

## 7. Conclusion and recommendations

This report has presented a rich picture of national and international ePortfolio communities of practice, with an examination of the factors that have contributed to their success and sustainability. The notion of the community lifecycle is central to the discussion. The research activities encompassed a survey, a program of semi-structured interviews with community managers, and a series of case studies depicting successful ePortfolio communities. The survey of ePortfolio practitioners sought to determine the potential value of an ePortfolio CoP, the preferred focus for and the desired features of such a community, as well as the options for the technical and social architecture of an online forum. Through the semi-structured interviews it was possible to examine current examples of CoP activity to identify the critical success factors and the challenges faced by individual ePortfolio CoPs. Thus, the attributes of good practice could be presented. The data collected in the interviews contributed to the development of the 14 case studies, which have been beneficial in illustrating the diverse nature of CoPs in Australia and overseas.

The AeP2 team successfully achieved the desired outcomes for the project, as presented in Chapter 3 of the report:

- A forum was developed with the ALTC Exchange to support an ePortfolio community of practice.
- A range of strategies were developed and implemented to encourage interest in and engagement with community of practice activities.
- Resources were developed and promoted to support the diverse stakeholders in ePortfolio practice.
- There was effective collaboration with colleagues in the vocational education and training sectors to contribute to a cross-sector ePortfolio community of practice.
- A second Australian ePortfolio Symposium (AeP2) was hosted to disseminate the findings from Stage One of the Australian ePortfolio Project, exploring innovative practice in ePortfolio use in higher education, articulating policy developments and stimulating discussion on international ePortfolio issues.
- An associated trade display was held as a forum for strengthening the higher education sector's understanding of the features and functionality of ePortfolio platforms.
- Initial plans are in place to hold an ePortfolio symposium event in 2010 in collaboration with other ALTC projects and the *e-Portfolios – Managing Learner Information* business activity team with the Australian Flexible Learning Framework.

To further develop the sense of community engendered through Stage One, the AeP2 project team has effectively continued the dialogue about ePortfolios with a wide range of stakeholders in diverse educational contexts. This has specifically been achieved through the development and distribution of the series of six Australian ePortfolio concept guides; through the hosting in February 2009 of the second Australian ePortfolio Symposium, the AeP2 Showcase and the Technical Issues and Opportunities in ePortfolio Practice meeting; and through the online ePortfolio Practice Group set up within the ALTC Exchange. In addition, the ALIA/AeP2 LIS ePortfolio Pilot Project has successfully brought together an active community of library and information professionals interested in using ePortfolios to support their career development.

The research findings presented support the theoretical perspectives identified and discussed in the literature review, to indicate that the success and sustainability of CoPs were directly linked to the passion, dedication and commitment of a funded facilitator in the early days of the community, who was able to stimulate member engagement and to organise regular face-to-face and virtual activities to build the networks and relationships.

There was also agreement about the challenges faced by CoPs, with technological issues, difficulties in maintaining member engagement and the workload of the facilitator all cited as barriers to community development.

While the ePortfolio Practice Group was set up as a pilot collaborative space in the ALTC Exchange, the project team found itself challenged by a number of technical issues associated with the migration of the system to a new platform in mid 2009, which impacted on the coherence, reliability and accessibility of information posted to the forum. There were clear expressions of concern from members of the community about the features and functionality of the ALTC Exchange, particularly in terms of support for collaborative and networking activities, which inevitably had ramifications for the level of confidence members placed in the community site.

The AeP project, as a commissioned study of the ALTC, has served as a natural focal point for ePortfolio practice in higher education from late 2007 to the current time, with members of the project team acting as recognised points of contact and avenues for the dissemination of information about ePortfolios within Australia and internationally. This opportunity for leadership has been valuable in terms of making linkages across the various education sectors, particularly between the higher education and the VET sectors through the alignment with standards and policy development with colleagues representing the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Initiatives where knowledge and expertise has been shared include the open exchange of information about ePortfolio policy and practice, input into research and consultative processes, reciprocal support for and representation at ePortfolio seminars and workshops, and the contextualisation of AeP resources for audiences in the VET sector. Collaboration in this arena is timely, as new requirements emerge in the context of learner mobility within and between education, training and employment.

The AeP project has also been a lens for international activities, with natural synergies evident in the relationships established with agencies such as the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA), the International Centre for ePortfolio Research (hosted by the University of Nottingham) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK, NL ePortfolio SIG in the Netherlands, and emerging professional bodies such as the Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence Based Learning (AAEEBL) in the USA.

The ability for this leadership role to be maintained, however, is limited due to the finite life of the project itself. It was noted in the discussion about the CoP lifecycle that ‘communities’ typically follow a path of continual evolution, while a ‘project’ is ostensibly defined by specific start and end dates. The current funding model for the AeP project does not provide any opportunity for support for an ongoing role of community facilitator, which has been recognised as one of the most significant critical success factors for embryonic communities. This situation has a direct impact on the ability to sustain the momentum of the ePortfolio Practice Group within the ALTC Exchange: the group was initiated by the project team as part of the AeP2 project and, while the group has attracted around 50 members, the ‘active’ members who have added resources and promoted events have been those on the project team, rather than the membership at large. The members of this group are largely unknown to each other; it has been difficult to generate a feeling of collegiality in such a diverse, dispersed group even though the numbers are relatively small. Having experimented with this organic model of the pilot ePortfolio Practice Group, the project team believes that the long-term viability of such a group will rely on regular monitoring and support with a person (or people) dedicated to sourcing and providing new and fresh information. It is proposed that Queensland University of Technology takes responsibility for the active management and/or facilitation of the ePortfolio Practice Group within the ALTC Exchange so that the community of practice can successfully progress to the *Grow–Sustain* phases of the CoP lifecycle (see Figure 6.2).

It should be noted, however, that the diverse nature of the ePortfolio CoPs identified through the AeP2 research activities underscores the argument that a one-size-fits-all model might not be the most appropriate community of practice. In the literature review it was revealed that it was natural for CoPs to have a variety of geneses, based either on local or regional geography, on specific issues such as ePortfolio standards or pedagogy, on particular discipline interests, or on institutional factors. The key dynamic is therefore the interest in ‘common practice’, so that specific needs – such as the articulation of professional standards and competencies or the sharing of experience and expertise in using a particular software platform – may be the catalyst that draws people together. It is argued that there is room for all of these communities. One of the key outcomes from the AeP2 project could be the finding that ePortfolio researchers and practitioners are interested in a number of communities that support discrete aspects of ePortfolios, rather than a single national CoP through the ePortfolio Practice Group on the ALTC Exchange.

The AeP2 project has, in fact, successfully helped people come together to share their ideas and experiences in different areas, for example, through:

- PebblePad User Group (focusing on a particular ePortfolio platform)
- ALIA/AeP2 LIS ePortfolio Pilot Study (focusing on professional requirements)
- interaction through the Managing Learner Information Reference Group that supports the ePortfolio business activity within the VET sector (focusing on cross-sector technical issues and opportunities).

These different CoPs therefore represent a distributed model, rather than a centralised one. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the distributed profile of the sector itself represents one of the major hurdles for Australian higher education. While some sense of coordination across technology in education is provided by agencies such as JISC in the UK and SURF NL in the Netherlands, there is no comparative organisation in Australia. Some sense of cohesion can be found in the funding allocated to the Australian Flexible Learning Framework to provide the vocational education and training sector with an eLearning infrastructure. This arguably provides an opportunity for the strategic implementation of eLearning initiatives such as ePortfolios.

A number of organisations in the higher education sector are in the position to provide leadership and support for sustainable communities of practice in the area of ePortfolios in learning. The university Directors of Information Technology collaborate through the group CAUDIT, although their focus is primarily on strategic partnerships and relationships rather than on specific, funded initiatives. The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE) is regarded as a key Australasian organisation for universities engaged or interested in open, distance, flexible and eLearning, with a strong interest in enhancing policy and practice in eLearning. The Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ascilite) represents a professional community that encourages and supports quality research into, and exemplary use of, technologies for teaching and learning in tertiary education throughout Australasia. Interest in ePortfolio practice has been encouraged through focused forums at the annual ascilite conference. In recent years, ascilite has established strategic relationships with related organisations such as the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) in the UK and SURF in the Netherlands.

At the same time there has been a groundswell of interest in ePortfolios in individual universities across the higher education sector, with linkages to a number of other ALTC projects such as the National Graduate Attributes Project led by the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland, and a range of initiatives introduced at various institutions, including the University of New South Wales, Monash University, Flinders University, Edith Cowan University, Charles Sturt University, Murdoch University and Bond University. Building on relationships within the Australian Technology Network (ATN), ePortfolio activities are being extended at Queensland University of Technology, Curtin University of Technology, RMIT University and the University of South Australia. The dual sector institutions, which combine higher education and vocational education and training — such as RMIT University, Swinburne University, Victoria University and Charles Darwin University — have also demonstrated interest in ePortfolios to support more informal learning and recognition of prior learning (RPL) activities, especially for non-traditional learners. There are, therefore, already a number of collaborative bodies whose representatives may see value in driving further ePortfolio initiatives within the higher education sector and cooperating with other education and employment sectors.

While valuable work is evident in the cross-sector and cross-institutional collaborations, significant challenges remain. Further work needs to be done to develop strategies to progress ePortfolio practice in higher education. Effective strategies depend on interaction between the four contexts of government policy, technical standards, academic policy, and learning and teaching. The recommendations made in the final report of the first stage of the AeP project (Hallam et al., 2008) remain relevant. Government departments with responsibilities for education are encouraged to engage with peak industry, professional and employer bodies to develop a shared understanding of the potential of ePortfolio practice to articulate employability skills. This may foster an understanding that ePortfolio practice could be developed as a strategy to build an integrated relationship between the higher education, VET and schools sectors in order to support an individual's lifelong learning needs and to increase the potential for career progression.

Within universities there is a continued need for those engaged in the institution's learning and teaching policy environment to be conscious of the potential of ePortfolios to be integrated into current and future eLearning strategies in order to contribute to student-centred learning outcomes that reflect not only high level academic standards, but also the relevant professional standards and graduate employability skills. It is argued that the successful adoption and effective implementation of ePortfolios require strong alignment between the strategic, tactical and operational areas of academic management.

Despite the continued energy and enthusiasm generated by the AeP2 project, concerns remain about the 'unfulfilled potential' of ePortfolios in education. Delegates attending the AeP2 Symposium noted that there was still a lack of meaningful research into practice, with many academics seeking answers where little research has actually been conducted to date, particularly in Australia. It is believed that there is still room to undertake investigations into the real impact of ePortfolios on key learning outcomes within and beyond university.

In the context of higher education, there is scope to conduct further research into areas of learning and teaching practice that are aligned with ePortfolio learning in order to develop deeper understandings of issues such as the first year experience, curriculum mapping, student assessment, work integrated learning (WIL), cooperative education, graduate employability, learner mobility, graduate attributes, critical reflective practice and so on. While funding from the ALTC has directly supported the first two Australian ePortfolio symposia in 2008 and 2009, to achieve community engagement through the *Inquire, Design, Prototype* and *Launch* phases of the CoP lifecycle (see Figure 6.2) further financial support from the ALTC through the funding of ancillary ALTC projects and ALTC Fellowships would represent a valuable strategy to ensure that the ePortfolio community continues to move into the mature phases of *Growth* and *Sustainability*. One possible strategy could include partnership and/or sponsorship arrangements with the ALTC at learning and teaching forums and conferences – with permission to use the ALTC branding – to ensure that ePortfolio learning remains on the education agenda. This would also enable events to be hosted in different areas of Australia to reach a wider community of ePortfolio practitioners and researchers.

The relationship between critical reflective practice and ePortfolios offers further potential for progressing CoP activities, with ALTC funding granted to Dr Mary Ryan from Queensland University of Technology to develop staff and student capacities for teaching and learning reflective writing in higher education. Dr Ryan's project builds on some of the outcomes of the Australian ePortfolio Project; the project reference group includes established practitioners in the ePortfolio community, with representation by members of the AeP team from QUT and by members of the AeP2 steering committee. Beyond this, recent discussions within the AeP community have led to plans for an ePortfolio symposium to be held in 2010 in conjunction with the national forum proposed as part of Professor Beverley Oliver's ALTC Teaching Fellowship. Professor Oliver, from Curtin University, will be focusing on facilitating national benchmarking of the achievement of graduate attributes and employability skills at course level. Cross-sector collaboration is proposed, as the interest in employability skills is shared by those involved in the *e-Portfolios – Managing Learner Information* business activity, which is currently developing a national standards-based approach to the use of ePortfolio technologies for managing learner information (for example, through learner records, between VET, other educational sectors and employment).

Stage Two of the Australian ePortfolio Project was particularly targeted: to establish, facilitate and encourage an Australian community of practice (CoP) for ePortfolio researchers and practitioners, and to introduce a regular Australasian conference to provide a forum in which to explore and discuss ePortfolio research and practice. As an applied research project with tight timelines, the AeP2 project team achieved its principal objectives. The recommendations from the study are equally targeted: to promote the sustainability of ePortfolio CoPs and to encourage further stakeholder commitment to a regular face-to-face forum or conference.

## Recommendation 1

It is recommended that the various stakeholders in higher education who are interested in ePortfolios utilise the Australian ePortfolio Toolkit to guide and inform their practice.

## Recommendation 2

It is recommended that Queensland University of Technology takes responsibility for the management and/or facilitation of the ePortfolio Practice Group within the ALTC Exchange.

## Recommendation 3

It is recommended that the current distributed model of ePortfolio communities of practice be continued, with member needs tailored to meet geographic, software platform, or discipline/profession/industry requirements.

## Recommendation 4

It is recommended that, within individual academic institutions, ePortfolio communities of practice are encouraged and supported in order to develop common goals and shared understandings between the different ePortfolio stakeholders.

## Recommendation 5

It is recommended that individual academic institutions, through their teaching and learning research funds, foster and support further research into the educational benefits of ePortfolio practice.

## Recommendation 6

It is recommended that academic consortia such as the Australian Technology Network (ATN) sponsor cross-institutional research initiatives that will contribute to the development of a sound evidence base to support effective ePortfolio practice.

## Recommendation 7

It is recommended that cross-sector collaboration continues through the e-Portfolios – Managing Learner Information business activity coordinated by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, to ensure that international information standards for ePortfolio practice are adopted as an Australian technical framework, in order to facilitate the exchange of information and data across institutional, sectoral and jurisdictional boundaries.

## Recommendation 8

It is recommended that the ALTC establish partnership and/or sponsorship arrangements that continue the branding of future ePortfolio forums as ALTC events held in association with other ALTC project or fellowship activities.

## Recommendation 9

It is recommended that the 2010 Australian ePortfolio Symposium (AeP3) is planned to facilitate cross-sector collaboration between the higher education and vocational education and training sectors, in conjunction with ALTC-funded projects and fellowships and the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, in order to develop the interests in all stakeholders interested in the use of ePortfolios to support graduate employability, employability skills and learner mobility.