

Executive summary

This report documents Stage Two of the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP2), to specifically explore the current scope of national and international ePortfolio communities of practice in order to identify the factors that have contributed to their success and sustainability. The study has built on Stage One of the Australian ePortfolio Project (Hallam, Harper, McCowan, Hauville, McAllister, & Creagh, 2008), which outlined the broad range of issues and challenges, as well as significant opportunities, that faced the higher education sector in terms of ePortfolio practice, to determine how the emergent community of ePortfolio researchers and practitioners in Australia might be advanced.

The overarching aims of this project were to focus on building the Australian community of practice through an online forum and further symposium activities. Through the research activities the project sought to generate the following major outcomes:

- Develop a forum within the ALTC Exchange to support an ePortfolio community of practice.
- Develop strategies to encourage interest in and engagement with community of practice activities.
- Develop and promote resources to support the diverse stakeholders in ePortfolio practice.
- Collaborate in the establishment of a cross-sector ePortfolio community of practice.
- Host a second Australian ePortfolio Symposium (AeP2) to disseminate the findings from the Australian ePortfolio Project; to explore innovative practice in ePortfolio use in higher education; to articulate policy developments, and to stimulate discussion on international ePortfolio issues.
- Host an associated trade display as a forum for strengthening the higher education sector's understanding of the features and functionality of ePortfolio platforms.
- Develop resources to support an ePortfolio symposium model that may be adopted for future events.

The project extended from December 2008 to July 2009. The AeP2 team successfully achieved the desired outcomes for the project, which contributed to strengthening the sense of community through the following initiatives:

- 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.
- A forum was developed within the ALTC Exchange to support an ePortfolio community of practice.
- A range of strategies was developed and implemented to encourage interest in and engagement with community of practice activities.
- The AeP Toolkit was developed and promoted to support the diverse stakeholders in ePortfolio practice.
- There was effective collaboration with colleagues in the vocational education and training sector to contribute to a cross-sector ePortfolio community of practice.
- 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.

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

The project commenced with a review of the literature to define and explore existing models of communities of practice and to identify best practice frameworks that might guide the development of an Australian online ePortfolio community. The themes and issues identified in the literature guided the research process. The data collection activities examined the requirements for the development of a community of practice, considered from the perspectives of the different stakeholder groups, including academics, learning designers, learning and teaching and ICT support staff, careers and employment services, human resources managers, academic managers and the learners themselves.

The project activities encompassed a survey of stakeholders, 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, so that the attributes of good practice could be presented.

The data collected in the interviews contributed to the development of 14 case studies, which have been beneficial in illustrating the diverse nature of CoPs in Australia and overseas.

The report presents 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 survey findings indicated that there is strong support for a CoP to support ePortfolio practice in the Australian higher education sector. There is a high level of interest in the concept of a hybrid forum that blends the benefits of an online community with opportunities for face-to-face meetings (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 is 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. A CoP was seen to be an important initiative that would help consolidate current levels of interest and foster and strengthen the networking and relationships that were already emerging amongst those involved in ePortfolio learning.

While the semi-structured interviews provided insights into the distinctive aspects of the different communities based in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States of America, they also revealed considerable commonality of views and experiences. While 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 to organise regular activities to assist and build the networks and relationships.

There was 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. Nevertheless, all facilitators expressed a clear desire to ensure that their CoP not only had a strong and vibrant future, but that the different communities should work together to strengthen the role of ePortfolios as a tool for learning and teaching and for career development.

The AeP2 project encompassed six key areas of activity that have contributed to building a sense of community amongst local ePortfolio stakeholders:

- The AeP Toolkit, comprising a suite of six published concept guides about ePortfolio practice (see Appendix 1).
- The AeP2 Symposium, as a face-to-face forum to explore and discuss innovative practice.
- The AeP2 Showcase, to develop shared understandings about the features and functionality of the ePortfolio platforms available in Australia.
- The AeP2 Technical Issues and Opportunities meeting to consider the topics of policy, standards and interoperability.
- The ePortfolio Practice Group, established as an online community space within the ALTC Exchange (<http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/eportfolio-practice>).

- The ALIA/AeP2 LIS ePortfolio Pilot Study, introduced as an example of an industry-wide opportunity for ePortfolio practice to support learning and career development.

These activities all helped the diverse stakeholders in ePortfolio practice to come together and share ideas and experiences. They have also enabled the development and consolidation of relationships within and across academic institutions, between the tertiary and the vocational education and training (VET) sectors, as well as between the various disciplines and professions.

The AeP2 project, which has continued the momentum achieved through Stage One 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. 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.

Recommendations

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.