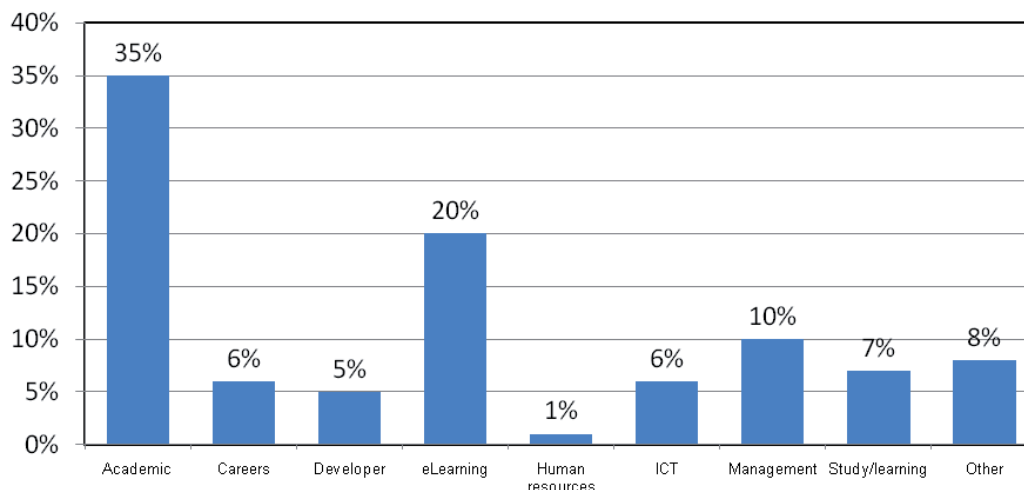


Figure 5.1: Professional roles in ePortfolio work

The discipline areas of the various respondents were broken down to reflect the traditional academic discipline areas within higher education. Of the key discipline areas of respondents who were academic staff (n=54), education was predominant in the use of ePortfolios, at 28% (n=25). The health sciences and law were the next most common disciplines (7% each), with business, information technology and the social sciences also represented (4% each). Therefore, while a significant number of respondents indicated their use of ePortfolios was predominantly in the context of teaching and learning across the range of different disciplines, there was also evidence that their interest in ePortfolios extended beyond any specific discipline area (n=45).

### 5.2.2 Use of online social and professional networking sites

The data revealed some interesting variations in the use of online social and professional networking sites. Of the 152 respondents to this question, 27% (n=41) used online social networking sites on a daily basis, while around 22% (n=34) access these sites every week. Twenty per cent (n=31) reported that they had never participated in any online social networking activities. Ten respondents (6.6%) stated that while they had not used online social networking, they did plan to do so in the future. Figure 5.2 presents the breakdown of the frequency of use of social networking. A significantly smaller number of respondents were using online professional networking/community sites (n=18) daily as compared to social networking sites.

However, in terms of weekly access, the number of respondents using professional networking sites was similar to the number using social networking sites. Again, about 5.3% of respondents reported that they not yet used professional networking but were planning to do so in the future. Ultimately, respondents were more likely to be using social networking sites on a regular basis (daily) than professional networking sites.

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 present the differences between the use of online social and professional networking tools .

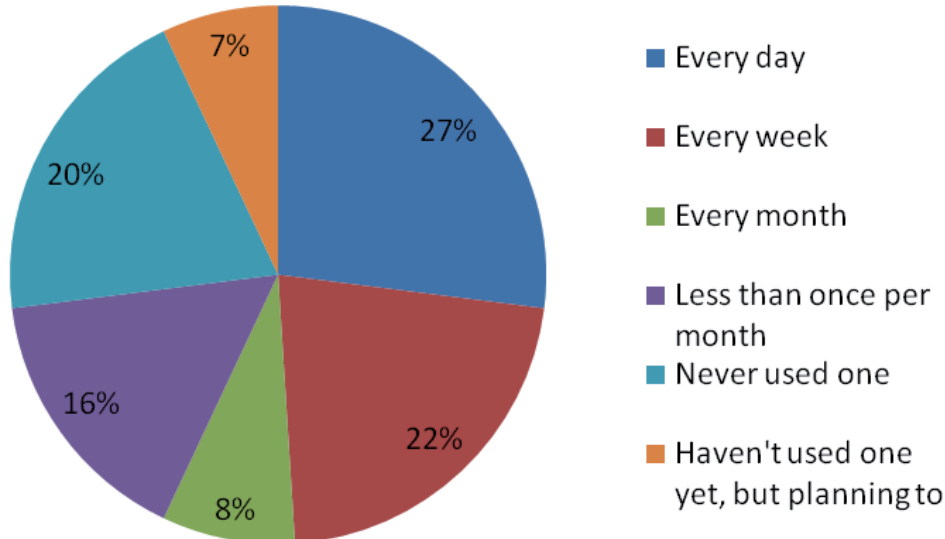


Figure 5.2: Use of online social networking sites

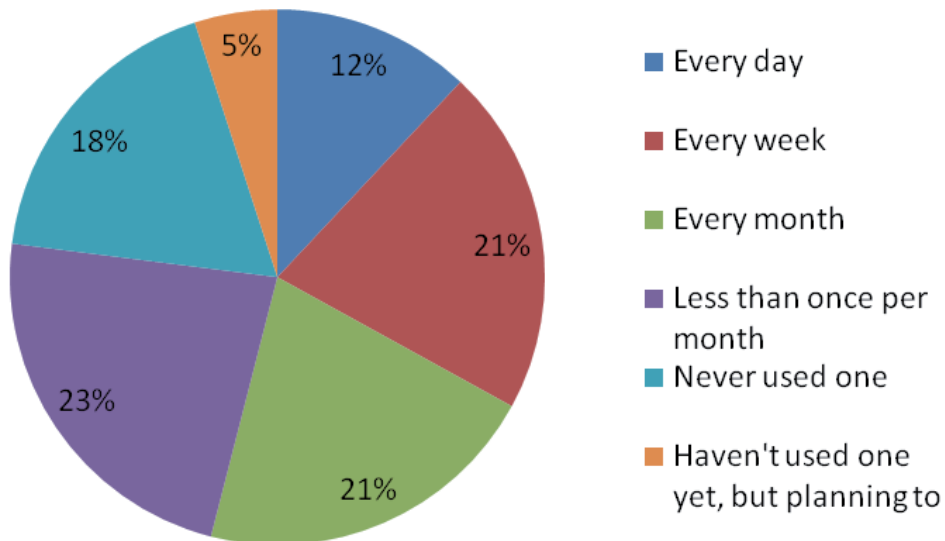


Figure 5.3: Use of online professional networking sites

Interestingly, those working outside of the HE sector were more likely to access both online social and professional networking sites on a daily or weekly basis. Table 5.1 highlights the differences in online use of networking sites by respondents from the different sectors. It was interesting to note that of the respondents from the VET sector (n=15), more than half worked in eLearning and 20% in management roles, compared with figures for those in the higher education sector of 16% in eLearning and 10% in management roles. There could be value in undertaking a further investigation to determine whether, for example, there might tend to be a higher level of engagement with online networking activities amongst people who are working directly in the eLearning environment, as opposed to those working as teaching staff.

Table 5.1: Percentage comparison of those participating in online networking: HE and non-HE

	Access daily (%)	Access weekly (%)	Never (%)
<b>Social networking</b>			
HE sector	19	20	25
Non-HE sector	43	26	6
<b>Professional networking</b>			
HE sector	7	15	17
Non-HE sector	21	32	19

For those participating in online social and professional networking sites or communities, the most common communication tools were email discussion lists or groups (e-lists/e-groups) with almost one third of respondents (n=47) noting this was their most frequently used method. This communication tool was followed closely by the use of Web 2.0 tools (for example, Flickr, Twitter, Delicious) with around one quarter of respondents (n=37) claiming the most frequent use. Other frequently used online tools included live presentations or workshops and teleconferencing. Respondents rated live chat room and bulletin boards as the most infrequently used.

### 5.2.3 Participation in a community of practice

The vast majority of survey respondents (92 %) saw themselves as currently participating in a community of practice (CoP), as defined by the AeP2 Project, within either their personal life or their professional life. Four types of interaction were identified by the project team as being the most common: face-to-face, telephone, video conferencing and online interactions. Of those that identified themselves as being part of a CoP, online interactions – including email, blogs and online communities – were identified as being the most common interactions. The least used interaction identified was video conferencing. It should be noted that the number of those identifying face-to-face interactions as commonly used was slightly less than online interactions (see Figure 5.4).

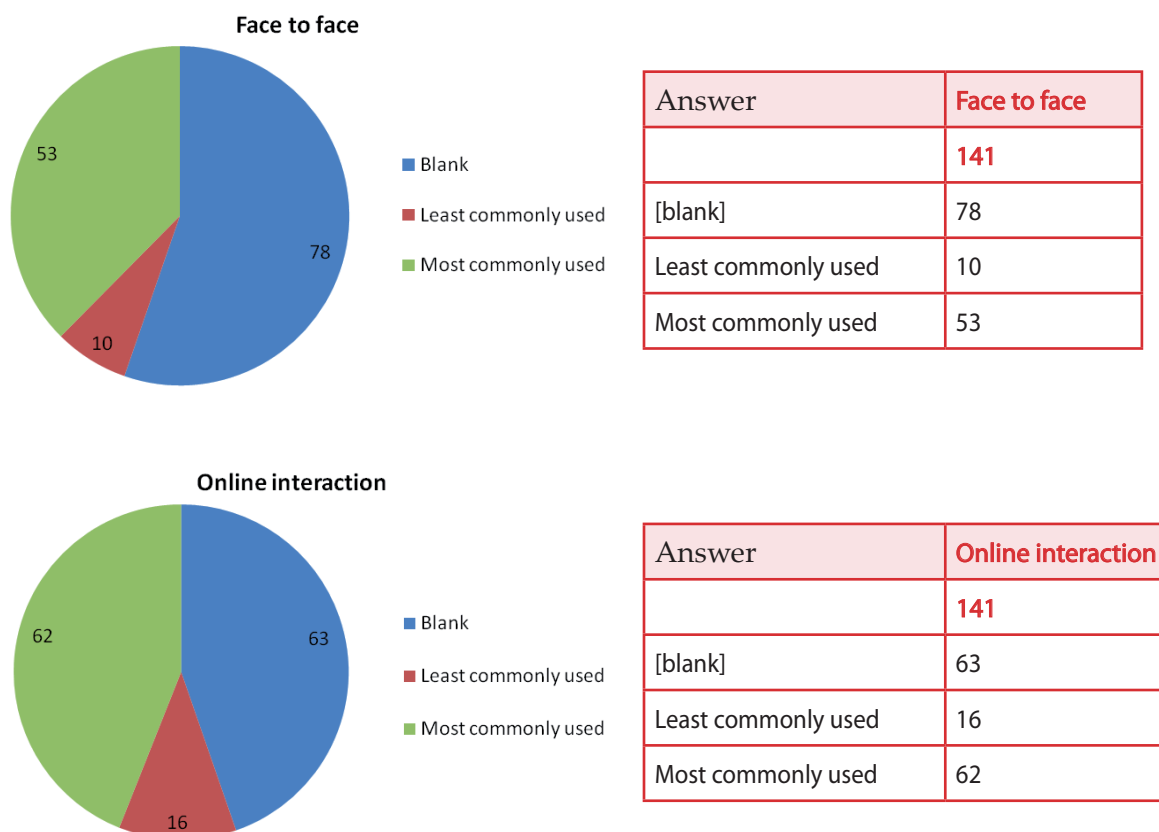


Figure 5.4: Common forms of interaction in CoPs

### 5.2.3.1 Models

An initial selection of survey questions sought to determine how respondents viewed a potential ePortfolio CoP. Initial questions were directed at their interest in the geographical scope of the practice, for example, CoPs with a regional, national or international focus. This was evaluated by examining the 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' responses. Across these questions the highest proportion of respondents who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' supported the idea of a national perspective for a ePortfolio CoP (n=132), rather than a regional or an international focus.

Respondents were then asked to identify their level of interest in different contexts for an ePortfolio CoP, encompassing the following:

- discipline-based
- cross-sectoral (HE, VET, schools, employers)
- technology/software tools
- policy
- pedagogy.

Of these five principal contexts, the highest interest (75%) was in a context focus on pedagogy (strongly agree or agree n=116). Almost 60% (n=89) indicated that they supported the idea of a CoP that had a strong focus on technology and software tools. Overall, there was a high proportion of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses to the policy context for the ePortfolio community (52%, n=80), reflecting a necessity to formalise the context of ePortfolio use.

An examination of the data across the sectors with a comparison of the 'agree' and 'strongly disagree' responses for each specific context made it possible to identify the respective priority areas for each sector. Those respondents who identified themselves as being in the HE, VET and schools sectors expressed the greatest support for a pedagogy focus for an ePortfolio CoP. In contrast, respondents representing employer groups, while smaller in number, were eager to see a technology/software tool focus for a CoP. Representatives of professional associations, identifying themselves in the career or eLearning sector, felt strongly that the focus of a CoP should be discipline-based, directly reflecting their professional focus. Those who had selected the 'other' group for their professional role, identifying themselves as participating in careers, ICT, management and eLearning, responded most favourably to the focus being cross-sectoral.

An additional question in the section of the survey about potential models for CoPs asked respondents to consider the organisational aspects of a CoP. Survey respondents were asked about the importance of face-to-face contact (forums, meetings) on a regular basis; 57% (n=88) recorded 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. Respondents representing professional associations indicated that they were extremely keen to participate in face-to-face events, highlighting the value of forums such as the AeP symposia to engage interested parties beyond the education sector.

Questions were asked about whether respondents would support a funded 'community manager' or whether they felt that a community should be completely 'organic' (that is, without a moderator or manager). Figure 5.5 indicates the level of agreement to the proposition that the CoP should accommodate a funded manager or moderator, with almost three quarters (n=111) responding with 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

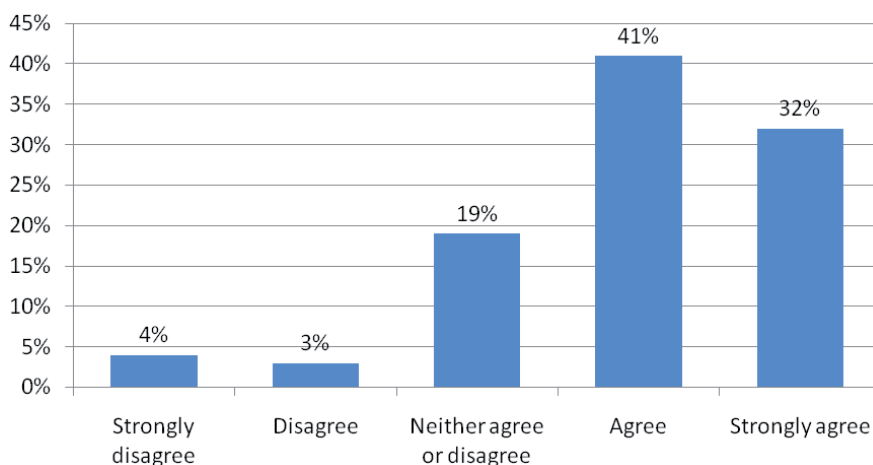


Figure 5.5: The importance of a funded community manager in an ePortfolio CoP

These responses can be contrasted with the subsequent question as to whether an ePortfolio CoP should exist without a manager or moderator. Figure 5.6 indicates that only 18% (n=28) of respondents envisaged a successful CoP with no central manager.

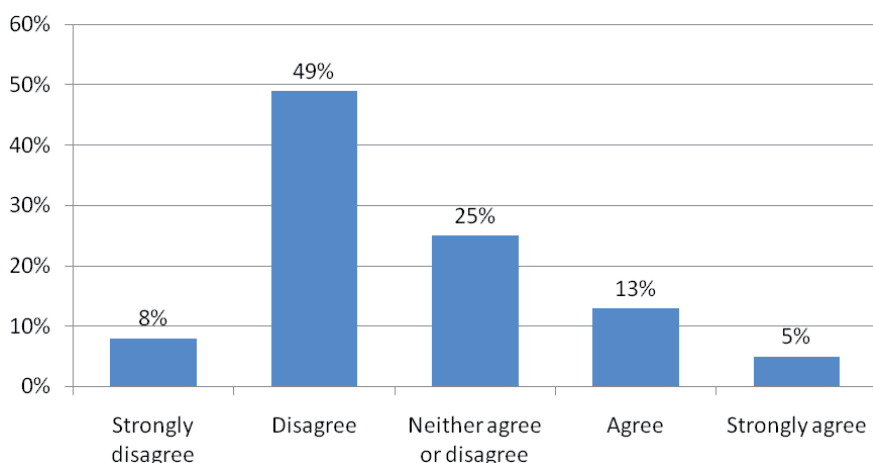


Figure 5.6: The importance of an ePortfolio CoP as entirely organic (no moderation/facilitation)

Of all sectors, the VET respondents recorded the highest responses of ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ for the involvement of a manager or moderator, whereas the schools sector was more supportive of an organic CoP (67% agreed or strongly agreed). Interesting, when the responses for those people least experienced with ePortfolios (less than six months) were compared with those most experienced (more than two years), there was a common preference for a managed online ePortfolio CoP as compared to an organic community.

### 5.2.3.2 ALTC Exchange

While just over half of the survey respondents had heard of the ALTC Exchange online professional networking site (n= 92), only 23% (n=36) had actually used the site. This indicated a general awareness of the emergent professional networking opportunities currently available to the higher education sector, but that only sporadic use had been made of the site to date.

## 5.2.4 Online ePortfolio community of practice

While the preliminary questions in the survey sought to explore the context and organisation of a CoP, the questionnaire subsequently aimed to gather information about the types of activities that users of an ePortfolio community of practice would be interested in within the context of the CoP.



### 5.2.4.1 Uses of an ePortfolio community of practice

The survey presented a selection of uses and opportunities that could be offered to members of an online ePortfolio community of practice, including opportunities to:

- collaborate with others
- locate/obtain resources made available by other practitioners
- upload resources to share with others
- participate in special interest groups
- network with colleagues and practitioners
- disseminate information
- find out about special events (symposia, conferences, workshops)
- participate in online workshops or web forums.

A series of questions were posed about the potential uses, with respondents able to select their answer based on a Likert scale of 'strongly agree' through to 'strongly disagree'. The data was aggregated for the number of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses across the questions.

While all respondents noted the value of the proposed uses, those who had been using ePortfolios for less than six months either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' to the following three uses:

- the opportunity to network with colleagues and practitioners
- the opportunity for collaboration
- the ability to find out about special events.

Those using or dealing with ePortfolios for more than two years valued:

- the opportunity for collaboration
- the ability to find out about special events
- the capability to locate/obtain resources made available by other practitioners
- the opportunity to participate in special interest groups.

The main difference between the two groups was noted in the desire for new ePortfolio users to network and collaborate with other users, whereas those with experience appeared more interested in finding out about relevant events and being able to locate and obtain resources to support their ePortfolio practice.

Similar findings were noted when the HE sector was examined separately, with academic staff who had less than six months experience with ePortfolios (n=14) compared to academic staff with more than two years experience (n=19). As an example of these differences, Figures 5.7 and 5.8 summarise the variations in the perceived use of an online ePortfolio CoP for networking purposes, with experienced ePortfolio practitioners strongly supporting the idea.

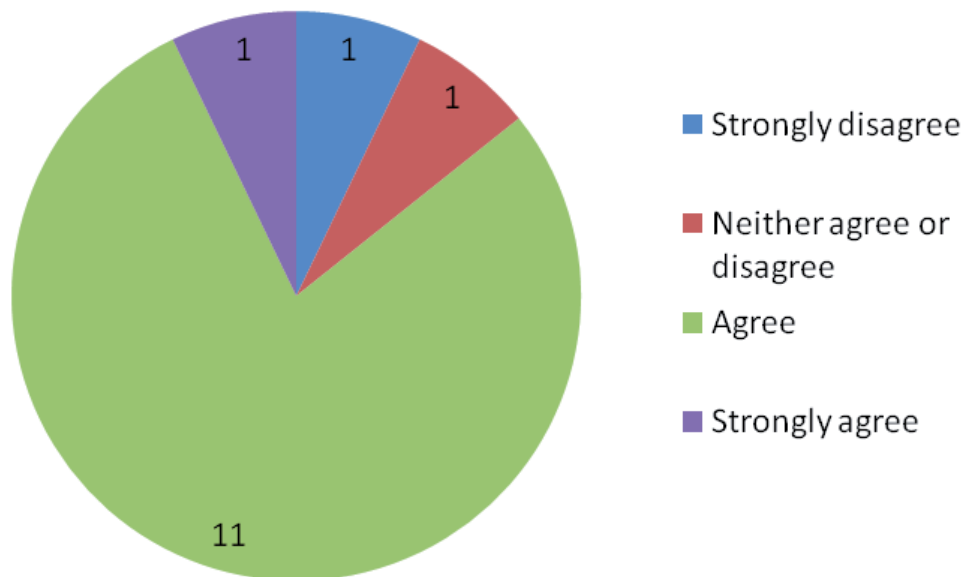


Figure 5.7: I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice to network with other practitioners or colleagues (HE sector, academics with less than six months experience with ePortfolios)

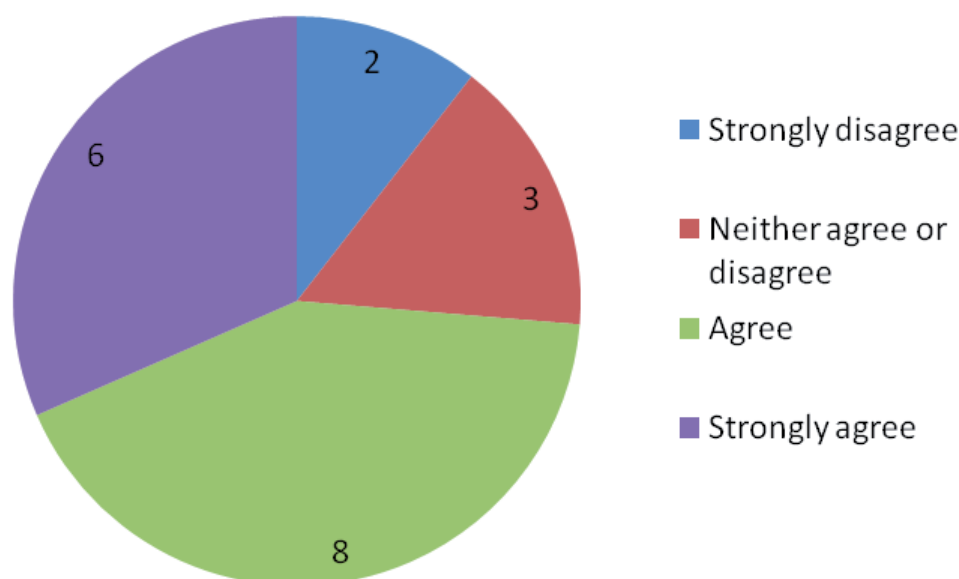


Figure 5.8: I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice to network with other practitioners or colleagues (HE sector, academics with more than two years experience with ePortfolios)

Different priorities for the use of an online ePortfolio CoP were noted when the sectoral data was reviewed. Although small, representatives of the employer sector (n=3) were interested in using a CoP for the purpose of information dissemination.

Representatives of the HE sector (n=108) indicated their interest in using ePortfolios for the purposes of:

- locating and obtaining resources made available by other practitioners
- disseminating relevant information
- obtaining information around special events.

Respondents in the VET sector (n=15) viewed their key uses of an ePortfolio CoP as:

- collaboration with others
- networking with colleagues and practitioners
- finding out about special events
- disseminating information.

The schools sector (n=6) prioritised the following uses:

- disseminating information
- collaboration with others
- networking with colleagues and practitioners.

Although the number of respondents in some sectors was arguably very low compared to the HE sector, there was a strong degree of agreement about the potential value of an online ePortfolio CoP to disseminate current and relevant information.

#### 5.2.4.2 User conditions

There were also a group of questions to examine three specific conditions of use for online ePortfolio CoPs, with respondents asked to select the most meaningful option:

- *I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice only if I knew someone else who was using it.*
- *I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice only if I received training in its use first.*
- *I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice only if it did not require special training.*

Over 61% of respondents (n=95) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would only use an online ePortfolio CoP if they knew of someone else using it. The data was common for both new users (less than six months experience) and established users (more than two years experience). However, it was noted that the small group of respondents representing employers (n=3) indicated that they were more likely to use the CoP if they know someone else who was using it.



In relation to the condition of training, only 6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more likely to use an online ePortfolio CoP if there was prior training available. This suggested that they either felt confident about their abilities to operate in an online environment or they anticipated that online CoPs would be relatively intuitive to use. Again, the education sectors (HE, VET and schools) appeared more confident about their use of an online CoP.

While the majority of respondents did not see the requirement for prior training in the use of an online ePortfolio CoP, there was ambivalence about the use of a CoP that did not require any special training. Figure 5.9 graphically presents this ambivalence, with fairly even proportions of responses agreeing/strongly agreeing, disagreeing/strongly disagreeing and remaining neutral.

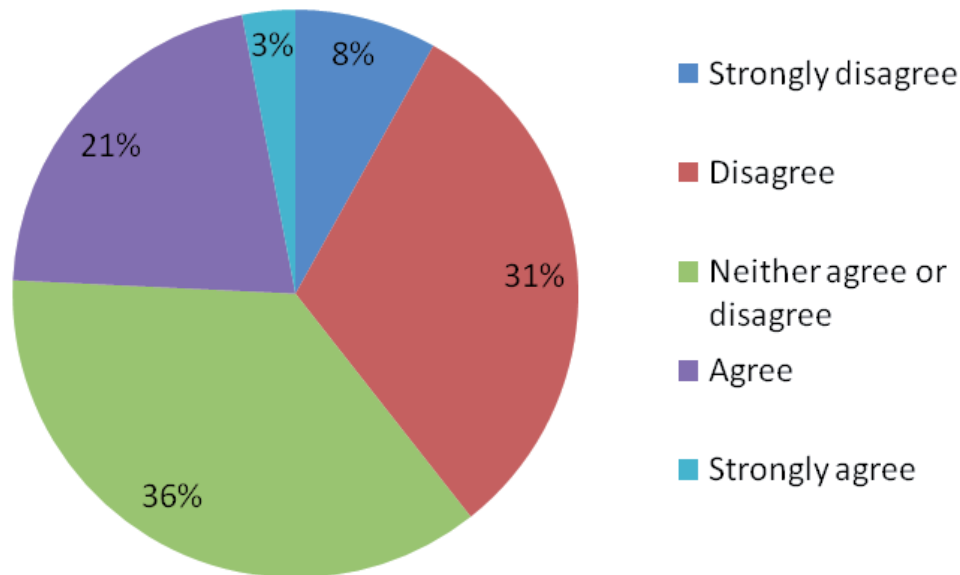


Figure 5.9: I would use an online ePortfolio community of practice only if it did not require special training

It was found that respondents from the employer groups and professional associations were more inclined to support the need for special training around the use of an online ePortfolio CoP, compared to those in the education sectors.

### 5.2.4.3 Types of users

The final section of the survey sought to clarify the range of stakeholders who might participate in an online ePortfolio community of practice. Respondents were asked to determine, using a Likert scale to reflect the degree of agreement or disagreement, who they believed an online ePortfolio community of practice should be open to. Each potential user group was identified in separate statements, for example, 'I believe an online ePortfolio community of practice should be open to employers'. The following users were identified:

- learners
- teachers
- learning and teaching support staff
- IT support staff
- careers advisory staff
- human resources staff
- employers
- professional bodies
- ePortfolio tool developers.

Higher percentages were recorded across the sectors for the involvement of:

- teachers
- learning and teaching support staff
- IT support staff.

The lowest level of agreement was noted for participation in a CoP by learners and by human resources staff. Respondents from the VET sector highlighted the need for teachers and IT support staff to be involved, while those in the schools sector placed employers and professional bodies ahead of teachers. However, when the data was analysed from the perspective of professional roles, there was consensus amongst the three main cohorts of academic staff, eLearning staff and institutional managers to suggest that the two key groups of stakeholders of a CoP should be teachers and learning and teaching support staff.

### 5.2.5 *Comments and ideas from respondents*

There were two open-ended questions in the survey that allowed respondents to contribute their own views about a potential online CoP to support ePortfolio practice in higher education. The first question invited respondents to provide their ideas and opinions about the type(s) of activities that could be incorporated in an ePortfolio CoP. The main focus of the comments related to the possible scope of activities and the range of potential stakeholder groups:

*These are all different groups with different interests. You may need to set up different spaces for each as well as spaces with combined memberships. E.g. employers and students may be a good or poor mix, depending on the circumstances.*

*Ideally, it should attract & involve a diversity of stakeholders - you need to be inclusive about those stakeholders who work in the standardisation space.*

Staff in government departments were nominated as a further stakeholder group to be included in an ePortfolio CoP. Respondents proposed that the scope of the CoP should include:

*Product reviews & surveys*

*Evaluation of ePortfolio concepts from each stakeholder's perspective*

*Technical standards for ePortfolio communities of practice implementations*

*Creating a career strategy in the e-portfolio*

*Embedding resources published separately e.g. Slideshare, Youtube*

The survey allowed for some general discussion around the desired goals for an online ePortfolio community of practice, enabling respondents to present their previous experiences with, or ideas for, an online ePortfolio CoP. The comments were wide ranging, covering the need for support for a CoP, ideas about how the CoP might evolve, the concept of 'a common purpose' for members and issues associated with the commitment of time as a member. Beyond this, respondents presented their views about value of the AeP symposia to the education sector and the importance of continued collaboration between interested parties. The topic of the development of an online ePortfolio CoP attracted a number of comments about who might serve as moderator and the level of moderation required:

*I believe face to face events like the AeP2 symposium are key to successful community building and maintenance. The challenge of fostering online communities is yet to be fully addressed ...*

*Plan to include regular 'real time' events online using virtual classrooms - bring the discussions into a truly web 2.0 domain. This will keep an AeP CoP alive between f2f symposiums and generate groups of special interest groups.*

*A community of practice works best when it is organic and emerges from a community of practice in the real world. Note the uptake of facebook by comparison to any University led network. A good community of practice would add to the existing measures rather than replicate them.*

*It is crucial that, at least in the initial stages, there is a funded project manager to drive the community.*

*CoPs tend to need a sense of organisation, direction, purpose, and facilitation.*

*I believe some sort of moderator or champion is useful in 'seeding' a COP, encouraging activity, and providing stimulus ...*

*To maintain interest, they must be useful and active. People are time poor, so info / resources must be relevant to practitioner needs, so maybe a few different focussed areas, e.g. technical, pedagogy, showcasing etc*

*To widen the appeal to practitioners other than Universities, the practicalities of coordination, collaboration and connectivity need to be discussed openly. Viewpoints from all areas of education need to be heard.*

*I think there is a key distinction between an Online Community of Practice and a Network of Practice (NOP). It will be important for any initiative to identify whether it intends to truly go beyond a NOP and how.*

Overall, the survey findings indicated that there was strong support for a CoP to support ePortfolio practice in education.

## 5.3 Summary

The AeP2 project team was satisfied with the good number of responses received for the survey about the potential for an ePortfolio CoP in Australia. Given that there was, at the time, no 'dedicated' CoP in the area, the questions had been developed to encourage respondents to consider what they felt would be an appropriate model for a CoP. There was undoubtedly a high level of interest, particularly to consider a hybrid forum that blended the benefits of an online community with opportunities to meet face to face, for example, through further symposium events in the future.

The focus of a new community could include a range of areas of interest, including pedagogy, technology and software tools and policy. There was clear consensus that, at least in the early days, an ePortfolio CoP would benefit from the guidance and facilitation of a funded community manager, rather than being a purely organic entity. It is believed that the timing of the survey, following immediately on from the second symposium, contributed to the interest in and engagement with the subject, with many respondents keen to continue the positive professional momentum and energy stimulated by the symposium and to further develop the contacts they had made. A CoP was seen to be an important initiative that would help to consolidate current levels of interest as well as foster and strengthen the networking and relationships that were already emerging.



# Case study 1

## Australian Flexible Learning Framework: E-portfolios Community of Practice

Website: [tp://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/e-portfolios](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/e-portfolios)  
Blog: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/e-portfoliosblog>  
Contact: Allison Miller, E-portfolios Business Manager, [allison.miller@tafesa.edu.au](mailto:allison.miller@tafesa.edu.au)

### Context

Since 2005, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, the e-learning strategy for the Australian vocational education and training sector (VET), has conducted research into the role ePortfolios can play in supporting learner mobility and lifelong learning. In 2008 the Framework established the *E-portfolios — Managing Learner Information* business activity to focus on infrastructure (services, resources and standards) with the aim of developing a sector-wide approach to business and technical standards and policy.

The current research activities have principally been guided by an E-portfolio Reference Group that encompasses a broad membership base. As well, a VET E-portfolios Community of Practice (CoP) has been established and facilitated by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework in response to those practitioners and early adopters working in this area who can share best practice. Membership is informal and includes teachers and learning and teaching support staff in the sector, as well as ePortfolio tool developers.

### Aims and outcomes

Broadly, the VET CoP aims to encourage the adoption of ePortfolios by connecting areas of good ePortfolio practice and supporting those early adopters who may feel isolated in their current ePortfolio activities. The technical architecture of the community is principally a website and blog, but dissemination activities include workshops, conference presentations and forums in both a virtual and face-to-face context. A yearly event is planned to facilitate interaction between the various stakeholders. Both the website and the blog link to current ePortfolio resources and information specific to the business activity and the VET sector, as well as ePortfolio activities and initiatives within Australia (for example, AeP).

### Critical success factors

Funding and the organisational context and support has made a significant impact on the development of the CoP. Facilitation and administration is funded by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, who has determined the information needs of the community around raising awareness and disseminating the current ePortfolio activities in Australia.

Key CoP 'personalities' can also provide the stimulus for discussion and the sharing of knowledge. Hearing from those who have travelled down the implementation path and utilised ePortfolios in their specific context can provide a sense of relevance and purpose for community involvement.

### Challenges

How people utilise the CoP has required consideration. Different technological and social platforms are offered in the CoP, for example, some members prefer RSS feeds; some are comfortable participating in an online forum, while others prefer workshops. Information and resources have been arranged in various formats to accommodate the various levels of members' technical knowledge so that they do not feel alienated by the nature of the online environment.

### Sustainability

Sustainability will be determined by the continued relevance of ePortfolio progression in Australia. The VET CoP currently sits as an awareness raising process within the current business activity of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Management has already considered the CoP as a relevant activity and has supported facilitation via funding of an administrator and various dissemination activities. Developing and sustaining relationships with 'aggregators and agitators' will help develop ideas and activities for the group. Activities and resources are also carefully considered so as to accommodate the long-term member and the newly arrived individual, and bring together the two with common interests.



## Personal learning plans and ePortfolio

**Website:** edna Groups — password access only

**Contact:** Pru Mitchell, Senior Education Officer, and Cecily Wright, Education Officer Education.au: [pmitchell@educationau.edu.au](mailto:pmitchell@educationau.edu.au), [cwright@educationau.edu.au](mailto:cwright@educationau.edu.au)

### Context

The new South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) has developed a module for senior secondary students around a personal learning plan (PLP) (<http://www.futuresace.sa.gov.au/plp.htm>). Evidence of learning is to be provided through various formats, with electronic portfolios suggested as one of the options. Various school associations received funding for 2009 from the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP) (<http://www.qualityteaching.deewr.gov.au>) to consider ePortfolios in the school sector.

In order to prepare teachers to make use of ePortfolios in secondary schools, Education.au (<http://www.educationau.edu.au/jahia/jsp/index.jsp>) was asked to put together a professional learning activity for South Australian teachers around using ePortfolios and implementing PLP in their schools. Hands-on workshops introduced teachers to the concepts, using the edna Groups Moodle learning management system as a social space to accommodate resources and course material. This online membership space provides access to pre-readings, website links, workshop presentations, polls and news and introduction forums.

### Aims and outcomes

Although not essentially emerging from a community of practice (CoP) ethos, the group operates within a community framework and describes their online environment as a 'space for collaboration and discussions between members of the ePortfolio Professional Development program'. The ePortfolio group has linked the aims of their professional development project with two of the specific outcomes of the AGQTP (summarised below):



#### AGQTP Outcomes

- Outcome (1): Teachers will have strengthened the currency and depth of their pedagogical knowledge and skills.
- Outcome (4): Teachers will have engaged productively in collegial networks that extend and support knowledge and skills

#### Aims of this project

- To build knowledge and skills related to ePortfolios
- To create and extend online collegial networks
- To further develop ICT skills and capabilities
- To trial the processes involved in creating an ePortfolio

### Critical success factors

While the CoP is more structured and directed than other organic entities, the online activities have helped engage the group throughout their development, particularly as the teachers were able to develop their own ePortfolio or digital tool as a way of understanding the process. What is noted is that both the facilitators and the community members are coming from a position of 'investigation' around ePortfolios and are able to share and collaborate. Feedback and reflection on the workshops and activities will also assist in the development of future activities.

### Challenges

The varied ICT skills of the community members have been a significant challenge in this inaugural activity. While the introduction of ePortfolios is in itself often a new concept, the idea of working and contributing in an online community has provided further challenges for some participants. The direction and guidance from the facilitators has proved invaluable in this aspect of the CoP.

### Sustainability

Plans are in place to continue the provision of professional development workshops in the future around ePortfolio options in SA secondary schools, and the facilitators envisage that the community will continue with participation of some of the foundational members. Additionally, these members will bring their new-found knowledge to the next influx of members. Maintaining the momentum in the community has relied heavily on the organisation and facilitation of Education.au and on making connections and sharing information with various organisations using and implementing ePortfolios.







## Case study 3

### RMIT University: Introducing ePortfolios

Website: <http://www.rmit.net.au/eportfolio>

Contact: Meaghan Botterill, ePortfolio Project Leader, RMIT University [meaghan.botterill@rmit.edu.au](mailto:meaghan.botterill@rmit.edu.au)

#### Context

As part of RMIT's e-Learning Advancement Program (REAP) the ePortfolio tool PebblePad is being trialled. REAP aims to 'improve e-Learning and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) at RMIT and enhance active learning opportunities for students' (REAP website). Consequently, the use of wikis, blogs and ePortfolios constitutes a large amount of the interest in online learning environments, assessment and career development.

The PebblePad trial (2200 licences at this stage) has resulted in the development of a CoP essentially focused around professional engagement with the scholarship of learning and teaching and is supported through an internal staff wiki that operates as a space for the collaboration and dissemination of ideas, pedagogy and research as well as a professional development site (Botterill, Allan, & Brooks, 2008).



#### Aims and outcomes

The PebblePad trial began in mid 2008 and will finish at the end of 2010, extending across different areas of the university in line with the strategic goals of the institution as a whole and professional support services. Principally, the trial aims to support the introduction of ePortfolios into teaching and learning across the university. The development of the CoP has provided staff with a means of organisational support and connectivity across RMIT.

Due to the diverse location of the CoP across campuses, both local and international, engagement is supported through electronic means (email and Skype), as well as face-to-face events (lunches and forums) at different campuses. Notification of and dissemination about events are supported via email and the wiki. Professional development days, both internal within RMIT and externally with the Australian PebblePad Users Group (see Case study 5), have also assisted to build the CoP and foster inter-university relationships around ePortfolios.

#### Critical success factors

Essentially, there is a sense of security amongst the CoP members who might otherwise have felt isolated in the trial. The voluntary nature of the community has meant that the trial participants have been able to take ownership of their projects, feel they can contribute and are engaged in the learning process. The CoP has successfully allowed for the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst staff working in quite diverse contexts.

#### Challenges

As a dual sector university, RMIT accommodates both the vocational education and training (TAFE) and higher education (university) sectors. Aligning the various teaching staff across the sectors around the utilisation of an ePortfolio can be problematic. However, PebblePad has been able to accommodate the two different frameworks of graduate attributes (higher education) and competency standards/employability skills (TAFE) and the CoP has fostered strong connectivity amongst the staff.

#### Sustainability

External motivators have been as important as the internal motivation around the CoP. Regular national symposiums and events have kept the discussion around ePortfolios in Australia current, particularly in the educational context. RMIT's ongoing commitment to evidence-based assessment and career readiness has also justified the role of ePortfolios. Scaffolding and instigating support for staff using ePortfolios via a CoP is a means of producing early adopters who might ultimately support and champion ePortfolios in the future.





## ePortfolio Practice: ALTC Exchange

**Website:** <http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/eportfolio-practice>

**Contact:** Ann Gillespie and Gillian Hallam, Exchange facilitators and members of the AeP2 project

### Context

This online community was set up as part of the Australian ePortfolio Project's second stage (AeP2) and launched to prospective members during the second Australian ePortfolio Symposium in early February 2009. The site is hosted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Exchange (ALTC), a professional networking site that enables members to 'contribute, collaborate, and share knowledge about innovative teaching and learning practices in higher education with like-minded professionals' (<http://www.altcexchange.edu.au>). The main purpose of the ePortfolio Practice community site was to provide the beginnings and structure for online involvement and interaction. Interested participants are pointed to relevant information and resources about ePortfolios in higher education.

### Aims and outcomes

Six months have passed since the ePortfolio Practice Group was created, and as AeP2 nears completion the group has around 40 members, specifically from the higher education and vocational education sectors.

The members are able to add additional areas to the wiki to enhance the interactive nature of the group. Members can also interact using a forum and adding blog entries that can be made private or remain publicly available. Short-term objectives have been around increasing awareness, for example, to highlight initiatives that various institutions are involved in, such as pilot projects, examples of early adoption, etc. In the longer term it is anticipated that the site will support those members interested in sharing information.



### Critical success factors

A broad spectrum of members became involved during and immediately after the Australian ePortfolio Symposium. This ensured that diverse interests were discovered to help colour and add to the information base about the current use of ePortfolios in Australia. Ultimately, a key role was played by the facilitator, under the auspices of the AeP2 project, to assist in laying down the foundations and starting points for novice ePortfolio practitioners.

### Challenges

The functionality of the ALTC Exchange is very structured and communication between members has not been as seamless as with other online technologies. Consequently, members have not been as actively engaged in the forum as had initially been anticipated, relying instead on the group facilitator to post resources to the Exchange and to manage the site.

### Sustainability

As the AeP2 project concludes, the role of facilitator of the ePortfolio Practice Group on the ALTC Exchange will no longer continue. The ability to sustain a group such as this, without ongoing funding or staffing, will ultimately depend on any future activity that might continue the current momentum in ePortfolio use nationally. The impetus to drive such a group may come from individuals with a passion to coordinate the information resources to meet a wide cross-section of needs and requirements. Changes to the technological infrastructure of the ALTC Exchange may also have the potential to reduce some of the barriers to participation and networking.



## Case study 5

### Australian PebblePad User Group (APpUG)

Contact: Meaghan Botterill, [meaghan.botterill@rmit.edu.au](mailto:meaghan.botterill@rmit.edu.au)

#### Context

With the growing awareness of the benefits associated with the use of ePortfolios in education across Australia, there has been an increase in ePortfolio software systems and applications. One product, PebblePad (developed by the University of Wolverhampton, UK), is currently being trialled or run with site licences in 15 universities across Australia. This has offered an opportunity to develop a Community of Practice (CoP), the Australian PebblePad User Group (APpUG), to support professional development and inter-university collaboration across areas such as research, learning and teaching, discipline-based networking and resource development.

#### Aims and outcomes

The inaugural meeting of APpUG was held at RMIT University in December 2008. An invitation was extended to all institutional PebblePad users to attend either in person or through video conferencing. The aim of this CoP is to extend practice and praxis across the use of ePortfolios in universities, as well as provide a professional network of PebblePad users for collaboration and knowledge sharing across technical, pedagogical and professional practices.

Due to the geographic distribution of members of the CoP across Australia, engagement is supported through both information and communication technologies (ICT) and face-to-face events (such as phone, email, Skype, video conferencing, a PebblePad blog and forums or conferences at different institutions). Notification of and dissemination about events are supported via email and the blog. To increase relevance beyond general information sharing across PebblePad, the events also have a thematic session, for example, Career Development Learning, in order to extend professional capability and inter-university knowledge, networking and resource sharing.

#### Critical success factors

The networks established through this CoP have been a critical success factor. The importance of the face-to-face events for meeting people and knowing what is occurring in their institutions has helped to facilitate inter-university collaboration across research, resourcing and technical support. These networks have also been critical for linking disciplinary groups together across the different institutions. Again, this fosters collaboration, while also allowing the sharing of exemplars from the different institutions. It is also important to have people willing to develop the CoP as it theoretically sits outside of their institutions.

The personal involvement of the PebblePad developers has, to date, also been a critical success factor in this CoP. The face-to-face events have coincided with their visits to Australia so far and have contained both product information and pedagogical insights. However, in their absence, it has been important to develop other ways of maintaining the CoP. Organising events that address specific ePortfolio initiatives, for example, 'ePortfolios and Engineering Accreditation' and 'ePortfolios for the recording of Recognition of Prior Learning' have been successful. The CoP has successfully allowed for the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst staff working in quite diverse contexts.

#### Challenges

The primary challenge is sustainability. As PebblePad is being trialled in most of the universities, an institutional decision to adopt another ePortfolio program will impact dramatically on this CoP. Thus, the ability to move the CoP away from simply one around PebblePad as a product to a more sustainable ePortfolio CoP might help to alleviate this issue if it arises.

#### Sustainability

Connectivity is the key to sustainability. Participation in other external initiatives and events, such as AeP, and undertaking collaborative work across different institutions, for example, joint research papers and presentations, will help to strengthen the CoP. Furthermore, regular communication and participation in APpUG events will also sustain and strengthen the CoP and maintain its relevance and currency.





## ePortfolios in the library and information services sector

**Website:** PebblePad Gateway — closed website  
**Contact:** Gillian Hallam, community facilitator, [g.hallam@qut.edu.au](mailto:g.hallam@qut.edu.au)

### Context

Digital portfolios, or ePortfolios, are being introduced into a number of professional disciplines to support professional accreditation and professional development. One of the major goals of Stage 2 of the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP2) was to encourage ePortfolio stakeholders to establish a community of practice (or several communities of practice) to share learning and experiences of quality ePortfolio practice. In conjunction with the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), the AeP2 project team is running a two-year (2009–2010) pilot project within the library and information services (LIS) sector to consider the use of ePortfolios in learning and career development by library and information professionals. Self-selected participants include librarians and library technicians, whose roles range from students and recent graduates through to LIS professionals in the later stages of their careers, with direct support from educators, mentors and employers.

### Aims and outcomes

The principal aim of the pilot program was for individual LIS practitioners to develop an ePortfolio to focus on career planning, professional development and performance review activities, enabling them to establish a rich portfolio of reflective evidence on their own learning and development over a period of time, and importantly, build a community of practice within the discipline.

The ePortfolio software tool *PebblePad* was chosen for the pilot, and participants were encouraged to seek the support of their employer to take part in the program. The second Australian ePortfolio Symposium, held in Brisbane in February 2009, included an introductory workshop for the LIS ePortfolio cohort. Three surveys have been developed around the pilot: an initial expectations survey, a further survey during the course of the pilot and a final survey to capture the actual experiences in the concluding stages of the AeP2 project in mid 2009. Participants in the LIS pilot project will be able to continue to use the PebblePad ePortfolio platform until the end of 2010.

To date, the community of 26 participants from all over Australia has come together regularly for face-to-face meetings in their regional groups (South East Queensland, Central Queensland, Melbourne, Adelaide and Northern Territory) and have communicated virtually via the PebblePad Gateway application.

### Critical success factors

The community's face-to-face meetings have enhanced the collegial, sharing and supportive nature of the group. Most of the participants have already made positive gains in their professional and academic focus with the use of the ePortfolios and their participation in the community. Some had used the ePortfolios to attain new jobs and career promotions. Building formative relationships, not only around using the ePortfolio but also around their shared professional interests will be a lasting outcome of the CoP.

### Challenges

The participants self-selected from the library and information sector and thus their roles and demographical profiles were diverse. The geographical location of the participants also required a strong organisational role and this has been facilitated via the PebblePad Gateway application, which allows members to communicate online and share notes from the regional meetings.

### Sustainability

Although a pilot project, the community has been provided with an opportunity to be directly involved in an initiative that seeks to address learning and development issues in vocational and higher education, and in the workplace within the LIS sector in Australia. At a higher level, the project will help the LIS sector to be acknowledged as a leader in the arena of professional development and lifelong learning, with the potential to nurture further communities around ePortfolio practice.

