Portfolios of choice

by Julie Hare

There comes a time when an institution has to play the role of early adopter and encourage change in student behaviour. In the case of ePortfolios, only one Australian university – QUT – has stepped into the breach, offering each of its 40,000 students the opportunity to create and manage their own e-Portfolio.

As with all early adopters, QUT stands alone in Australia, with the University of Wollongong earning an honourable mention. A new report into the use of ePortfolios by Australian universities, commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, has found fragmented use of ePortfolios not only across the sector but within institutions. Internationally, Australia lags behind the leading nations.

“The use of ePortfolios tends to be fragmented and distributed across the sector,” said lead author Associate Professor Gillian Hallam from the School of Information Systems at QUT. “There’s not much collaboration or cohesion, but there are isolated pockets of innovative activity.”

Among its 10 recommendations, the report argues that ePortfolios are not a fad and, as such, government policy should be directed towards encouraging a shared understanding of the value and potential of ePortfolios for employers and peak bodies and their integration across the education sectors “in order to support the individual’s lifelong and lifewide learning needs and to increase the potential for career progression”.

Hallam said the VET sector is more advanced in its use and understanding of ePortfolios, with the concept of recognition of prior learning and engagement with industry having given it the edge.

“The fact is eLearning is developing and growing. As students create their academic work digitally, there is an argument that ePortfolios initially become a repository to store all of their work, develop their reflective skills through their education and monitor their skills development and achievements.”

Complex and dynamic, ePortfolios can be manipulated to suit different audiences. Students can choose views for their lecturers, for instance, or for future employers.

“What is an ePortfolio?
An ePortfolio is an electronic portfolio, also known as a digital portfolio. According to Wikipedia it is a “collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a user. Such electronic evidence may include inputted text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries, and hyperlinks. E-Portfolios are both demonstrations of the user’s abilities and platforms for self-expression, and can be maintained dynamically over time. Some e-Portfolio applications permit varying degrees of audience access, so the same portfolio might be used for multiple purposes.”

“ePortfolio process is really important about learning how to collect information, reflect on it and develop plans for future learning. It’s very holistic – it’s not just about academic study its about how you are developing as a person across the whole of your life. We talk about lifelong learning, but also lifewide learning because its not limited to just your institutional achievements.”

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