EPORTFOLIOS, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY: SOME STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

ePortfolios are increasingly prevalent in Australian universities as platforms for students to develop and present themselves and their work electronically. This paper focuses on ePortfolio use for education and recruitment. Student responses to an online survey at Victoria University in Melbourne about their use of PebblePad provide perspectives about the usefulness of ePortfolios, the utility of the PebblePad platform, the relevance of assessment tasks and the extent to which students may use ePortfolios beyond assessment requirements. Survey findings highlight students' polarised views about PebblePad and suggest a need to review how ePortfolios are used, promoted and assessed.

Introduction

This paper examines the increasing use of ePortfolios in Australian Higher Education. PebblePad is the chosen platform for developing ePortfolios at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, where VU students are encouraged to use such digital spaces to both develop employability skills and to showcase these employability skills to prospective employers. A second year unit in VU's Faculty of Business and Law, Professional Development 2: Analysis and Strategy (PD2), requires students to create an ePortfolio as an assessment task. At the end of semester students were invited to complete an online survey so that unit coordinators could obtain student views about the usefulness and importance of ePortfolios in the context of the assessment exercise as well as the quality and utility of the PebblePad platform that was used. Students were further asked if they had presented their ePortfolio to potential employers and if there was any likelihood of them presenting their ePortfolios as part of the recruitment process in the future. The survey was conducted to evaluate and improve on the unit's curriculum for future deliveries.

Background

Victoria University has a central Student Careers Unit that has responsibility for working with curriculum developers and academics to embed employability skills in the curriculum. This unit also encourages and supports students to develop their ePortfolio to showcase these employability skills. This unit is firmly of the belief that an ePortfolio will enhance students' employment prospects as well as enhance students' capacity to think reflectively about their employability skills. In addition to Student Careers, the university employs eLearning staff who are also available to support both staff and students in the uptake of the ePortfolio platform. How well resourced these support areas are and what motivates teaching staff to use PebblePad, the platform adopted at VU, is a matter for senior managers to consider. In reality, to embed ePortfolio use in a whole-of-course approach takes more oversight and time than most lecturers have and a range of encouragements and support are required to ensure a coordinated, whole-of-course approach to developing and demonstrating employability skills.

Literature Review

It is worth noting here that many institutions refer to electronic portfolios, webfolios, digital portfolios and efolios.[1] In this paper, we have chosen to use the increasingly common ePortfolios — and not eportfolios or the hyphenated e-portfolios. Many VU documents refer to webfolios or even generically to PebblePad but there seems to be no institutional common usage. The word ePortfolio seems to have the most common usage in Australian literature and throughout most Australian universities. While there seems to be no consistent usage around this digital artefact, each term clearly refers to the same sort of digital space with similar functionality. Many of Australia's universities use the commercial product PebblePad though others' products are also used in Australian education including Blackboard, Desire2Learn and CareerHub. Some Australian institutions use open source products such as Sakai, Open Source Portfolios and Mahara. Even fewer universities in Australia use institutionally developed platforms (Hallam et al., 2008).

Officially, VU defines a webfolio as "an evidence-based web site that is used to present 'stories' about yourself or stories about your learning. They can contain any number of pages which can be added to, edited or deleted at any time. Pages may also contain links to web sites and other assets within your ePortfolio" (VU, n.d.). A review of ePortfolio literature focuses mostly on their use in an educational setting and as a space to develop employability skills, including reflection. Literature in the field also emphasises the fact

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[1] The Australian ePortfolio Project (Hallam et al., 2008) offers a number of terms that are used to describe an ePortfolio: digital portfolio, efolio and webfolio are just some of them.

that most Australian universities provide an ePortfolio for students and encourage them to collect evidence of their graduate attributes. EPorfolio use in Australia seems to be following trends in Europe, the UK and the USA although, unlike Europe, Australia does not have the supranational benefits of the Bologna process or the inspiring — if not a little ambitious[2] — work of the European Institute of E-Learning (EIfEL) to encourage the uptake of ePortfolios here. EIfEL's definition of the ePortoflio raises the issue of ownership and therefore cost that is mentioned by VU students in the evaluations: "An ePortfolio is a *personal* digital collection of information describing and illustrating a person's learning, career, experience and achievements. ePorfolios are *privately owned* and the owner has complete control over who has access to what and when" (ElfEL, n.d.; our emphasis). Certainly, access to ePortfolios when students are no longer enrolled with the university is only one issue around the ownership theme. Other definitions mention that ePortfoilos include "authentic" evidence and evidence collected over an extensive period of time (NLII, 2003) but really the quality of evidence cannot be guaranteed by the medium. Most definitions see ePortfolios as containing anything from academic work to personal information — including video, audio, photographic and textual evidence, academic results, other achievements such as awards, employment history (including volunteer work), testimonials of employers, and evidence of personal interests.

How well desired graduate attributes or the use of ePortfolios have been embedded in the Australian higher education curriculum is a matter for extensive discussion in an ALTC report on ePortfolios: *Australian ePortfolio Report* (Hallam et al., 2009). A number of government-sponsored reports have commented that ePortfolios are prevalent in the education sector (Hallam et al., 2009; Precision Consultancy, 2007) and seem to be gaining popularity in a number of areas. Similarly, reports and papers often comment that ePortfolios "provide benefits to employers who wish to obtain a more complete picture of a graduate and their skills and experience" particularly in relation to demonstrating employability skills (Precision Consultancy, 2007, p. 46). While there is a considerable amount of material on ePortfolio use to encourage student reflection and to document development of graduate attributes, especially in higher education, there has been little research on the actual as compared to the speculated use of ePortfolios in the recruitment process.

The idea that employers would obtain a more complete picture of would-be employees through their ePortfolio is not a well-documented step in the job selection process. Really, while ePortfolios are touted as both learning spaces and platforms for exhibiting skills and attributes to prospective employers, little attention has been paid to how or even whether employers use them as part of the recruitment process: "little is known about employers' preferences for how useful ePortfolios are to them and how they could better identify student employability skills for employers" (Precision Consultancy, 2007,

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[2] EIfEL's claim "In 2010, every citizen will have an ePortfolio" really should have contained a few qualifiers.

p. 56). Three years later, it is safe to say that little is still known and what is known is hardly positive.

The 2007 report by Precision Consultancy claims that employers are suspicious of "university generated reports" of employability skills and rely on their own selection processes. Furthermore, the report says that students need to "take responsibility for explaining and demonstrating examples of their capabilities through portfolios. . . structured to meet employer needs" (2007, p. 46). The same report provides a summary of employer practices in graduate recruitment — interviews, resumes, letters, personality testing, assessment centres, interviews, online applications and academic results — all feature in the process but ePortfolios most notably do not (Precision Consultancy, 2007, p. 44). Finally, the fact that the very first recommendation in a national, government-funded report is for "the government departments with responsibilities for education engage with peak industry, professional and employer bodies to develop a shared understanding of the potential of ePortfolio practice to articulate employability skills" (Hallam et al., 2009, p. iv) very much suggests that, currently, using ePortfolios in the job application process in Australia is mostly a potential part of the process. It seems industry and employer groups need to be more specifically encouraged to consider using them.

While some studies examining ePorfolio use in Australian education have commented on "the limited availability of studies of student learning and the longitudinal use of ePortfolios" (Housego & Parker, 2009), the comprehensive ALTC report (Hallam et al., 2009) absolutely testifies as to the prevalence of ePortfolios in Australian Higher Education. This report provides a solid overview of ePortfolio use in Australian universities and suggests that the topic of ePortfolio use offers a great deal of scope for research in learning, learning about reflection, developing and presenting employability skills in units of study and in a whole-of-course approach as well as developing technological skills suited to the medium. Other areas of research would include the use of ePortfolios in the recruitment process.

The ePortfolio Space

Six different uses of ePortfolios have been identified: Assessment ePortfolio, Presentation ePortfolio, Learning ePortfolio, Personal Development ePortfolio, Multiple-owner ePortfolio and a Working ePortfolio (Hallam et al., 2008, pp. 3–4) and clearly the audience and the purpose of an ePortfolio determines the sort of evidence it contains, the formality of language, the academic literacies demonstrated and even the quantity and medium of material.

The European Institute of E-Learning (EIfEL) has different categories and uses of ePortfolios in keeping with its more political and, indeed, regional brief: individual, community, organisational, territorial, and sectoral (EIfEL, n.d.). In Professional Development 2 (PD2), ePortfolios are used primarily both for assessment and presentation of individual students. In most cases, these PD2 students have not used PebblePad in their university study before and are not likely to again. Necessarily, then,

this task is primarily introductory and fairly basic in its intent. Many authors point to the rich learning spaces provided by ePortfolios: the multimedia capacity, the hypertextual connectivity of claims, reflections and evidence, the opportunity to develop and disseminate "digital stories of deep learning" (Barrett, 2004). The reality of commercially produced products is that their functionality can often be replicated by open source software and some teachers and students prefer the open source option because they see it as more ethical and more sustainable. Some teachers may also argue that open source products allow students to demonstrate more creativity.

Assessment has been the key to stimulating student use of ePortfolios at VU. If ePortfolios were not assessed, very few students would use them in an educational setting. Similarly, these digital spaces do not automatically foster reflective learning, develop writing skills, or connect appropriate evidence of employability skills if students do not take the opportunity to work at their assets and reflections. As Rossi (2005) states: "We need. . .to evaluate if providing a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is enough to start a reflective and narrative practice to increase the awareness of the learning path and to identify the future learning steps." Rossi notes the space alone is not enough: the role of teacher is also vital and the assessment tasks — both formative and summative — are even more important.

At VU, little is known by teaching staff and unit coordinators about how ePortfolios are used across schools or faculties. Very often, it seems, the focus of students developing assets in the ePortfolio medium is at a unit of study level (Hallam et al., 2008) or even at the level of a single assessment task. Certainly, some information about ePortfolio use at VU might be known to central units that manage the platform or provide support. But the need to be able to map and embed developmental assessment tasks across a course means this information must be available to unit coordinators and curriculum developers. Tellingly, it was very clear that few students in the Professional Development unit knew of the availability of the PebblePad platform, let alone accessed it, before the assessment task for PD 2. These students are all at least half-way through their undergraduate degree so it could reasonably be assumed that PebblePad use at VU in Business degrees is not comprehensive across the course.

Methodology

An online survey was sent via student email to all PD2 students at the end of semester when results had already been submitted. The survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Students were in no way obliged to respond and were simply e-mailed the link in Survey Monkey and invited to complete the survey. The survey included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions asked students to rate aspects of the ePortfolio platform or the assessment task using a five-point Likert scale: 'unimportant'(1); 'moderately important' (2); 'important' (3); 'very important' (4) and 'essential' (5) or similarly ranked descriptors: 'waste of time' (1); 'not useful' (2); 'average' (3); 'useful' (4) and 'very useful' (5). Even in respect of the closed questions, students were invited to make a comment or explain their response. Closed questions

alone are good for obtaining statistics from forced responses but it was felt to be important to obtain the richness of responses that can only come from open-ended questions and the opportunity to comment freely (See, for example, DeVaus, 2002; Sekaran, 2003).

Sixty students completed the survey representing a response rate of around 10%, which is low though not uncommonly so for web-based surveys. Of the respondents 11% were international students either on shore or off shore (Malaysia). This is much less than the percentage of international students in the population of students enrolled in that unit, indicating less than adequate representation of international students from a sampling perspective. Females comprised 58% of respondents, which is similar to the proportion of females enrolled in the subject. However, it is well established that self-selection surveys cannot guarantee known or equal probabilities of selecting members of the target population so caution must be exercised in generalising to the general population (Fan & Yan, 2010). Thus, there can be no guarantee that the proportions of positive and negative comments in the sample of online respondents are the same as the entire population. Even so, this does not necessarily devalue the validity of the qualitative remarks from those who expressed positive and negative views. It is reasonable to postulate that the sample of 60 was large enough that the qualitative negative responses may well be typical of those holding negative views in the wider population and the positive comments may well be typical of those holding positive views in the wider population. It would be much harder to argue that the proportions of positive and negative views in the sample would accurately reflect that of the wider population of students.

PD2: ePortfolio Task

The assessment task in PD2 required students to develop an ePortfolio based on reflections about their curricular and co-curricular activities. Students were also encouraged to include examples of and reflections on other aspects of their life and work experiences that could augment the representation of themselves to prospective employers: language skills, intercultural experiences, examples of leadership and management skills and examples of voluntary work with testimonials from peers or associates were all possibilities. The students' ePortfolio had to be structured around looking back at their past learning within the course but the task also invited them to reflect more broadly on their life experiences. Students were directed to look around at their current activities and learning, and to look forward to consider their aspirations and goals. Students were required to be creative in the design of their ePortfolio and they were encouraged to include examples and evidence using a range of media — audio, video, photographic, scanned documents: whatever they could imagine. They were provided with a model ePortfolio produced by a teacher but this was not intended to be prescriptive.

Survey Findings

Unit Coordinators were interested to find out what students thought of the ePortfolio task and the PebblePad platform. From a simple analysis of the descriptive statistics and categorical groupings of the qualitative responses, students' perceptions can be summarized under four broad headings:

1. The importance and value of having an ePortfolio
2. The utility of the PebblePad platform and evidence used
3. Sharing ePortfolio with employers now and into the future
4. The relevance and appropriateness of the ePortfolio assessment task

Each of these headings will be discussed in turn through providing percentages of responses together with some verbatim student comments on the four themes.

Importance and Value of having an ePortfolio

When asked to rate the importance of having an ePortfolio to showcase their employability skills to potential employers, 65% of respondents rated it as of average or higher importance, while as many as 33% of respondents rated it as not important. This indicates at least moderate support for the idea of having an ePortfolio, but the fact that 24% of students rated it as not at all important indicates a polarization of views among the students that requires further probing. This polarization of student views was also evident in responses to an open-ended question about the usefulness of the ePortfolio as a way to showcase their employability skills to potential employers. Just over 50% of respondents made positive comments while 40% of the responses were negative.

The positive comments pointed to perceived advantages of the ePortfolio for a few main reasons; namely, that it is easy to send an ePortfolio link to an employer, that the ePortfolio allows for more creativity than a regular CV, and that employers have an opportunity to see more skills in the PebblePad format than they would in a paper-based product. The following comments are typical of the positive comments on this question:
- "easy communication to employers"
- "the capacity to provide a different way for employers to view your skills"
- "the opportunity to be more creative than a resume"

One student went so far as to suggest ePortfolios were "the best way to showcase their skills to an employer."

The students who made negative comments about the value of an ePortfolio were often critical of both the whole ePortfolio concept as well as the PebblePad platform. They cited aesthetic and technical or operability reasons for their negative reaction. These responses are typical of the negative comments on this general question:
- "too difficult and intense for employers"
- "too difficult to create in a way suitable for employers"
- "cheap and tacky"
- "the same as a resume but more confusing and time consuming"

One particularly interesting comment, given that many institutions use freely-available products, is the comment that PebblePad "is little more than a glorified Facebook." A few respondents used less flattering and unpublishable comments to express their views of the platform. At the softer end of the negative comments, several students expressed doubt as to whether employers would have the time or inclination to look at ePortfolios. This concern was also expressed by four of the students who had made positive comments.

The PebblePad Platform and Evidence Used
The survey contained three questions which addressed the suitability of the PebblePad platform to develop an ePortfolio and its ease of use and graphic capability. The survey also had one question which asked students about the nature of the evidence they had used.

The majority (61%) of respondents indicated that PebblePad was a suitable platform for producing an ePortfolio. However, 40% of respondents did not consider PebblePad a suitable platform and this percentage suggests a significant level of disapproval. In terms of ease of use, the majority of respondents rated PebblePad as "ok" or better. However, there were still 17% of respondents who rated it extremely negatively as "very poor." By contrast, relatively few expressed concerns about its graphic capability with only 5% rating it "very poor" and more than 80% rating it "ok" or better.

It was encouraging that most respondents took the trouble to add a comment on the question of graphics. These comments were often illuminating and offered far more information than expected. Interestingly, it was those students who responded negatively who were more likely to add a comment than those who had responded positively. The positive respondents added little more in the way of information other than clarifying that they thought PebblePad was easy to navigate and made it easy for them to create their ePortoflio. Conversely, those who responded negatively reported that they did not find PebblePad easy to navigate and they complained that they had found it difficult to insert photos and graphics in the way that they wanted. At the extreme end of the negative comments was one student who felt the PebblePad platform should be abandoned as "it is not easy to use and the graphics suck." Another student suggested that there must be a similar product of "an industry standard that isn't such a w___!"

In terms of evidence used by students, almost all respondents reported using a mixture of word documents (such as their CV or examples of completed assessment or testimonials), photos and links to other websites (usually school or university sites or organisations they had worked for or been associated with). A smaller number of respondents had scanned certificates or other documents as evidence of particular achievements or qualifications. Only three respondents had uploaded videos.

Not surprisingly, those students who had responded negatively to questions about the usefulness of the ePortfolios and the utility of the PebblePad platform tended to report having provided little evidence or few assets, as PebblePad calls any items saved in ePortfolios. These students had created little in the way of evidence because they had

found it difficult or thought it to be a waste of time. It could also be the case that, assessment wise, they did not need the marks in order to pass the subject: possibly their only motivation to complete the task.

Sharing ePortfolios with Employers Now and into the Future

Only four respondents (7%) had already shown their ePortfolios to an employer or potential employer. Interestingly, three of these four students reported positive interest in their ePortfolio from the employers. Of those who had not yet shown their ePortfolio to prospective employers, 41% reported that they intended to do so. The majority of students (56%), however, reported that they had no intention to show their ePortfolios to any prospective employers. Understandably, several of those respondents intending to share their ePortfolio with employers in the future were less concerned about whether employers would be interested and more worried about the quality of their ePortfolio at the current time. These respondents made comments to the effect that they did not think their ePortfolio was yet good enough to share with an employer, but hoped it would be by the time they graduated.

Those respondents not intending to share their ePortfolio with employers mostly comprised the students who thought the whole artefact was a waste of time. Many of these students said that their resume and covering letter was enough. Some of these respondents doubted whether employers would take time to look at an ePortfolio. The strength of the feelings expressed in the comments for the question "Would you show your ePortfolio to an employer in the future?" ranged from doubt to rhetorical incredulity:
  • "not yet convinced that employers will look at it"
  • "Hell no! Why would I waste an employer's time?"

On the other hand, two of these students who indicated that they did not intend sharing their ePortfolios added that they may consider trying to develop an ePortfolio in a different platform. This indicated that a few students were more concerned with the platform than with the ePortfolio concept.

The Relevance and Appropriateness of the ePortfolio Assessment Task

Two of the survey questions asked students to comment on the assessment exercise requiring them to develop their ePortfolio. In many respects, this question could well make richer sense of the other responses. The open-ended question about the relevance and appropriateness of the assessment task drew a range of comments from almost all respondents. It should be of some concern to educators and curriculum developers that of these responses, only 37% were positive, while the majority (45%) were negative. A further 12% of respondents were undecided.

Many of the negative comments about the ePortfolio assessment task related to the process or the way the task was introduced or explained by the individual lecturer. This complaint has already led to further professional development and support for Professional Development 2 lecturers. In addition to this problem, a different complaint involved the perceived difficulty of the assessment task — including the technical requirements of the task. This complaint suggests that considerable work is needed to

refine the requirements of the task and the way it is introduced and explained to students. The polarization of views among students was most prevalent in these responses with strong comments at both ends of the spectrum. At the positive end of the spectrum, it is clear that a number of students not only endorsed the assessment exercise but also enjoyed it. Their responses indicated they had met the learning objectives originally envisaged by the designers with comments reproduced here verbatim from the survey such as:

- "it led me to think about my life"
- "easy, relevant to my life and a lot of fun!"
- "well thought out and easy to manage"
- "Of all the assessments I liked this one the best"
- "very interesting and will be creditable"
- "good experience and should help me apply for a job"

However, again, there were clearly some students who had strong negative perceptions about all or part of the exercise. They commented that the task was "terrible," "useless," "a bore" and "overly time consuming and tedious." Nevertheless, evident in these negative comments is a cry for help: several students wrote that they were "unclear on what to do", that there was "too little help" and that "my lecturer was unhelpful." Support from lecturers, student mentors and central support units will be provided in the next delivery of the unit.

Conclusion

The clear messages of this survey concern both curriculum developers and the subject lecturers themselves. We know, anecdotally, that the facilitators in this unit use technology in widely different ways. The Professional Development (PD) units are run in technologically rich learning spaces in 3-hour seminars of no more than 40 students. There are kidney-shaped tables of 8–10 students, one computer per team of 4–5 students and projector capacity for students to share their computer work with the class on one or all of the five 52" LCD monitors around the room. An online survey conducted in 2009 confirmed the suspicion that facilitators of the PD units are highly individual in their use of the available ICT. The 2009 survey emphasised that "some facilitators find some technologies 'very useful' and have developed creative ways to connect with students, capture student work and encourage student reflection while others may consider the same technology 'not appropriate' for teaching" (Woodley & Papadopoulos, 2009). The need for professional development for PD teachers is evident both to support their teaching and to ensure that students encounter a comparable learning experience irrespective of their facilitator. Furthermore, it is clear that how ePortfolios are modelled and evaluated by the teacher impacts on students' use of it.

Research insists that ePortfolios are most successful when they are part of an integrated curriculum and certainly students' responses reinforce that message. EPortfolios should not be developed just in a unit of study here and there. The PebblePad task in PD2 has already been altered for Semester 1, 2010 — it is more integrated into the unit and

students need to work on their ePortfolios from week 3 to ensure a more formative and developmental approach to the assessment task. However, the evidence is also clear from the literature (Hallam et al., 2008) that developing ePortfolios in a single unit or even a few units is not sufficient to render it a meaningful task either to develop students' reflective and employability skills nor to represent those skills to a prospective employer. To that end, the PD2 coordinators will liaise with other core unit coordinators in the business degree to better integrate the ePortfolio task — especially, and most logically, with the coordinators of Professional Development 1 (Critical Thinking and Problem Solving) and Professional Development 3 (Challenge and Leadership). While the "whole-of-program portfolio. . . [that allows students to] record, document and reflect on their development of graduate attributes across the whole program of study" (Housego & Parker, 2009) might be some way off, this should be on the Faculty of Business and Law's teaching and learning agenda.

There is very little in the literature on how employers use ePortfolios in Australia in the recruitment process — except to suggest that it is not common practice. The few students in the survey who did show their ePortfolio to employers had a positive response: this perhaps says something about both the attitude of the employers and the quality of the student work.

As acknowledged earlier, research has established that it is impossible to know the extent to which the online sample is representative of the entire population. It is possible that those with stronger views one way or the other may be more inclined to complete a voluntary online survey of this nature. Given the polarized nature of student perceptions this is a plausible scenario, or it may be that the sample gives a reasonable representation of wider views in the student body. However, there is enough in the survey responses to suggest that there is reasonable support among students for the usefulness and importance of the ePortfoilio and the assessment exercise. The polarization of opinion and the number of students with very strong negative views suggest a strong need for a review of the ePortfolio assessment task and the way it is structured and introduced to students.

Ironically, Housego and Parker (2009) make the comment that "The use of ePortfolios to support effective teaching and learning activities won't be successful just because ePortfolios are interesting" (p. 408). In our survey of students in PD2, almost half of the students did not find ePortfolios remotely interesting. In fact, the idea that PebblePad was a "glorified Facebook" echoes an early concern by Barrett (2004) that ePortfolios can be just "a fancy resume." In order to make this task and the platform of PebblePad useful and attractive to students, they require more support, a more integrated and whole-of-course approach to the ePortfolio and perhaps other options of developing this artefact.

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