

6. ePortfolios and communities of practice: Current national and international practice

6.1 Overview

While the survey activity provided the AeP2 project team with insights into the possible scope, features and functionality that ePortfolio practitioners might seek in an online community of practice, it was also considered important to capture the current context of active ePortfolio communities both nationally and internationally, as well as to examine the experiences of those involved with the different forums, with the goal of developing an understanding of the issues associated with successful CoPs. Of the 17 online ePortfolio CoPs identified across the USA, the UK, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia, 14 contributed to the project, with the managers or facilitators openly discussing their experiences and views about establishing and maintaining an active ePortfolio CoP. These managers or facilitators of the CoPs participated in a semi-structured interview that included a series of exploratory questions, in order to:

- provide information about the purpose or long-term goal of the CoP
- identify success factors in the development of a CoP
- identify the barriers or challenges in the development of a CoP
- compare the value of an organic community with a structured community
- determine how CoPs might be sustained over a period of time.

The interviews were recorded, with the data subsequently analysed and synthesised to identify the common themes plus areas of distinctive practice. In addition to the issues presented in this chapter, case studies around the 14 communities feature in both this and the previous chapter to contextualise and articulate individual practice. For each of the case studies, a draft document was sent to the interviewee for review to ensure that the key ideas had been accurately presented. It should be noted that these case studies capture the attributes of the community at a particular point in time.

In this chapter, the information gathered through the interviews is analysed. The characteristics of the different CoPs are introduced to highlight the aims and objectives of the various communities, as well as the technical and social architecture for the groups. It is acknowledged that a community, at different stages, can be mapped to the various stages of a CoP lifecycle, so that there are distinct differences in the attributes of a new and emerging CoP and a well-established and mature CoP. Following a discussion of the uses and opportunities of the various communities, the facilitators' views of the critical success factors and of the challenges they have faced are reported.

6.2 The aims and objectives of ePortfolio communities

It was found that there were varied stimuli for the development of the ePortfolio communities that were subject to examination. While some communities evolved from the particular business activity of the host organisation itself, the majority were established as a result of a shared interest in a specific ePortfolio context, most frequently with a concern for the pedagogical issues. In line with much of the discussions in the professional literature, most of the ePortfolio CoPs identified were formed in a voluntary manner, rather than prescribed by business entity or an organisation (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). However, it was noted that two communities were initiated as part of a professional development opportunity within the specific education sector, with the members' mutual interest in using and piloting ePortfolio tools. In these two cases, it was acknowledged that the facilitation of the CoP was achieved through a funded role that had a predetermined end point. Overwhelmingly, each ePortfolio CoP reiterated the central ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991) with learning being the central process of engagement.

CoP facilitators were asked to identify the key aims and objectives that had driven the establishment of the CoP. Whether instigated by the organisation or motivated by factors of common interest, all facilitators saw the formation of the CoP as a means of bringing together knowledge and practice around ePortfolio use. Interviewees were asked to identify the primary purpose of their ePortfolio community. The following points succinctly summarise their responses:

- To encourage and support the *adoption* of ePortfolios.
- To *build* knowledge, networks and collaboration around ePortfolios.
- To *share* both knowledge and effective practice in ePortfolio use.

All interviewees acknowledged that there was a growing interest in ePortfolios both within and beyond the education sector and that the establishment of an organisational, regional or national forum to support this interest was required. Several respondents identified the need to build relationships between those working with ePortfolios as the primary stimulus for the development of a community:

... we need to bring staff together from the various areas and empowering them and supporting them in their effort.

... to share effective practice in an efficient manner and to build networks of practitioners.

Saw the need for a CoP that combined the ideas of face-to-face activities and online email lists to the ePortfolio activity

For some communities this notion of bringing together individuals with a common interest was in a more embryonic stage, with facilitators directly responding to an emerging awareness of ePortfolio practice:

... a quiet mailing list, people pose questions and let others know about events Mailing list is general and incorporates a wide variety of people ... so you do get a breadth of opinion and I think that can be quite good ... we're a real mixed bag.

Concern was expressed that many practitioners, especially those who saw themselves as early adopters, were working in relative isolation, so that a 'community' could bring together those already working with, or possibly contemplating working with, ePortfolios to offer a non-threatening and supportive environment.

During consultation we discovered there were a number of people working in isolation and saw the need to connect with others.

... connect good ePortfolio practice, to support early adaptors who felt isolated, to encourage the adoption of ePortfolios.

... staff need this type of support institutionally plus we can link people together to discuss issues – don't want them to feel isolated.

... wanted a private space to learn – feel safe and share resources.

Beyond this, the notion of formalising a particular interest in the national arena was recorded in the feedback from CoP facilitators. Cambridge et al. (2005, p. 1) stressed the value of sharing best practice and generating new knowledge so that community members might 'advance a domain of professional practice'. Responses in the interviews indicated that involvement in a CoP could ultimately contribute to the development of a more formalised agenda around ePortfolio development:

Need to provide a national forum to share ideas, network and provide opportunities to share practice ...

... constant lobbying and advocacy effort to build this up as a profession

... attempting to define ePortfolio work as a profession

... getting more people who are involved in the aspect of developing an outcome space.

It was recognised that collaborative activities could potentially engage a wider cohort, either within a faculty or institution, or across disciplines or professions.

6.3 Characteristics of ePortfolio communities

The 14 ePortfolio CoPs profiled for the research varied in age and maturity. Interestingly, most (n=10) had been active for less than 12 months. One CoP had been operating for a period of one to three years and three had been active for more than three years (one since 2001). The more mature CoPs had evolved from their original iteration: one example had begun with members who had an interest in the technical perspectives of developing and building ePortfolios. This CoP has now changed to adopt more holistic perspectives, enabling members to consider the wider learning and teaching contexts of ePortfolios. A second example is a CoP established as a professional association with various chapter and committee groups that are arguably more closely aligned to the theoretical example of a CoP presented in the literature that might encompass specialist areas of ePortfolio activity, or indeed, a regional interest group.

There is wide discussion in the literature around CoPs about the notion of a self-sustaining or 'organic' community, and the concept of a community that is more structured, most likely centred on a core individual or group (Wenger, 1998). Eleven of the 14 CoPs identified had a position of facilitator, whose role was to administer the community. The position was funded either as part of the general business processes of the institution or through membership fees. All those who interviewed saw their commitment to the CoP — whether paid or unpaid — as an ongoing obligation, reflecting 'a passion about a topic' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Some interviewees reiterated this strong sense of commitment:

I am paid to do this role which suits my professional life which is really busy ... worth it because I enjoy it and it fits into my professional role. The more time you have assists in putting professional effort into things ... needs to be a facilitator but that individual needs to have a particular passion for the community or it will be put aside as just another job

While the role of the facilitator was viewed as a vital component of an active CoP, those interviewed all felt that the CoP should eventually become self-sustaining, with members driving both the agenda and future directions of the practice:

... planned this so it would be self-sustaining and we would be more in the background – our members would eventually drive it

... have the community members lead the discussion rather than 'force' something on them

6.3.1 Membership

Interviews with the facilitators indicated that, in general, membership of their ePortfolio CoP encompassed representatives from the education sector. CoP members were essentially teachers, learning and teaching support staff and ePortfolio tool developers. Figure 6.1 presents the categories of membership of the profiled ePortfolio CoPs.

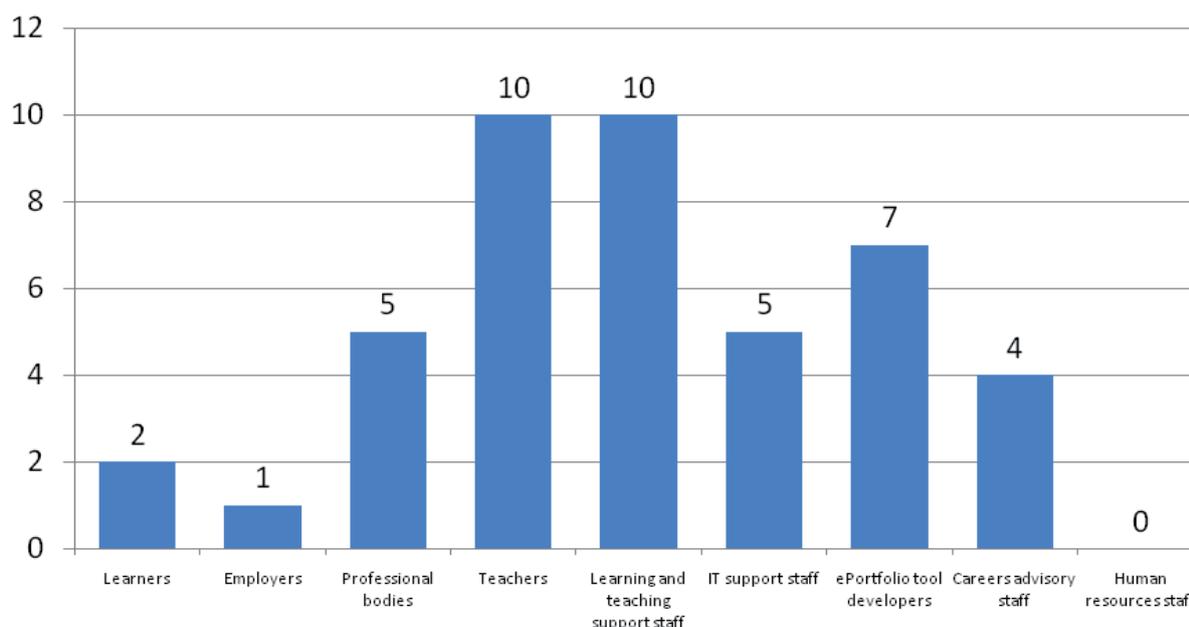


Figure 6.1: Membership of ePortfolio CoPs

The data collected in the interviews echoed the expectations revealed by the AeP2 survey respondents who essentially saw membership as being relevant to those in the teaching and learning context; that is, teachers and ICT and learning support staff. However, it was noted that the number of members was very wide ranging, often being dependent on the actual age of the community. The more recently established groups included an example with only 12 members, while one long-established community boasted over 850 active members.

In considering the concept of membership, and in particular ‘active’ membership, a term that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews was the ‘lurker’. In the context of the internet, the ‘lurker’ has been defined as an individual who will view, but not participate in, online communities such as newsgroups, message boards or online forums (Wikipedia, 2009). Early research on the internet environment indicates that around 90% of users participating in online groups are happy to ‘lurk’ (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). While interviewees all discussed the incidence of lurkers or listeners, especially if they were involved in a young community, they did not necessarily view their presence as a negative activity:

Lurkers are a common phenomenon ... dip in and out of things due to time constraints There is nothing wrong with lurkers ... they are soaking things up ... they do want the information – it can be a matter of confidence

... have to accept that some people will always be lurkers

... goes in waves in regards to use – people come in and out, some track emails and if they see something of interest they come in

Due to the fact that the specific context of the ePortfolios is a relatively new phenomenon in education, it was found that some members often participated in other ePortfolio CoPs, so that the ‘active’ membership fluctuated.

6.3.2 Lifecycles

The interviews allowed for the discussions to explore some of the issues associated with the lifecycle of each CoP. Within the literature, individual CoPs have been plotted along a specific roadmap or lifecycle, with one example presented by Nickols (2003) following a sequence of stages: *Committing, Initiation, Operating, Winding down, Conclusion*. At the conclusion of all the interviews, however, it was felt that, given the focus on sustainability, the CoP lifecycle discussed by Cambridge et al. (2005; adapted from McDermott, 2002), was more suited to the context of the ePortfolio communities.

The model utilised by Nickols is arguably more suited to a CoP within the context of a business organisation, whereas Cambridge et al. (2005) have plotted the phases of the CoP to reflect the community lifecycle within the arena of education. Figure 6.2 illustrates these phases:

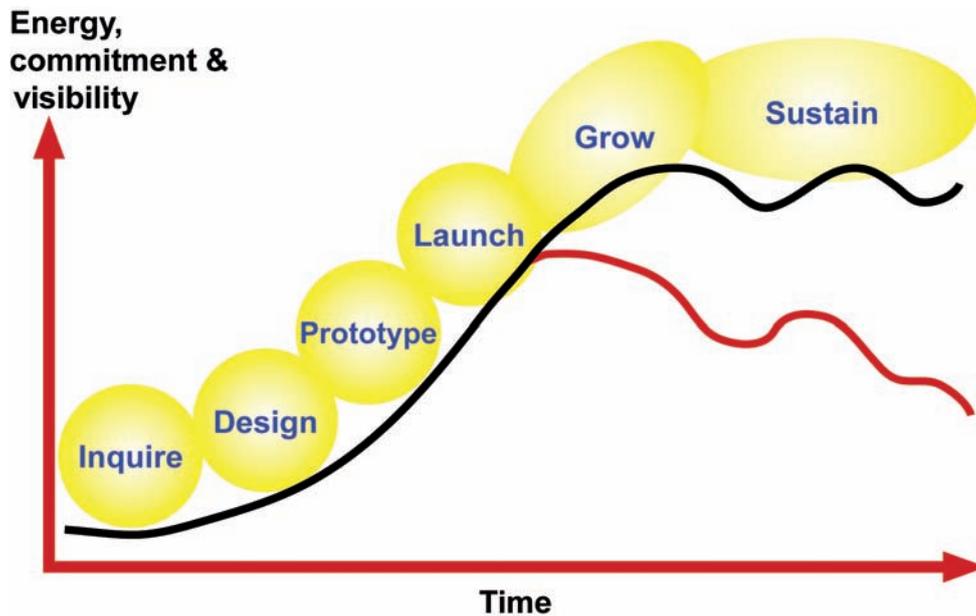


Figure 6.2 : CoP lifecycle model (adapted from McDermott, 2002, as cited in Cambridge et al., 2005, p. 2)

Using this model as a guide, the interview data was interpreted to present those CoPs that had been operating for 12 months or less as clearly being at the *Prototype–Launch* stages, while the CoPs that had been active for a longer period of time represented the *Grow–Sustain* phases. Those in the *Grow–Sustain* phases had developed mission statements or preambles to guide their community and essentially had attained the ‘critical mass’ of members that Cambridge et al. (2005) identified as being crucial in regards to sustainability.

One interviewee discussed the benefits of this critical mass:

It’s rather like a colony of ants or a hive of bees, the population changes over but the jobs keep getting done because you’ve got enough people doing each role

The research data gathered through the interviews therefore supported the theoretical framework proposed by Cambridge et al. (2005).

6.3.3 Technical and social architecture

Discussions with the interviewees revealed that there was often a geographical focus for the diverse CoPs, with, for example, a regional, or indeed national, context defining the community, although several of the larger CoPs reported that they had either international members or sub-groupings of members. The geographical nature of the group frequently determined the type and frequency of face-to-face events. It was found that one group had been able to hold regular face-to-face interactions due to the geographical proximity of the members. However, another community had initiated their community online, with no physical interaction: the community had yet to meet as a group within a face-to-face context.

Cambridge et al. (2005) argued that ePortfolio CoPs existed principally within a specific technical and social architecture or ‘community container’ (p. 2). In terms of community communication, the technical architecture of the communities that were reviewed ranged from an email list through to a wiki space, blog spot or website, and tended to utilise software platforms and packages such as Wetpaint, Moodle or Google Groups. It was found that communities often used a variety of communication methods to accommodate the different needs and interests of the members:

As an active group we have created a CoP around a number of different forms – blog, website and an annual event

In the preliminary survey conducted prior to the actual interview, the interviewees were asked to select which aspects of the online community were the most critical. The list of uses and opportunities was the same as that presented to the main survey respondents; that is, the chance 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.

The interviewees were asked to rank their responses according to a Likert scale of ‘very important’ through to ‘unimportant’. The responses were aggregated around the highest number of ‘very important’ and ‘important’ across the primary uses. Those uses claimed to be of highest importance to the interviewees CoP were to:

- participate in online workshops or web forums
- participate in special interest groups
- have the opportunity to upload resources to share with others.

Figure 6.3 indicates the relative importance of according to what CoP facilitators felt were significant for their community members.

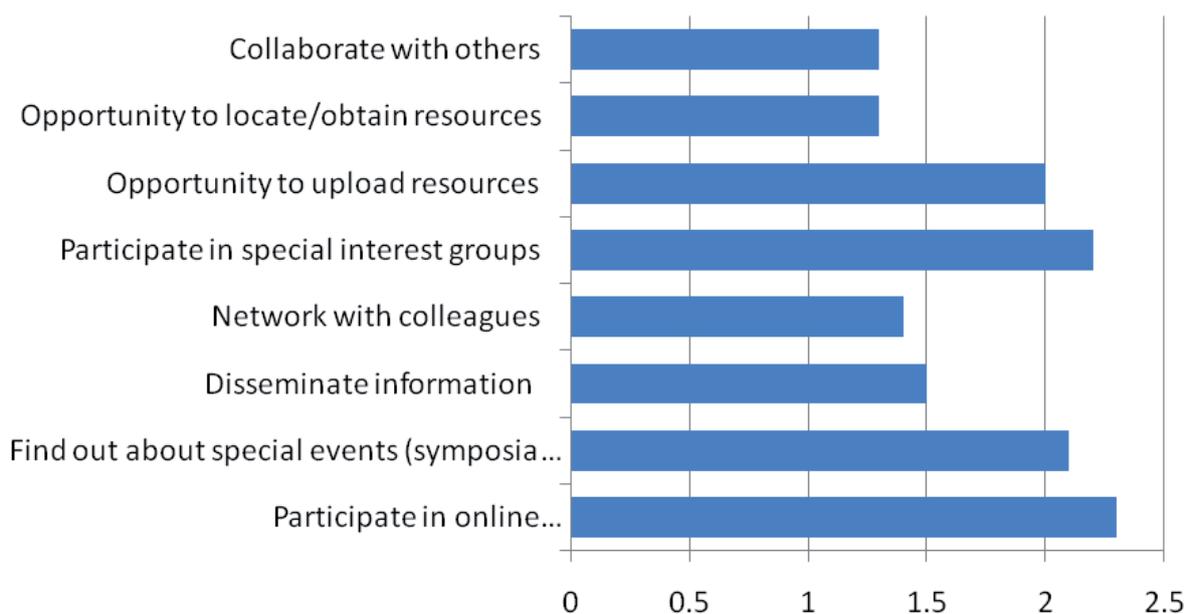


Figure 6.3: Relative importance of the different uses of the ePortfolio CoP

As a comparison, the Australian survey responses around the expectation of uses for the ePortfolio CoP indicated that the three top uses were to:

- find out about special events (symposia, conferences, workshops)
- locate/obtain resources made available by other practitioners
- collaborate with others.

The different views presented in the respondents’ expectations and in the facilitators’ experiences highlight the fact that ePortfolio CoPs had reached the stage where members are actively participating in events, engaging in special interest groups and sharing relevant resources. Thus, the expectations survey indicated a preliminary phase that focused more on exploration and inquiry, with the goal of identifying opportunities for collaboration and access to resources and information on upcoming events.

6.4 Success factors for communities of practice

Interviewees were asked to share their views about what they understood to be the key success factors for their ePortfolio CoP. The facilitators were able to identify three significant factors that they commonly understood to contribute to a successful community experience:

- funded facilitation and the specific role attributed to an administrator
- membership engagement and inclusivity
- diversity of community activities.

The interviewees provided their insights into these three factors.

6.4.1 Funded facilitation

The literature on CoPs considers the importance of a facilitator who is able to make a commitment of time to support and foster the engagement of community members (Stuckey & Smith, 2004). Interviewees discussed the critical role of a facilitator:

... our experience is that it needs a lot of mediation

Need a leader – need a community manager, without the work I do there is not a community.

... a facilitator is critical – particularly around raising awareness

Interviewees pointed to a reliance on a facilitator who could support the community until it became self-sufficient and met the diverse needs of the community members. In considering models of potential online communities, the Australian ePortfolio CoP expectations survey sought to determine the respondents' perceptions about the value of a funded manager to facilitate the CoP. The responses were found to align closely with the comments provided by the interviewees about the requirements for a moderator.

6.4.2 Member engagement

The need to engage members on an ongoing basis is also regarded as a critical factor that can directly contribute to the success of any community of practice, as discussed by Cambridge et al. (2005) and reiterated by Chen and Ittelson (2009). The development of relationships around respect, trust and commitment has been found to assist in members sharing their experiences and ideas:

Empowerment and the idea of ownership – that they are part of something that they can contribute – this is important

... ensuring people feel valued, welcome and engaged in the network ...

Ultimately, active engagement was viewed as being advantageous to members who sought a sense of belonging and connection:

Engaging members ultimately assists in people feel they have a voice in how the bigger picture is formulated – mutual support network and having the link into policy development gives them an amplified voice in their constituency

... giving people a heads-up on current information – informed and slightly ahead of the game

getting the continual buy-in, refreshing what the priorities are – providing opportunities for members to discuss and investigate the issues that are really important to them

The sense of commitment and connection is intrinsically the attribute that can ensure that the group becomes an authentic community.

6.4.3 Community activities

The sense of belonging also translates into the activities undertaken within the community. Interviewees agreed that the value of participation in any CoP was directly linked to the activities on offer to its members. Cambridge et al. (2005) refer to this as ‘an integrated thoughtful combination of face-to-face meetings, live online events, and collaboration over time within a persistent Web environment’ (p. 2). Facilitators agreed that a great deal of effort was required to maintain relevant and up-to-date community architecture:

Need to have a variety of things going on.

... also, keep it fresh – there is definitely more activity when I put something new in or advertise something – putting on events keeps the activity

... we see surges every time we have an event – special guest for an online forum or the like

Face-to-face activities have kept the group together – about half of the group have contributed to the online forum. Online activities helped engage the group – this was a directed activity.

However, interviewees also cautioned against having too much activity; this was commonly discussed in relation to email lists where members might feel swamped by the constant interaction in the group. It was felt that it was very important to find the right equilibrium in terms of the amount of online activity:

... large number like to get information periodically, but you could lose them if you are bombarding them ...

Need to find a balance between having too much activity and too little – keep refreshing things regularly – this keeps people interested – word of mouth

Need to keep the community interesting – events, dialogue, ideas, activities ... need long term activities as well as those activities that will attract members and enable people to connect with common interests

To be effective, the community manager needs to establish a balance of communication and activity to stimulate and engage members, avoiding the danger of overload.

6.5 Challenges for communities of practice

Along with those factors that interviewees had determined as contributing to the success of a CoP, the interviewees were also asked about the significant challenges they felt they had faced to date. Some of the challenges that they identified were related to the critical success factors, such as the role of the facilitator and membership engagement. The discussion focused on the following three central issues:

- using the technology
- facilitator workload
- community engagement.

The interviewees were keen to discuss their own experience of these challenges.

6.5.1 Using the technology

The development of online and internet-mediated CoPs has provided a flexible platform to support community members and their activities, particularly in the area of ePortfolio practice. Nevertheless, navigating these technologies has proved problematic for some of the members. Facilitators have discovered the need to consider the type of software they might use within the technical architecture of the community:

... need to make the community feel that they are not alienated from the technology.

... still a lot of people new to the technology – have to be very mindful of the technology you utilise

... trying to factor in the technological issues – try to use simple tools – website, blog and a easy to use tool for web conferences.

For those interviewees working within a higher education institution or a specific organisation, there were often additional concerns about some of the Web 2.0 platforms that might be blocked by the institution. While it was necessary to offer the community a public face, it was also crucial for members to feel there was safety and inclusivity in terms of their ability to share information and resources. Wikis were often the preferred software tool, accommodating privacy through password access.

Although it was reported that most members were comfortable in the evolving online environment, some facilitators noted the need to keep their members within the confines of familiar channels of communication:

... have some technical challenges – some people prefer email as a form of communication rather than use a networking site – we’ve started out with what is good enough to work – not entirely convinced that using other technology will work – why change if it works?

It was important, therefore, to achieve a balance between innovative and more traditional technologies.

6.5.2 Facilitator workload

In the discussions about critical success factors, interviewees emphasised the important role of the facilitator. Inevitably, however, they also highlighted the associated challenges of the role, particularly in terms of the workload and commitment required by the individuals who held the position. Some of those interviewed stressed the enormity of their role and the impact of the workload:

... trying to keep all the projects spinning – a lot going on.

Trying to cover all the bases - also marketing and member services, communication methods, arranging conferences and the like.

As discussed previously, the interviewees recognised that their role as a facilitator should ultimately be a temporary one, within the lifecycle of the CoP. In the long term, they optimistically anticipated complete community ownership rather than a fully facilitated practice:

... but would rather not be doing this ongoing because other people don’t have ownership, if you like, and they don’t have involvement and it is not a sustainable model.

Nevertheless, the goal of sustainability meant that there was a degree of reticence about moving away from the facilitated model in the short term.

6.5.3 Community engagement

In the discussions on critical success factors reference was also made to member engagement and the general reliance on the community structure to attain and maintain their commitment. For some interviewees, engagement was found to be the essential key to sustainability:

Keeping engagement has been the largest challenge – feedback at events is generally positive but how do you measure the level of activity once members go back to their institution?

Maintaining engagement is tricky ... not easy when you only have a small amount of money involved.

Again, the topic led to discussion about the role of the ‘lurker’. There was evidence that not all members wish to actively participate in the community:

Listeners are browsers – they just read but may not contribute

Keeping or encouraging engagement in the community was therefore considered an additional challenge for those facilitating the CoP:

(lurkers) just don’t want to miss anything ... they just sit and watch – come and go, they can be from related communities ... may come to life at certain points

One CoP had designed the structure of the community to reflect the different levels of activity. Lurkers were encouraged to use the first tier: a wiki page of research project information and resources. Other tiers were directed to those members, often early adopters, who were running pilot studies and could act as potential mentors for new members. It was also noted that a critical mass of members frequently meant that the lurking or listening factor was not really a concern:

You have 'listeners' and 'contributors' ... need a good blend of this and this comes from a large group ... pulls in enough active people so it can include those who just want to 'listen' or read what's on the Wiki.

It was acknowledged that a community would – and indeed should – be comprised of members who represented differing levels of understanding and progress with ePortfolio practice, to ensure that there was an effective transfer of ideas and experience within the community, and potentially also between communities.

6.6 The sustainability of the communities of practice

Stages One and Two of the Australian ePortfolio Project have demonstrated that interest in ePortfolio use to support learning continues to grow both nationally and internationally. The series of interviews with ePortfolio CoP facilitators revealed that their communities were continuing to develop, either in response to an evolving understanding of the potential value of ePortfolios in education overall, as part of a business process in the context of further education and the recognition of prior learning, or as a complement to professional education activities in a career development environment. Ultimately, it was found that there was no single factor that ensured the sustainability of a CoP. The interviewees agreed that there were a number of interrelated activities and actions that, in combination, would continue to drive the effectiveness of an ePortfolio CoP. It was noted that these factors could have both internal and external implications for the community.

6.6.1 Internal drivers for sustainability

Continued momentum and engagement are viewed as essential elements of community sustainability. Cambridge et al. (2005) remind those planning to instigate a CoP that it would ultimately be the members themselves who would sustain the practice over time. This view is supported by Kranendonk and Kersten (2007) who surmised that their 'members keep on re-evaluating the meaning, practice, community and identity of the CoP' (p. 956). Interviewees echoed this in their discussions about community membership:

Need new people to come onboard all the time to compensate for those who may leave the group – helps deal with change and keeps the momentum going

... also need to target new people – 'fresh blood' - and identify those who may want to be involved

Within the online environment, the literature has identified the fact that sustainability can be directly linked to levels of dissemination, for example, the sharing of resources and publications (Stuckey & Smith, 2004). All interviewees stressed the importance of keeping the community engaged, stimulated and 'fresh':

Regular forums and symposiums to sustain and continue momentum

... keeping the site up-to-date – keep it fresh and if there is something happening – events, discussion – this keeps the momentum. It's possible to sustain these types of online CoPs indefinitely if the interest is there

The notion of inclusivity was regarded as an essential factor for effective engagement, to ensure that members maintained a sense of belonging and place in the community:

ensuring people feel valued, welcome and engaged in the network – that encourages other people to take responsibility - becomes shared ownership – other people do the facilitation, prompting, engaging – people feel the network does a good job for them

... it's about hearts and minds, people feel connected, valued, appreciated and endorsed – not just about the present but what's happening in the future

One interviewee gave the example of members having a ‘heads up’ in regards to different events, activities or being up to date on current information. Within an institution individual members could feel that, through the CoP, they were ‘ahead of the game’:

... very instrumental but important because in their institution it signals that they are connected

As noted earlier, 11 of the 14 CoPs reviewed for this project accommodated a funded facilitator, either as part of the institutional business process or through sponsorship from a national organisation. Kranendonk and Kersten (2007, p. 955) concluded from their studies that a successful CoP required not only a proactive facilitator, but also what they termed as a ‘master’ or core group of members that was able to provide distributed leadership and direction. The key person (or persons) may have some degree of status or influence:

Need an aggregator and an agitator ... probe and feel what the groups needs are

Need ‘thought leaders’ who put themselves out there and where people can be honest about their experiences – good and bad – need a provoker – someone who will shake things up

Interviewees also discussed the importance of attaining financial support in terms of ensuring ongoing sustainability:

Funded activities and administrators make a huge difference to sustaining a CoP.

Would require someone funded and motivated in equal amounts – be good to find someone within the group to maintain the emphasis ...

While it was accepted that, as a starting point for an ePortfolio CoP, a funded position might be a crucial factor for success, it was felt that — ultimately — there should be some sense of communal responsibility for the future of a CoP, especially to ensure a sense of ‘reputation and prestige’.

One community manager reported that she had recently lost funding for the (part time) position she had held for several years to manage the community. However, a new team was committed to continuing her work, with the former manager remaining the ‘face’ of the community. It was noted that, because of the national and international reputation of the CoP, the institution where she was employed had agreed to continue to support her surrogate role within the infrastructure for the community and was committed to hosting various ePortfolio events and forums in the future. This outcome reflected the significant value and prestige of the community, together with recognition of contributions made to funded projects in previous years.

6.6.2 External drivers for sustainability

The impact of external drivers on the ongoing sustainability of a community is highlighted in the various models of ePortfolio CoPs profiled as case studies in this report. The literature on CoPs reviews some of the communities in the business or corporate sector introduced in response to a specific problem or issue within the organisation. Probst and Borzillo (2008) noted that the viability of CoPs would depend on members believing that their community involvement would benefit or be advantageous to their professional needs. As ePortfolios become more common in the education sector, particularly in Australian higher education, the immediate context of CoPs has the potential to be influenced by government policy around education and employment.

Interviewees stressed that those external drivers were a prominent feature in their understanding of sustainability of the community:

Perhaps we need to put more effort into getting employers interested in ePortfolios. This will help as an external driver

A managed external approach will assist in keeping the ePortfolio environment active.

Although not specifically addressed in the interviews, external drivers were broadly included in discussions about the current ePortfolio environment. One interviewee considered the policy issues of ePortfolio practice and suggested that some form of national award or recognition could serve as a positive motivator within the ePortfolio community as a whole.

External factors such as professional accreditation and the recognition of prior learning where evidence of learning and development was captured in an ePortfolio was also viewed as providing impetus and momentum within particular CoPs. The CoPs that accommodated members from a variety of sectors were also seen to have a significant effect on practice perspectives:

... affiliations with other organisations ... can be useful to offer other resources – that will ultimately increase the level of engagement.

If there are separate communities it is important to have bridges between them.

There were strong views about the value of building connections and linkages with other communities, especially in terms of integrating and leveraging ePortfolio practice with the opportunities offered by the adoption of emergent technologies and online learning and teaching strategies. For example, the role to be played by ePortfolios in the context of eLearning was seen to be an important driver for interaction with other communities.

6.6.3 Future directions for communities of practice

The sustainability of a community will inevitably be determined by the members' goals for a group's ongoing development and growth. The model adapted by Cambridge et al. (2005) presents the final phase of the CoP as *Sustain*:

Sustain: *Cultivate and assess the knowledge and 'products' created by the community to inform new strategies, goals, activities, roles, technologies, and business models for the future.*

(McDermott, 2002, as cited in Cambridge et al., 2005, p. 2)

The future directions in ePortfolio practice are intrinsically linked to emerging educational technologies, as well as to policies on skills development and lifelong learning. Some facilitators indicated that they saw their communities playing a significant role in the area of ePortfolio development:

... don't have formal clout but are recognised as a group with expertise (a large mass) we are invited to different things but we can maintain our independent and a professional orientation

Need to influence the market and champion for different types of ePortfolios

The need to think about future directions links back to the community's original planning activities and their documented aims and purposes; interviewees believed that the process of providing members with the information, resources and support that they might need would empower and ultimately sustain the community:

... it's about doing the best you can for the people in the present but it is also about helping people connect to the future

There was strong agreement amongst the CoP facilitators that it was essential to build and extend national and international partnerships, especially given the globalisation of higher education.

6.7 Summary

By conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with the facilitators of 14 different ePortfolio communities based within Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the Netherlands and the USA, the research team was able to gather an extensive collection of experiential data about the diverse communities. While there were some distinctive aspects of these communities — presented in detail in the individual case studies — it was found that there was considerable commonality of views and experiences. The balance of virtual and face-to-face communication varied across the CoPs, there was a shared understanding about the critical success factors, with a clear need for the commitment of a funded facilitator in the early days of the community in order to stimulate member engagement and organise regular activities to help build the networks and relationships.

There was also agreement about the challenges faced by CoPs: technological issues, difficulties in maintaining member engagement and the workload of the facilitator were all cited as barriers to community development. Nevertheless, all facilitators expressed a clear desire to ensure that their CoP not only had a strong and vibrant future, but also that the different communities should work together to strengthen the role of ePortfolios as a tool for learning and teaching and for career development.