The Australian ePortfolio project and the opportunities to develop a community of practice

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In 2007-2008, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded a national research project to examine the current picture of ePortfolio practice in Australian universities. The paper presents a review of the Australian ePortfolio Project, with a specific focus on the strong interest across the Australian higher education sector to establish communities of practice to support the sharing of knowledge and experience at the institutional, discipline and sector levels nationally. A number of international models of communities of practice that encourage the sharing of expertise through research and practice are outlined. The paper seeks to stimulate discussion about the possible opportunities for all ePortfolio stakeholders (learners, teachers, academic managers, ICT directors, educational technologists and learning and teaching support teams) to build and sustain a strong future.

Keywords: ePortfolios, communities of practice

Introduction

In 2007 the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education) called for expressions of interest for a priority project to investigate ePortfolio practice in higher education in Australia. The project, known as the Australian ePortfolio Project (2008), was awarded to a group of four universities: Queensland University of Technology as lead agency, The University of Melbourne, University of New England and University of Wollongong. Three of these universities were part of a consortium commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) to consider the development of a National Diploma Supplement (UNE, 2008). The final report for this research project is scheduled to be delivered in August 2008.

The Australian ePortfolio Project was informed by an extensive literature review and environmental scan which has helped develop an understanding of the current national and international contexts. Data collection activities encompassed an audit of ePortfolio practice in higher education to consider the range of initiatives and the drivers for development in diverse academic institution, with online surveys of academic staff, university administrators and human resources managers. These surveys have enabled the project team to examine the range of ePortfolio activities that may be mapped across diverse criteria to create a series of maturity models, augmented by case studies that will allow a richer picture to emerge of the contexts where ePortfolios are being used. A series of regional focus groups were conducted to better comprehend ePortfolio use in secondary education, vocational education, the professions and the wider community. Further work involved a survey of student expectations about ePortfolios (early in Semester 1) with a follow-up survey on student experiences with ePortfolios (at the end of Semester 1), as well as interviews with 'mature' student users. Beyond the universities themselves, the research also encompassed a series of semi-structured interviews with people who represented the professional accreditation bodies, employers and employer groups, educational policy and eLearning standards and interoperability.

The Australian ePortfolio Symposium (AeP, 2008) was held in early February 2008 to bring together representatives from Australian universities to discuss the educational, technological, management and policy aspects of ePortfolio practice. The event attracted more than 200 delegates from 38 Australian and New Zealand universities, plus one Scottish university. The research activities have enabled extensive consultation across the sectors, with the Symposium offering an opportunity for many of the key players to come together to share ideas and experiences, as well as to stimulate discussion about the future role of ePortfolios in higher education.

These project activities have therefore already help build a strong foundation for a possible community of practice. 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". 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 and 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 final report for the Australian ePortfolio Project was released by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in late October 2008 (Hallam, Harper, McCowan, Hauville, McAllister & Creagh, 2008). The project reported that while there is a high level of interest in ePortfolios throughout the Australian higher education sector, ePortfolio practice is currently fragmented and requires cohesion in order to raise the field to the level of leading edge practice in other countries (Hallam et al, 2008). A sense of isolation amongst early ePortfolio adopters was uncovered during the research, together with the desire for opportunities of collaboration and sharing with other practitioners (Hallam et al, 2008). To this end, the Australian ePortfolio Project report made two specific recommendations:

- Recommendation 8: "that ePortfolio stakeholders establish a Community of Practice to share learning and experiences of quality ePortfolio practice in higher education, in order to foster scholarship and research and to provide a forum for dissemination about good practice."

- Recommendation 9: "that a regular Australasian conference be convened to explore and discuss ePortfolio research and practice." (Hallam et al, 2008, p.v)

It is argued that, through the Australian ePortfolio Project, there is the potential to build on the foundational research work to engage the Australian higher education sector in that "sense of joint enterprise and endeavour" (Smith, 2003).

International communities of practice that support ePortfolio activities

Interest in and activities around ePortfolios in education have been in place for a longer period of time in the northern hemisphere. There are examples of ePortfolio communities of practice that have been established in Europe, including specifically the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK), as well as the United States of America (USA).

The European Institute for eLearning (EIfEL) was established in 2001 as an organisation that could focus on the policies and practices that underpin the concepts of a 'knowledge economy' and a 'learning society'. The notions of learning technologies, reflective practice and lifelong learning are central to EIfEL's activities. EIfEL is a membership organisation which 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 programmes, 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, 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 (EPICC) and the European Consortium for the ePortfolio (Europortfolio).

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. NL Portfolio is a special interest group (SIG) within SURF which aims to "combine, share and develop further the knowledge in the field of digital portfolios in higher education" (SURF, 2008). 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 as they move out of the experimental phase of ePortfolio practice to face the challenges of implementation at the institutional level. Knowledge is shared via the NL Portfolio portal, publications, seminars and congresses. Their recent work has included a study closely related to the Australian ePortfolio research project,

examining ePortfolio practice in a number of Dutch universities (Aalderink and 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 that institutions of higher education develop Progress Files to encompass the traditional academic transcript, as well as a way to record and reflect upon personal development, through Personal Development Planning (PDP). The Progress File comprises the two elements currently the focus of research in Australia: the National Diploma Supplement and ePortfolios. In the UK, 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, 2008). 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 Steering 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 at the University of Manchester (O'Connell, n.d.). The UK has further avenues of support for specific academic communities through their Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) (HEA, 2008a) and Subject Centres (HEA, 2008b).

Once again, the international perspective comes to the fore. The CRA plays a leading role in the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research. 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 which commit to a three-year research project. The research focuses 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 organsiational issues. The research teams are thus generally multidisciplinary in composition, for example 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).

Options for establishing an ePortfolio community of practice in Australia

The Australian ePortfolio Symposium, following on from the audit of ePortfolio use in late 2007 and the series of focus groups, aroused a strong interest in the topic from the perspectives of both research and practice. The recommendations presented in the Australian ePortfolio Project final report gives consideration to the potential outcomes from the project itself and further opportunities that may emerge as a result. Feedback from the Symposium delegates in early 2008 stressed the urgency of 'continuing the dialogue' that has commenced in this country, to consider 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 mission of the ALTC itself is to "promote and advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education" (ALTC, 2008), 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 is described as an online service designed to provide learning and teaching resources and support communication and collaboration across the national and international higher education sector. Philip, Lefoe, O'Reilly and Parrish (2007) propose that "the [ALTC] 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). The Australian ePortfolio Project team believes that there is a strong – and growing – body of interest within academic circles to move in this direction.

While the ALTC Exchange may be a suitable mechanism to support knowledge sharing at the local and national levels, there is also clear interest in international collaboration, especially 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 Steering 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 (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, 2008). The Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, discussed earlier in the paper, has proposed discussions about the feasibility of a future cohort of research into ePortfolio practice being formed in the Australasian region. There is further potential for Australia and New Zealand to embark on collaborative projects with UK colleagues, through the CRA, and in Europe, through SURF.

Conclusion

Findings from the Australian ePortfolio Project reveal that ePortfolio is at an emergent stage in Australian higher education. The time is therefore right for educators, technologists and managers to determine how they might speedily build their knowledge and skills, avoiding the possible potholes along the way, so achieve outcomes that will enhance learning and teaching for both students and teachers. The fact so 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. The present paper invites readers to consider the opportunities and challenges of establishing and sustaining an ePortfolio community of practice, to consider issues such as time and money, along with the identification and quantification of outcomes (Philip et al, 2007).

Acknowledgements

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