

8. WAYS TO SHARE ePORTFOLIO PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIA

Goal 5: To recommend ways to share excellent practice in the implementation and use of ePortfolios

8.1 Overview

During the course of the Australian ePortfolio Project, it became apparent that many teaching staff in universities were concerned about the silo-based culture that frequently developed in their institutions. While there are many new initiatives that introduce exciting and innovative teaching and learning practices into the curriculum, it was felt that all too often academics were working autonomously, with little opportunity to share ideas and expertise. This resulted in the wheel being reinvented on multiple fronts, both within the individual institution, across disciplines and across the higher education sector as a whole. The situation becomes more complex as new educational technologies are developed, with individual staff independently trying out new strategies to design, develop and deliver engaging learning activities for their students.

Some institutions seek to address these problems through some form of collaborative approach, be it through a working party, a task force or even a committee. An alternative model moves into the domain of more informal and fluid networking, with the development of a community of people, local or distributed, who seek 'to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories' (Smith, 2003). Their interest in organising themselves around a specific topic or area of knowledge offers them 'a sense of joint enterprise and identity' (Smith, 2003). From this shared enterprise, a 'community of practice' can evolve. Wenger (2002) defines communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better'.

Communities of practice have a special role to play in areas of emerging practice. In certain situations, people may be interested in a specific idea, technology or activity, but not yet fully understand or know 'how to do it'. Churchman and Stehlik (2005) argue that the value of communities of practice is particularly pronounced in times of emergent practice or rapid change. Tennant (1997) has suggested that new knowledge and learning are properly conceived as being located in communities of practice, where there is the potential to address problems that are relatively unstructured, 'to share knowledge outside of the traditional structural boundaries' and to work around the potential problems of slow-moving hierarchies in organisations (Lesser & Storck, 2001). While the authors consider the value of communities of practice within the immediate context of commercial organisations, the principles they discuss also apply to academic institutions.

The landscape of ePortfolios represents one example of emerging practice in Australian higher education that is currently attracting considerable interest. The research activities that have been central to the Australian ePortfolio Project have revealed that a significant number of people are interested in the use of ePortfolios in learning, in transition into employment and in career development. However, comments from research subjects have indicated that many of these people feel that they are currently working in isolation and are keen 'to make meaning or sense of their situation and ways in which to negotiate their professional identity in the new context' (Churchman & Stehlik, 2005). The research team strongly believes that the Australian ePortfolio Project presents opportunities to engage the Australian higher education sector in that 'sense of joint enterprise and endeavour' (Smith, 2003). Following an overview of the concept of communities of practice in higher education, some international examples of ePortfolio communities of practice are presented as models that might guide the establishment of some potential options that could support engagement with ePortfolios through the areas of policy, research and practice.

8.2 The role of communities of practice in higher education

Social constructivist learning theories emphasise the importance of collaboration between learners: 'Learners construct their own reality or at least interpret it based on their perceptions of experiences, so an individual's knowledge is a function of one's prior experiences, mental structures and beliefs that are used to interpret objects and events' (Jonassen, 1991). Beyond this, one specific aspect of social constructivism is the concept of situated learning, where learners become involved in activities that are directly relevant to the application of their learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). These ideas are central to the model of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), which proposed that learning involves a process of engagement in a 'community of practice'. The authors argue that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice, participation that is 'at first legitimately peripheral but that increases gradually in engagement and complexity' (p. iii).

Communities of practice are 'groups of people who informally share, develop and diffuse learning, knowledge and practice' (Churchman & Stehlik, 2005); they develop around things that matter to people (Wenger, 1998), so that the organisation around a specific area of knowledge and activity offers members 'a sense of joint enterprise and identity' (Smith, 2003). Inevitably, the community should link back to 'practice', so that ideas and activities are shared and further developed within the community itself. As such, the process is integral to the nature and attributes of the academic environment, both within and across institutions. Wenger (1999) has identified three dimensions that define the role and purpose of a community of practice:

- *What it is about: Its joint enterprise as understood and continually negotiated by its members*
- *How it functions: Mutual engagement that bind members together as a social entity*
- *What capability it has produced: The 'shared repertoire' of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabularies, styles etc) that members have developed over time*

(Wenger, 1999, pp. 73–84)

The use of ePortfolios in higher education is an emerging area of interest to many academic stakeholders: teaching staff, students, instructional designers, academic managers, IT directors and careers and employment staff. The high level of interest and engagement from delegates attending the Australian ePortfolio Symposium, held in early February 2008, intimated that there was indeed immense potential for the project team to consider future strategies that would allow the current knowledge and experience of people to be placed 'at the centre of a process of dialogue and collaborative enquiry that can lead to transformative learning out of which new identities and practices emerge' (Newell Jones, 2006).

The theme of the 2008 conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Association of Australasia (HERDSA) was 'engaging communities'. Members of the Australian ePortfolio Project team were invited to lead one of the extended symposium sessions at the conference. With delegates attending from both Australia and New Zealand, discussion focused on the opportunities to foster deeper engagement with the policy environment, practice issues and collaborative research initiatives in the region. As a good proportion of the symposium participants had also attended the AeP Symposium, it was felt that the forum itself had aroused good levels of interest, energy and interaction, and that these could potentially be developed further. One of the critical issues, however, is to determine what form or forms might best suit the 'emerging community'.

8.3 Examples of international communities of practice to support ePortfolio activities

Interest in and activities around ePortfolios in education have been in place for a considerable period of time in the northern hemisphere. There are examples of ePortfolio communities of practice that have been established in Europe (specifically the Netherlands and the UK) and also in the USA.

The European Institute for eLearning (EIFEL) was established in 2001 as an organisation that could focus on the policies and practices underpinning the 'knowledge economy' and 'learning society' concepts.

The notions of learning technologies, reflective practice and lifelong learning are central to EIfEL's activities. EIfEL is a membership organisation that began as a tight-knit community but has since opened up to a broader membership base of both individuals and organisations, embracing the spectrum of stakeholders in the eLearning environment. Members are informed about and guided in their professional practice through a series of activities that include research projects, pilot programs, special interest groups, workshops, conferences and consultancy. The organisation has a specific role to play in supporting the initiatives introduced by the European Parliament, such as the Europass (2004), which seeks to become a single transparent framework for individuals to present their qualifications and competencies. In response to this, EIfEL developed the 'ePortfolio for all' as their objective for 2010. The campaign has provided a focal point for their activities, such as the International ePortfolio conferences, European Portfolio Initiatives Coordination Committee (EPICCC) and the European Consortium for the ePortfolio (Europortfolio). Further information on EIfEL can be found on their website (www.eife-l.org).

There are further communities of practice in individual European countries, such as the Netherlands. The organisation SURF has a longer history, evolving in response to government policy issues in the 1980s, with Dutch universities challenged to develop and introduce ideas associated with the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in higher education. SURF and its activities are primarily funded by the academic partners (research intensive and applied science universities) and the government Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. NL Portfolio is a special interest group (SIG) within SURF, established in 2004, which aims to 'combine, share and develop further the knowledge in the field of digital portfolios in higher education' (SURF NL, 2008). One fractional staff position is funded by SURF for administration of the SIG. The activities of NL Portfolio currently encompass:

- *setting up a portal site for e-portfolio in higher education in the Netherlands*
- *participating in different project tenders in the field of e-learning in the Netherlands*
- *starting up a work group around scaling up Eportfolio in Higher Education Institutes*
- *cooperating in the international field on e-portfolio*
- *exploring and developing the theme of life long learning in the Netherlands, in cooperation with partners in education, in government and in employment*
- *being one of the organisers of Eportfolio 2008 conference in October in Maastricht*
- *disseminating practice through congresses, seminars, etc.*

(SURF NL, 2008)

Accordingly, the NL Portfolio team coordinates research projects across the higher education sector, to explore the potential for ePortfolios in learning and assessment and to support academics with scalability issues as they move out of the experimental phase of ePortfolio practice to face the challenges of implementation at the institutional level. Limited funding is offered for a number of small projects that draw on the distributed enquiry process to resolve a range of questions associated with ePortfolio practice. Knowledge is shared via the NL Portfolio portal, publications, seminars and congresses. Recent work at NL Portfolio has included a study closely related to the Australian ePortfolio research project, examining ePortfolio practice in a number of Dutch universities (Aalderink & Veugelers, 2007). International collaboration is also a key focus of the NL Portfolio activities.

In the UK, ePortfolio activity was also initially stimulated by government policy, with the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (1997) recommending the development of 'Progress Files' that consisted of a formal academic transcript and the ability to record and reflect on personal development (PDP). The Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) operates as an Associate Centre of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), with a specific focus on supporting higher education institutions and their communities with the implementation of Progress Files, personal development planning and ePortfolios (CRA, 2008b). The CRA has a membership that encompasses major higher education institutions, smaller organisations and individuals, providing a forum for dialogue about policy and practice in the area of ePortfolios. The organisation has close links to the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and, of course, the HEA. The CRA has compiled a number of case studies on ePortfolio practice in diverse universities and has contributed to the development of communities of practice within and across institutions, for example, the University of Manchester (O'Connell, n.d.).

Once again, the international perspective comes to the fore. The CRA plays a leading role in the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (2008). This agency, as the National Coalition, was established in the United States in 2003 to promote research on ePortfolio practice at colleges and universities. As it was felt that practice was in fact outpacing research in many areas of ePortfolio activity, the coalition was founded to engage institutions in collaborative research efforts, using a cohort model. Each cohort is composed of about ten higher education institutions that commit to a three-year research project. Cohorts I and II involved US institutions, but UK and European universities have been involved in Cohorts III and IV. Cohort V (2008–2011) was convened in August 2008.

Within the Inter/National Coalition, the research activities focus on both a question important to the institution's local practice, as well as on a cohort-wide enquiry into a common question, so that the investigative activities build on and contribute to scholarly theory and research into a range of learning, eLearning and organisational issues. The research teams are thus generally multidisciplinary in composition, with academic teachers, IT staff, learning support staff etc. There are two face-to-face meetings in the three-year cycle, with some overlap between the different cohorts to ensure knowledge and experience is transferred between the groups. There are also two teleconferences with the coalition leader each year. The coalition website acts as a portal for resources, and virtual meetings are convened via discussion forums and webinars (D. Cambridge, personal communication, February 22, 2008). The convenors of the Inter/National Coalition facilitate a virtual community of practice through the Electronic Portfolio Action and Communication (EPAC) wiki and blog (EPAC, 2008). The commentator Helen Barrett also tracks ePortfolio research activities, primarily from the perspectives of US work (Barrett, 2008).

The Electronic Portfolio Consortium, or ePortConsortium (eportconsortium, 2008) is a collaborative venture established by a group of US universities. The consortium comprises academic institutions and ICT organisations and focuses on the ePortfolio application environment, working towards appropriate definitions, and standards to support and encourage interoperability and transportability between ePortfolio systems. There are three types of membership: conceptual members, namely individuals who are interested in the conceptual or technical issues of ePortfolios; invited corporate members with an interest in the technical standards, participating in technical meetings and protocol development; and developing members, such as, higher education institutions using the Epsilon ePortfolio software system. The consortium currently has members in 67 different countries, with around 850 corporate members and over 1000 conceptual members. There is a collaboration group site that provides the opportunity for members 'to discuss and share know how, documents, case studies, and information about ePortfolio initiatives and projects within their institutions' (eportconsortium, 2008).

The ePortfolio standards community is represented by a number of agencies that encourage strategic and technical collaboration. In the UK, the JISC Centre for Educational Technology Interoperability Standards (JISC CETIS, 2008a) is a partnership of a number of higher education and further education institutions that receives funding from JISC. Representatives of JISC CETIS collaborate in a number of forums that explore and develop international educational standards, for example, internationally with the IMS Global Learning Consortium (IMS, 2008a) which has developed an international ePortfolio specification model (IMS, 2005) and nationally with LEAP 2.0, which is based on Semantic Web concepts (JISC CETIS, 2008b) and the Portfolio Interoperability Prototyping (PIOP) project (JISC CETIS, 2008c). Representatives from JISC also collaborate in the eLearning framework and tools program with other international parties, such as SURF NL, Industry Canada, the New Zealand Ministry of Education and the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to encourage the potential for common service definitions, data models and protocols. JISC plays an important role in disseminating information on learning technology standards via workshops and conferences.

JISC CETIS coordinates a Portfolio special interest group (SIG) to inform and support communication between people working with Portfolios, with a website, e-lists, events and, more recently, a wiki (JISC CETIS, 2008d). Highlighting the opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, this Portfolio SIG is administered by CRA.

The ePortfolio community in the UK receives support for research and development through JISC funding. In Section 1.5 of the report, it was noted that JISC has identified four key purposes for ePortfolios: supporting application, supporting transition, supporting learning, teaching and assessment, and supporting personal development planning (PDP) and continuing professional development (CPD). This conceptual framework gains further maturity through the targeting funding of projects, for

example, the use of ePortfolios to 'support application' sees the funding of research into projects that investigate issues associated with the application process into university, through the University and College Admission Services (UCAS) system or through direct entry options, or the issues associated with applying for jobs or work placements. The JISC ePortfolio website provides links to the diverse projects that it supports, which include the 'fit for purpose' projects, as well as the technical development initiatives and some guidance for institutions (JISC, 2008a).

The higher education policy environment is seen to be a critical factor in the JISC context, specifically in terms of the 'lifelong and personalized learning policy drivers [that] propose that all learners should be able to (electronically) develop, record, repurpose and transfer a wide range of information about themselves as they progress through different levels and episodes of learning, training and employment' (JISC, 2008b). Agencies such as CRA, on the other hand, are concerned with the practitioner perspectives of ePortfolios, especially to support research into practice, with the practitioner often a novice researcher. Encouragement and support is being offered to ePortfolio practitioners engaged in research projects through the National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and ePortfolio (NARN) (CRA, 2008b). This network project is being run as part of the HEA National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and is managed by academic staff at the University of Bolton and the University of Worcester in conjunction with CRA. The project involves practitioners from 16 higher education institutions becoming involved in 'participant action research on the research and evaluation process' (HEA, 2008b) to build the capacity for robust research and to build a stronger evidence base for understanding the impact of ePortfolios on students. The National Union of Students (NUS) is also involved in the project. Members of the network will operate on three levels: national, regional and institutional. Four events are planned at the national level to discuss and share the conceptual ideas: the theoretical model, possible research designs, the planning and reporting of issues etc. At the regional level, participants will attend six meetings that will focus on the action research process itself, to build a community of informed critical friends. At the institutional level, participants will be directly involved with the research and evaluation activities.

An alternative community of practice model has been established as a geographically-based entity, with the Scottish PDP Forum. The forum is jointly managed by HEA, QAA Scotland and CRA, with the aims of discussing areas of common interest, sharing effective practice and identifying other forms of institutional level support (HEA, 2008c). The priorities for members of the forum have been identified for the coming year, with a strong focus on collaboration and networking. The members are interested in both discipline-specific and multi-disciplinary research activities and see the Scottish PDP Forum as the opportunity to build links via individual members to other networks such as NARN and the Inter/National Coalition, as well as the opportunity to submit collaborative bids for funding or to develop shared resources such as toolkits and resources for students.

The UK has further avenues of support for specific academic communities through their Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and Subject Centres. Seventy-four CETLs were established in England in 2005 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), with a further seven created in Northern Ireland by the Department for Employment and Learning (HEA, 2008d). The CETLs seek to recognise and promote excellence in teaching, covering a wide range of disciplines and pedagogical research. In line with the role played by CETLs to help shape and influence institutional policies for learning and teaching development, share good practice across the higher education sector, and participate in evaluation and research to inform future developments in policy and practice, the Centre for the Advancement of Integrative Learning at the University of Nottingham includes an ePortfolio strand that focuses ePortfolio developments and initiatives (University of Nottingham, 2008b). This CETL has, together with JISC, hosted workshops to bring together the various stakeholders in ePortfolio development, specifically at a time when there is recognition of 'the growing relevance of e-portfolio developments in strategic plans and drivers in government and in higher education' (University of Nottingham, 2006).

The HEA in the UK also provides discipline-specific support through the 24 Subject Centres (HEA, 2008a). The Subject Centres facilitate the communication between academics in related fields, with the websites providing access to resources such as case studies, research reports and funding opportunities. The discipline focus in ePortfolio practice becomes increasingly important when there is the need to align qualifications and career development with professional standards (for example, in the health sciences and engineering).

8.4 Options for establishing communities of practice to support ePortfolio activities in Australia

Compared with the diverse examples of ePortfolio communities that have been established, and continue to evolve, internationally, particularly in the UK, Australia has as yet seen very little activity. Building on both the knowledge gained during the present project and on earlier work undertaken by JISC and CRA in the UK, the research team is currently developing a preliminary 'ePortfolio Toolkit' to provide guidance to the diverse stakeholders about the issues they need to consider and the approaches they can take to introduce an ePortfolio project at their institution.

The national audit findings and the regional focus group discussions supported the initial literature review and environmental scan to paint a picture of individual pockets of ePortfolio activity across the higher education sector, with committed and enthusiastic teaching staff working with their students to develop their ePortfolios. There are a growing number of journal articles and conference papers in the higher education literature addressing the issues of ePortfolios, although it can be argued that the majority of these papers showcase innovative practice, with little rigorous evaluation of the projects.

To date, there have been a small number of dedicated ePortfolio symposia in Australia: EIFEL hosted the ePortfolio Symposium in Melbourne in March 2007 (EIFEL, 2007), as part of the Trilogy Asia-Pacific ePortfolio Tour of Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong; in June 2008 education.au invited stakeholders from the VET sector, the higher education sector and the government to meet and discuss policy issues associated with ePortfolios in education and training (education.au, 2008a). A discussion group was set up within the Education Network Australia (EDNA) online network for Australian educators, but to date there has been little activity. The research team hosted the Australian ePortfolio Symposium, with the associated Showcase, in February 2008 (see Section 6.5).

At the local level, there have been several institutional developments. One university has embarked on an institution-wide project to introduce ePortfolios to students and academic staff. The project is strategically aligned with the university's teaching and learning goals; a cross-faculty reference group and working party have been established, with a pilot taking place during 2008, with the aim of the ePortfolio system being rolled out across the university in Semester 1, 2009.

Other universities are endeavouring to raise awareness about ePortfolios in learning and teaching. In October 2007, the University of Melbourne held an ePortfolio Forum (University of Melbourne, 2007), inviting academic staff to consider the role of ePortfolios in student learning and to showcase current examples of ePortfolio practice at the university. In May 2008, the University of Queensland held an institutional workshop that was designed as a 'starting point for a dialogue within UQ to establish a coherent approach to ePortfolios' (University of Queensland, 2008) in order to develop an initial strategy and working model for ePortfolio development and implementation at the university. The interactive workshop was effective in bringing together the teaching staff from many different disciplines to explore the many issues. International experts joined the workshop as 'virtual guests', providing feedback to the groups in the room as they developed their ideas.

The University of Wollongong launched its ePortfolio Community in May 2008, with an inaugural ePortfolio Symposium 'to celebrate and share the diversity of approaches, activities and tools used by the 2007 and 2008 cohorts [of students]' (University of Wollongong, 2008) (see also Table 6.2 in Chapter 6). Following on from the Australian ePortfolio Symposium, QUT held an internal showcase day to share and discuss some of the leading ePortfolio initiatives using the university's Student ePortfolio (SeP) from a range of discipline perspectives. The SeP team continues to develop the online resources to support students and academic staff; it also offers a program of tutorials and workshops to cohorts that range from new students during Orientation Week and to higher degree research students.

Feedback from delegates attending the Australian ePortfolio Symposium and discussions at professional meetings have stressed the urgency of 'continuing the dialogue' that has commenced in this country, possibly through a regular symposium program. Delegates reported that they wanted to know how to best share knowledge and expertise within and across universities, to foster collaboration and to establish a central resource or portal. These strategies are all elements of a community of practice.

The interests of different stakeholders, however, may need to be considered in the different contexts of policy, research and practice, and as in the UK, there may be opportunities to establish local, regional, national and international communities.

Individual institutions can develop their own community of practice, which may emerge from grassroots activities to gain momentum across faculties and schools, or there may be institutional drivers that encourage a strategic approach to coordinate policy with practice. Each institution will have its own channels of communication and collaboration that will best suit their immediate context. There may be scope for communities being established within alliances of universities which may have specific strategic goals, for example the Group of Eight, the Australian Technology Network, or the Innovative Research Universities Australia group. The existing communications infrastructure of these alliances may be developed to incorporate working groups to undertake collaborative research or to share practice.

The current research activities, through the national audit, the student surveys and the regional focus groups have not only succeeded in raising awareness within the Australian higher education sector about ePortfolios as both process and product, but also intensified the interest of academics in engaging with and deepening their understanding of the contribution of ePortfolios to learning, both within and beyond university. The research team believes there is immense scope for further research and analysis of the impact and potential of ePortfolios in higher education: the diverse dimensions of knowledge construction, student attitudes, new teacher roles, employer expectations, eLearning-supported pedagogies, emerging technologies, organisational factors, interoperability etc. Research funding (for example, through the ALTC) can play a vital role in facilitating collaborative research in the area and will help the sector better understand how ePortfolios might be used to achieve productive outcomes in key areas of educational and workforce policy.

While no current examples of discipline-focused communities for ePortfolio researchers or practitioners could be identified in Australia, there are clear benefits to be gained from collaboration across a specific discipline, especially when linked to professional accreditation requirements, for example, for the teaching profession, engineering or nursing. However, initial steps towards establishing disciplinary communities have been made through the ALTC Exchange.

The mission of the ALTC itself is to 'promote and advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education' (ALTC, 2008c), with specific objectives which seek to develop ways to identify, develop, disseminate and embed good practice in learning and teaching, especially through national and international relationships. The ALTC Exchange, formerly the Carrick Exchange, has been developed as 'a new online service that will provide learning and teaching resources and support communication and collaboration across the national and international higher education sector' (ALTC, 2008d). As such, it can support the identification, dissemination and embedding of good individual practice, as well as best institutional practice within the higher education sector, to support 'networking and the development of communities of practice across the higher education sector' (ALTC, 2008e).

In discussing the development of the ALTC Exchange, Philip, Lefoe, O'Reilly and Parrish (2007) proposed that the Exchange 'may well support fully formed communities of practice, plus any looser and more brittle networks'. It is advised that there should be room for the community of practice 'to self organise its own structure and facilities ... [beginning] with a minimal set of activities and forums to encourage participation' (Philip et al., 2007). This may be within discipline contexts, at regional or national levels. The Australian ePortfolio Project research team believes that there is a strong — and growing — body of interest in academic circles to move in this direction. Building on the idea of the HEA National Teaching Fellowship program, there is further potential to use the ALTC Fellowship Scheme as a mechanism to foster leadership and stimulate collaborative activities, as well as to develop national and international relationships.

The current research has enabled Australia to develop strong relationships with international ePortfolio communities. Rob Ward, Director of the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) has served as a member of the project Steering Committee, while Associate Professor Angela Smallwood, Director of the Centre for International ePortfolio Research at the University of Nottingham, has acted not only as the external reviewer for the project, but also a valuable 'critical friend'. It has therefore been possible for the research team to establish connections with representatives of ePortfolio practice and research in the UK, the USA and the Netherlands. Members of the project team were invited to attend the first meeting

of Cohort IV of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, held in London in October 2007, to observe the first steps in developing an international network of practitioner-researchers in the ePortfolio field. Members of Cohort IV include academic staff from universities in the England, Scotland, the Netherlands and the USA. Cohort V will involve 11 American universities in a three-year program of collaborative research.

While the ALTC may provide one suitable avenue to support the sharing of knowledge and practice within the Australian higher education sector, national cross-sector engagement is also critical in terms of policy and infrastructure — the Australian Flexible Learning Framework supports the VET sector through an eLearning infrastructure. The 2008–2011 framework strategy includes the strategy to support RPL and transition processes through a system of national standards that support portability and re-use of eContent (DEEWR, 2007b). The 2008 *framework business plan* includes funding for key business activities for ePortfolios (DEEWR, 2007a):

E-portfolios – developing the national infrastructure that will provide the technologies and standards to ensure portability of a learner’s collective evidence of learning, to support their ability to move between training and other forms of education, between jurisdictions, and between employers and industries.

A reference group has been established to ensure key stakeholders, including representatives from the Australian higher education sector, contribute to national and cross-sectoral agreement on ePortfolio standards, policy and business rules. The framework has funded a research study, the VET ePortfolio Roadmap, which will inform the development of strategy and policy for ePortfolio systems in the VET sector. The project seeks to identify key stakeholders, the commonly required features of VET ePortfolio systems in order to develop the appropriate reference model for an ePortfolio system. The research findings will then contribute to the planning of national ePortfolio activities.

Beyond this, there is also clear interest in international collaboration in the area of standards and interoperability to support eLearning. At the Federal Government policy level, there are already agreements and initiatives in place between the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand and SURF in the Netherlands, as evidenced by the eFramework for Education and Research (eFramework Partners, 2008): ‘The primary goal of the initiative is to facilitate technical interoperability within and across education and research through improved strategic planning and implementation processes’. Australia is also a member of the IMS Global Learning Consortium, which focuses on the IMS ePortfolio specification to help make ePortfolios interoperable across different systems and institutions (IMS, 2008b).

It is important for the Australian academic sector to engage with and support strategies that will encourage ePortfolio practice across higher education. While there is evidence of strong interest with some interesting examples of early adoption, further work needs to be done to ensure this preliminary work is sustainable and scalable within individual institutions and across disciplines. There is also the potential to encourage collaboration across the sectors, to bring together the schools, vocational and higher education sectors to achieve common goals.

8.5 Summary

Many of the delegates who attended the Australian ePortfolio Symposium indicated that the forum was very timely. The audit of ePortfolio practice findings reveal that the majority of the individual respondents are only sketching their first ePortfolio pictures and that many of the institutions are just beginning to develop the required infrastructure and supporting policies. The time is therefore right for educators, technologists and managers to determine how they might speedily build up their knowledge and skills — avoiding the possible potholes along the way — in order to achieve outcomes that will enhance learning and teaching for both students and teachers. The fact that many universities are only just setting out on this journey means that there is considerable value in participating in national and international networks to create a richer and more diverse canvas that will appeal to a wider audience. The opportunities presented by the ALTC Exchange and initiatives in the UK, Europe and the USA should not be ignored.

Nevertheless, it is not only about being in the right place at the right time. Philip et al. (2007) stress the challenges still to be faced: 'the need for financial support; issues of academic time poverty; the need for well-placed institutional champions, the difficulty of identifying and quantifying outcomes from communities of practice; and the question of sustainability and ongoing support'. Arguably these challenges are common to many academic projects — immediate analogies can be drawn with individual ePortfolio projects. There is a need for a clearly articulated common purpose and shared goals within so many of the activities that take place in the higher education sector. Through regular and frequent exchanges of knowledge and experience, the community's own 'practice' can effectively move teaching and learning forward (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003).

The ability to share creative ideas, innovative practice and high quality resources is integral to the future success of higher education nationally and internationally. There are opportunities, as presented in the recommendations and final chapter of this report, to foster deeper engagement with ePortfolios in higher education through the development of resource kits for the different practitioners, establishing a community of practice around the topic, or indeed several communities with, for example, a discipline focus. There is undoubtedly scope for individual academics or collaborative teams, both national and international, to undertake further research into the impact of ePortfolios in learning. A regular symposium would support the emerging communities of practice and offer a forum for the dissemination and sharing of knowledge and expertise.