

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Overview

A variety of research methodologies was used to investigate the current picture of ePortfolio practice in Australian universities and to capture data about the scope and relative diffusion of ePortfolios across the higher education sector. Initially, a literature review and preliminary environmental scan were undertaken to gain an overall understanding of the nature and practice of ePortfolios in education, both nationally and internationally. The topics and issues presented in the literature are discussed thematically in the individual chapters in the report. The research activities subsequently encompassed a national audit of higher education institutions, a series of regional focus groups and semi-structured interviews, as well as surveys of, and interviews with, student users of ePortfolios. A national symposium was hosted by the research team to facilitate discussion on and engagement with ePortfolios in research and in practice.

The national audit, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were undertaken between October and December 2007; the Australian ePortfolio Symposium was held in early February 2008, enabling many of the research subjects to engage further with the topic at the forum. Delegates attending the symposium were able to further progress the research activities, for example, through involving their students in the survey work undertaken during Semester 1, 2008. The data collection activities were completed in early July 2008. The research team was sensitive to the fact that there are diverse stakeholders involved in ePortfolio activities within and across institutions. The data collection activities were consequently designed to capture the diverse perspectives and understandings of the different stakeholder groups, that is, learners, academics, learning and teaching support, academic managers, employers and policy makers. Strategies were therefore developed to extend the reach as widely as possible within the given timeframe. In this chapter, the various methodologies are discussed, set against the theoretical frameworks that guided the research approaches used in the project. The research instruments are available in the supporting documentation on the AeP website (www.eportfolioppractice.qut.edu.au).

3.2 Research objectives

The research brief prepared by the ALTC (2007), presented six topics that should be studied, which represented the research goals for the project:

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| Goal 1: | To provide an overview and analysis of the national and international context related to the development of portfolios, particularly ePortfolios, in tertiary education and schools. |
| Goal 2: | To document the types of portfolios, particularly ePortfolios, used in Australian higher education including the different approaches, purposes, audiences and infrastructure. |
| Goal 3: | To identify any significant issues related to the approaches being developed in Australian education and the likely impact on what is happening in Australian higher education. |
| Goal 4: | To examine the potential relationship with the National Diploma Supplement work being conducted by a consortium of universities led by the University of New England and the University of Melbourne. |
| Goal 5: | To recommend ways to share excellent practice in the implementation and use of ePortfolios. |
| Goal 6: | To identify areas in which further development could be supported and provide advice on how this might be achieved. |

Grounded theory provides the social science research perspective that underpins the research methods used in the project:

Grounded theory research begins by focusing on an area of study and gathers data from a variety of sources, including interviews and field observations. Once gathered, the data are analysed using coding and theoretical sampling procedures. When this is done, theories are generated, with the help of interpretive procedures, before being finally written up and presented.

(Haig, 1995)

Grounded theory is an inductive approach demanding that themes and concepts identified through the research are grounded in the experience of the respondents/participants. Accordingly, the researchers avoided approaching the data collection activities with any 'a priori hypotheses' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but sought to acknowledge the emergent nature of ePortfolio use in Australia with the associated need to discover the authentic picture of current engagement with ePortfolios in the higher education sector. It was important to avoid any expectancy effect (Colman, 2006) resulting from prior engagement with either the international ePortfolio environment or the scan of international ePortfolio engagement.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The Australian ePortfolio Project research activities were approved by the Office of Research, Research Ethics Unit, Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The activities nominated in the initial submission included the national audit and the focus group activities. As the project progressed, however, it became clear that additional data collection activities would positively contribute to the knowledge and understanding of ePortfolio engagement in Australia. As a result, extended ethics clearance was sought to include semi-structured telephone interviews and online student surveys. The full ethical clearance granted to the project covers all data collection activities both at QUT and across the diverse locations in Australia.

All research participants agreed to take part in the data collection activities on a voluntary basis. Participants were informed that the data collected would be treated confidentially, with anonymity fully assured. They were aware that, at any stage of the activities, they could withdraw as a participant without any negative impact on themselves personally or on any institution they were associated with. Research participants were informed that the full report would be freely available from the project website upon conclusion of the project.

The focus groups and semi-structured interviews were all audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. During the project, the tapes were stored securely in the project team's offices. Upon completion of the project, all tapes will be destroyed. All identifying characteristics were removed from the data collected from the surveys, interviews and focus groups. Special ethics clearance was sought and granted for the project case studies, which were identifiable, with the written permission for use to be given by the subject of each case study.

3.4 National audit of ePortfolio practice in Australian higher education

The focus of the national audit of Australian universities was to meet the requirements of the second research goal: *to document the types of ePortfolios used in Australian higher education, including the different approaches, purposes, audiences and infrastructure*. Some of the qualitative data collected also contributed to the fulfilment of the third goal: *to identify significant issues related to ePortfolio use*. The audit therefore represented a major component of the research data collection process in the project. The survey made it possible to build on and augment the preliminary environmental scan of ePortfolio activity and to examine in more depth the extent of ePortfolio engagement in the higher education sector. Specifically, the audit sought to:

- Collect data to identify and map existing and emerging ePortfolio practice in the higher education sector in Australia
- Document the various approaches to ePortfolio use in the Australian universities

- Contribute to the development of appropriate frameworks to measure the level of maturity in ePortfolio practice.

The project was formally introduced to the Vice-Chancellors of each of the 39 Australian universities with a letter from the QUT Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Professor David Gardiner. The correspondence with the Vice-Chancellors offered the research team an initial admission into the individual universities in order to determine which areas of the institution, and potentially which staff, were utilising ePortfolios. The letter of introduction invited institutional participation in the national audit of ePortfolio practice. It was accompanied by a brochure on the project to provide the context for the study, as well as an invitation to the Australian ePortfolio Symposium scheduled for February 2008.

The letter of introduction further requested all universities to provide the names and contact details of all relevant staff interested in participating in the national audit. In addition, the research team located the contact details of possible survey contacts from Australian university websites, for example, Deputy Vice-Chancellors with academic or learning and teaching responsibilities, deans of faculties, assistant deans (teaching and learning), and directors of central services such as information technology services, learning support, eLearning or careers and employment.

Given the very real time constraints for the project, an online (rather than paper-based) survey was considered the most efficient data collection activity. The benefits of online data collection include faster response times, cost effectiveness and the ability to reach a wide geographical area, all of which were important factors for the national project. Duetskens, de Jong, de Ruyter and Wetzels (2006) suggest that online surveys have been valued by those individuals with busy schedules who appreciate of the convenience of the online environment. Van Salem and Jankowski (2006) add that online surveys allow for the common characteristics of the sample group – in this case their email connectivity – to be utilised to best advantage. The project team did, however, acknowledge the fact that online research activities make it difficult to determine overall survey response rates, especially given the challenge of needing to identify and reach appropriate respondents within complex organisations in a short space of time.

Principally, the Tailored Design Method (TDM) was used in the development of the survey instruments. Dillman's development of this method draws upon Social Exchange Theory and has been noted as producing a higher response rate (Dillman, 2000). Critical elements within Social Exchange Theory relate to rewards, costs and trust, whereby the respondents will reply or respond to the survey if they trust the source and believe that the reward will outweigh any direct costs to them. The project team tried to reduce the perceived costs in regards to time and effort by making the survey short and easily accessed by staff working in an online environment.

Following the Tailored Design Method, the survey allowed for multiple contacts with potential participants during the survey period, whereby respondents were contacted via email with regular notification of the final date for survey submissions. The TDM also requires the surveys or questionnaires to be user-friendly (for example, available online) and that they relay the importance and usefulness of the survey (for example, that this was part of a national research project commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council). As it was anticipated that members of the research team might wish to ask supplementary questions as a follow-up to the survey questions, respondents were requested to identify themselves and provide a contact email address.

Despite the benefits of the online approach, the research team was nevertheless challenged by the difficulties of determining the relationship between the number of individuals who were 'targeted' and the actual response rate. The sampling activities meant that respondents were able to forward on their survey link to others they understood to be involved in ePortfolio practice, and therefore it was not possible to determine, precisely, either the response rates or the sectors represented.

Given the diverse range of stakeholders, it was agreed that different survey instruments should be developed in order to accommodate the different contexts and to capture the range of perspectives that may be characteristic of the diverse groups. Three surveys were therefore developed to target the distinct areas of the higher education environment, with respondents asked to self-identify to determine the most relevant instrument to complete, using the following definitions:

- Learning and teaching survey — academic, academic support and general teaching staff, assistant deans, learning and teaching development and those generally involved with teaching design and development and/or supporting students in recognition of learning.
- Management survey — involved in governance, policy, resource development, department managers, administration staff, assistant directors and careers and employment officers.
- Human resources survey — involved in the professional development of university staff (professional and/or academic).

There was an initial presumption that the use of ePortfolios within individual institutions would potentially be very fragmentary rather than cohesive, with the result that various people at the same university might operate not only in different contexts but also have disparate understandings about ePortfolio usage. This meant, for example, that while one question asked about the breadth of utilisation of ePortfolios in the respondent's own context, it was quite feasible that respondents from the same institution would provide quite distinctive answers.

The online questionnaires were developed using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), a commercial tool that allows for a variety of question and response formats, for example, open text, multi-choice selection, Likert scale ratings and enabled drop-down menu selections. SurveyMonkey was selected because of its ease of use and qualifying features (such as the formats in which data can be downloaded), accessibility and cost. Each of the three surveys had a generic component that included a project information page, statement of consent, guidelines for completing the survey, respondent information and an area to nominate colleagues or other people known to the respondent who might also wish to be involved in the survey.

Following piloting by the project partners, the surveys were released in early November 2007. Emails were distributed to senior academic managers, human resource managers and careers and employment managers. The recipients of the emails were encouraged to distribute the details of the surveys further to any colleagues who may have an awareness of, or interest in, ePortfolios. Invitations to participate were also distributed to personnel who had been identified as authors or researchers during the process of reviewing the literature, or as being involved in ePortfolio projects during the environmental scan activities. Links to the surveys were also added to the AeP website so that they could also be located independently by people interested in ePortfolios.

The questions about ePortfolio use posed in the survey were deliberately open and exploratory as the researchers believed it was important to discover the respondents' own view of the ePortfolio world through open-ended questions, rather than potentially 'leading' the respondents by offering them the chance to simply 'tick the box' to allocate an answer. The overall nature of the questions was intended to collect the following information about ePortfolio engagement in Australian universities:

- the scope of institutional use — faculty wide, institution wide, program or subject based
- the scope of student and/or staff use
- assessment and evaluation activities
- guidance and support for ePortfolio users
- the technological nature of the ePortfolio tools
- implementation factors, including both drivers for and impediments to implementation
- policy and strategic direction
- the overall impact on teaching and learning.

Copies of each survey — Learning and teaching survey, Human resources survey and Management survey — will be made available on the Australian ePortfolio Project website.

The survey resulted in a large volume of rich data, which was examined and interpreted by the research team using QlikView data analysis software (www.qliktech.com) and the textual analysis program Leximancer (www.leximancer.com). The findings from the national audit are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.5 Focus groups

Focus group discussion sessions were planned for a number of locations across Australia. This aspect of the research sought to support the fulfilment of the third goal of the research project: *to identify any significant issues related to the approaches being developed in Australian education and the likely impact on what is happening in Australian higher education*. The principal purpose of the focus groups, therefore, was to engage with sectors beyond the higher education sector itself and to document the issues associated with ePortfolio practice in Australia. Invitations to attend the focus groups were sent to representatives of primary, secondary and higher education, the vocational education and training (VET) sector, representatives from business, industry and the professions, as well as representatives from the community sector. Project team members were asked to identify individuals and organisational representatives who might be interested in taking part. This purposeful selection of participants was considered important to ensure meaningful discussion about current ePortfolio engagement in Australia.

The focus group process also proved to be very valuable as an opportunity to disseminate information about the project beyond the immediate tertiary education sector. Engagement with representatives from sectors other than higher education helped inform the project more broadly about the level of awareness of and the range of experiences with ePortfolios in the different contexts. It was also possible to discuss what expectations these other areas might have for the higher education sector itself in terms of ePortfolio engagement. Kreuger (1994, p. 87e) stresses the value of focus groups as a means 'to understand ... to determine the range ... and to provide insights' into key issues, in this case into the multifarious ePortfolio issues in Australia. The nomination of possible focus group representatives by the project partners is noted by Kreuger as an effective strategy for identifying participants (1994, p. 84).

Focus groups were hosted by the four institutional research partners, in Brisbane, Melbourne, Wollongong and Armidale, with additional meetings held in Adelaide, Perth and Sydney. The focus group activities took place between October 2007 and February 2008, with each one lasting for up to two hours. It was recognised that Kreuger (1994) recommends a focus group size between six and nine participants, as the opportunity for equal participation may be reduced in groups of more than twelve.

The potential for 'interviewer effects' (Breen, 2006, p. 473) was acknowledged, with steps taken to minimise any risk of bias. Drawing on the literature and the experience of project team members, a series of stimulus questions was designed to elicit responses from participants, regardless of the level of their familiarity with the ePortfolio concept. The stimulus questions were used to guide, but not limit, the discussions. Time constraints within the project meant that the stimulus questions were not subjected to a full pilot process. To address this shortcoming, two strategies, also recommended by Breen (2006), were used to minimise any possible negative factors: firstly the stimulus questions were sent to participants prior to the focus group sessions so that they had time to consider them, and secondly the extended time for the focus group (up to two hours) allowed time for participants to seek clarification about the concepts arising from the questions.

The stimulus questions were used to prompt discussion about ePortfolio practice, drawing once again upon the research approach of Grounded Theory. Written agreement to participate in the research project was collected from all attendees at the beginning of the focus group sessions. The documentation distributed to focus group participants is available on the Australian ePortfolio Project website.

The questions focused on the following issues:

- What do you think an ePortfolio is/can be used for/comprises?
- What is the purpose of an ePortfolio in your sector?
- What are you doing with ePortfolio at the moment?
- What would you like to be doing in the future? Why?
- What support/factors would you like to have in order to progress your level of engagement?
- What would you like the higher education sector to be doing in terms of ePortfolio use/support?

One additional question was posed if the moderators felt that greater specificity was required:

- Which *one/two* of these factors *is/are* the most important for you at this stage?

It was hoped that the qualitative data from the focus groups would amplify the audit data collected in the surveys, to present a richer picture about the level of involvement in ePortfolio activity, to gauge current perceptions around ePortfolio practice, to identify critical issues and also to determine other sectors beyond higher education might like to see as possible outcomes of ePortfolio activities in universities.

3.6 Semi-structured interviews

To build on the foundation of the focus group activities and to further enrich the data collection process, the research team undertook a series of targeted semi-structured telephone interviews. Initially it was hoped to use the 'snowball sample' approach (Kreuger, 1994, p. 84) to elicit nominations for appropriate participants, primarily from those who had attended the focus groups. An initial email was distributed to forty-seven potential interview subjects to establish whether they wished to participate. However, as this initiative resulted in a disappointingly low response rate members of the research project intervened to specifically contact a number of people who were felt to have both the integrity and the depth of knowledge about different aspects of ePortfolio practice to provide valuable insights and comments. A total of seven people agreed to take part in the semi-structured telephone interviews, representing employers and professions, ICT policy and vocational education. Some of the interviewees had attended the focus groups.

The semi structured interviews were conducted between January and March 2008. The semi-structured interview questions were the same as the stimulus questions used in the focus groups, with the format encouraging open responses. Interviewees received information about the project, the purpose of the interviews and the text of the interview questions prior to the interview taking place. There was no predetermined length for the interviews and participants were free to continue talking for as long as they wished. On average, interviews lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. The telephone interviews were all recorded; at the beginning of the interview the purpose was restated and participants were asked to give, and in all cases gave, verbal consent to record the interview.

Tape-based analysis (Kreuger, 1994, p. 143) was used to analyse the interview data. Tape-based analysis acknowledges the summarised nature of the transcripts with analysts referring to the tape to clarify points if required. The tight timelines for the project meant that this approach was preferred to the lengthier option of full transcript-based analysis. Two analysts were used to identify the key words and phrases and to aggregate these into themes. A brief summary was prepared from each interview and the separate interview summaries were then collated to present an overall view of all the themes emerging from the interviews.

3.7 Student surveys

The research team was cognisant of the central role of students in the use of ePortfolios in higher education. The literature review and environmental scan, along with the preliminary findings from the audit, revealed that — to date — there has been a lack of information about the student experience per se, although internationally there had been some published activity of ePortfolio student evaluations, particularly within the UK and in the Netherlands. To capture the student voice, the AeP project developed two levels of data collection that focused on the student experience: the new student likely to be encountering an ePortfolio for the first time, and the 'mature' student who had been engaged with ePortfolio practice for some considerable time. The survey of 'new' students was two pronged: it involved a pre-course questionnaire at the beginning of the semester to capture their *expectations* about using an ePortfolio and a post-course questionnaire to capture their *experience* of the ePortfolio process during the semester. The 'mature' user study also comprised two parts: a survey and a semi-structured interview.

3.7.1 Pre-course and post-course surveys

SurveyMonkey was again used to develop two separate online surveys to capture both the initial expectations of students about how to use ePortfolios in their university course and their subsequent experiences with the process. The first survey was to be completed early in the semester *prior* to a student's use of an ePortfolio (pre-course survey); the second, follow-up survey was to be completed close to the end of the semester *after* they had engaged in ePortfolio work (post-course survey). The pre-course expectation survey was based on a pre-course survey piloted in 2007 with first-year paramedic students at QUT about to utilise ePortfolios in their coursework. Project members also reviewed a pre- and post-ePortfolio evaluation survey undertaken by dental students at Newcastle University in the UK (Teasdale et al., 2008).

It was anticipated that each survey would take no more than five minutes for the student to complete and it could be accessed online via a direct link, preferably during class time. The proposal was for the teacher/tutor introducing students to the ePortfolio activity to give them the link as an initial step, before they were introduced to ePortfolio or started using it. Each student was required to create a six-character code, using a combination of their initials and date of birth to render it unique to them, yet reproducible, so that the pre-course survey responses could be correctly correlated with the post-course survey responses. Later in the semester the teacher/tutor would release the link to the post-course survey for the students to complete.

The Australian ePortfolio Symposium in early February 2008 was used as a forum to identify potential targets for the student surveys. During the symposium delegates were invited to submit their contact details if they had a student cohort that was undertaking ePortfolio practice for the first time in the first semester of 2008. A total of six tertiary institutions responded to the invitation and the online pre-course survey was made available to these university representatives from Week 1 of Semester 1, 2008. The post-course survey was made available to the same six institutions for release before the end of the first semester; the release dates for the questionnaire were staggered to fit in with the timelines for the academic programs of each cohort.

Online surveys were selected for in-class completion because internet access was easily available to this population. In line with the audit and focus group activities, the questions enabled the project team to gain insights into student expectations prior to using ePortfolios, and then ascertain their experiences once they had engaged in ePortfolio practice. However, unlike the audit questionnaire, there was only one open-ended question and the rest were selective questions. This pre-determination of the response options not only allowed for prompt and efficient completion of the questionnaires, but also reduced the likelihood of confusion or concern on the part of students who were likely to be unfamiliar with ePortfolios. For example, questions around definitions of ePortfolios were presubscribed and students were asked to select the one they felt was appropriate. This was different to the approach taken in the audit surveys, where respondents were asked to give their own definition of ePortfolios. Copies of each questionnaire and both surveys will be made available via the AeP project website.

3.7.2 'Mature' users of ePortfolios

As part of the research for the AeP, the research team sought to collect data about students who had used an ePortfolio at an Australian university for some period of time, so that they could be considered 'mature' users of an ePortfolio. There were two parts to the 'mature' user study:

- Part 1: A short survey about the student (or previous student or graduate) and the context of their use of an ePortfolio
- Part 2: A semi-structured interview with the student (or previous student or graduate) conducted either by phone or face to face.

The questions and interviews had an exploratory focus and enabled the project to capture further valuable data about current ePortfolio practice in Australian universities from one specific cohort of stakeholders. The initial survey questions were identical to the demographic questions used in the pre- and post-course online student surveys; the remaining questions echoed the 'ePortfolio use' questions posed in the learning and teaching audit.

As an important first step, the research team needed to identify target respondents who could be regarded as 'mature' users. Drawing on data collected from the national audit in November 2007, the team identified those respondents who had indicated that their institutions had used ePortfolios extensively or over a significant period of time. Representatives from seven institutions that indicated extensive engagement in ePortfolios practice were contacted and invited to nominate mature users who might wish to be involved in the data collection activities. Initially, 16 potential respondents from various institutions around Australia were contacted.

A total of nine students (former students or graduates) representing two institutions were ultimately surveyed and interviewed about their use of an ePortfolio. While this group of respondents was more limited than originally hoped, this component of the project nevertheless offered the opportunity to provide initial information not only about students' actual experiences using an ePortfolio, but also the perceived the impact on their learning. There was further potential to consider the role of ePortfolios in the transition into employment as they applied for jobs.

3.8 Case studies

At the beginning of the project, the research team agreed that a series of case studies would provide valuable depth to some of the perspectives identified in the national audit. However, as the project progressed, the complexity of the task was acknowledged. To effectively complete the case study work, further consultation with ePortfolio practitioners across the higher education sector would be required. Consequently, brief case studies are presented for the four project partners, to illustrate a number of different ePortfolio initiatives within Australian universities. There is scope to extend the case study work in the future.

3.9 Employer engagement

The role of ePortfolios for transition into and across the employment sector and for initial and ongoing professional accreditation is acknowledged in the literature. The Australian ePortfolio Project has recognised the previous survey work undertaken by Rhonda Leece at the University of New England in 2005. Leece gathered employer feedback on ePortfolio use in the area of recruitment through a survey of members of the Australian Association of Graduate Employers. The outcomes of her survey indicated that while the process of compiling the ePortfolio was considered advantageous for the job seekers, there was no evidence to suggest that an electronic portfolio surpassed the traditional format of job applications. The final report recommended, however, that the employers' motivation to accept ePortfolio practice is one that should be cultivated (Leece, 2005).

The research team sought to ensure that this stakeholder group was included as a key cohort in the research activities. However, despite significant efforts on the part of the project team to engage with employers, recruiters and professional bodies, it was found that the short timeframe for the data collection work did not marry well with the annual pattern of graduate recruitment, coinciding with their peak period of activity. The contribution of industry representatives and employer groups was therefore limited to their involvement in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, which although providing highly valuable perspectives, did not permit the project to include a large-scale review of employer engagement with ePortfolio practice.

3.10 Maturity models

An outcome of the literature review and consultation process was an awareness of 'maturity models' as a way for organisations to measure their preparedness to adopted ePortfolios both at a technology and a process level. Maturity models gained popularity in the 1980s as a way to measure the degree of maturity an organisation may demonstrate in its approach to software development (Humphreys, 1989) in order to further support the development of ICT processes, products and services. In Australasia, the e-Learning maturity model (eMM) is a popular way to look at eLearning capability and sustainability (Marshall & Mitchell, 2002). Within the context of ePortfolio research and practice, two ePortfolio maturity models have been developed: one primarily aimed at the British schools sector, designed by the Learning Sciences Research Institute at the University of Nottingham and used by Becta (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, 2007), and a second model that sought to benchmark ePortfolio implementation in the Dutch higher education sector (SURF NL, 2007).

The Becta maturity model was designed to support the school sector in raising awareness of the factors affecting implementation and sustainability of ePortfolio practice within a local environment. The model looks at ePortfolio practice from the four main perspectives the institution, teacher, learner and system, each supported by a set of sub-factors or promoting questions. This is presented in a matrix format with a series of descriptors outlining a sliding scale of maturity. An organisation can then judge its level of preparedness by comparing their situation against the matrix (Becta, 2007).

Drawing on the Becta model, the Netherlands (NL) Portfolio group of SURF developed an adapted model, focusing on specific phases and priorities of ePortfolio implementation. This model has a five-point scale of maturity that encompasses: local use; process redesign; network redesign and embedding (in two levels: basic and advanced); and redefinition and innovative use. This model was then used to benchmark the state of higher education ePortfolio practice in the Netherlands and to encourage continuous improvement (SURF NL, 2007).

3.11 Australian ePortfolio Symposium

As part of the project plan, the research team proposed holding a forum to promote and extend the research activities. The Australian ePortfolio Symposium was a two-day event hosted by QUT in Brisbane to achieve this goal, as well as to facilitate the sharing of information and experiences, both Australian and international, across the higher education sector. The symposium was held from 7 to 8 February 2008, with two satellite events: a policy meeting attended by key partners and stakeholders, and a showcase of a range of ePortfolio software tools. The symposium was promoted through project partners, through the research activities such as the national audit and the focus groups, and from the project website. The event attracted a number of international speakers and the program included facilitated panel presentations and group workshops.

3.12 Summary

Within a relatively short time frame the research team used a variety of exploratory research approaches aimed at collecting a wide spectrum of data to describe and interpret the extent of ePortfolio initiatives in Australian universities and capture the key issues impacting on policy and practice in the higher education sector. Due to the short timeframe for the project, the research strategies were nimble and dynamic, yet successfully reached a broad spectrum of stakeholders in order to provide what is hoped is a balanced picture of ePortfolio practice.

The key findings from the research are presented in Chapter 6. In order to provide further contextualisation, however, it is valuable to first present the national and international contexts that frame ePortfolio activity (discussed in Chapter 4), as well as to outline the significant issues that relate to ePortfolio initiatives in Australian education (as presented in Chapter 5).