Chapter 11
Current ePortfolio Practice in Australia

Gillian Hallam
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Wendy Harper
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Lynn McAllister
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

ABSTRACT
This chapter provides an overview of ePortfolio practice in Australia where a national research project has successfully documented ePortfolio practice in Australian higher education, and a parallel study has investigated emergent practice in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. It examines the policy context for ePortfolio activity in Australia, introduces the Australian ePortfolio Project and then presents a review of the research findings. This chapter discusses how ePortfolios offer the potential to be a meaningful medium for convergence and integration of education and training. This is done in order to support innovation and productivity, ensuring ongoing national economic development and growth.

INTRODUCTION
Specific drivers for an ePortfolio approach to learning and teaching in the Australian education system include the need to understand the future employment skills requirements; the need to overcome current and emerging skills shortages; and the need to focus on retraining and up-skilling the workforce to address factors that may lead to skills obsolescence, under-employment or even unemployment. In order to support innovation and productivity to ensure ongoing national economic development and growth, the current policy environment of the Australian Federal Government seeks to enhance the quality of education, encourage widened access to education opportunities, and stimulate integration between vocational education and training and higher education. There is evidence of strong interest across the different education sectors, with a growing awareness that ePortfolios have the potential to establish some degree of cohesion between the
different elements of education and employment, increasing the quality of learning and the value of education outcomes.

The higher education sector in Australia currently comprises 39 universities, of which 37 are public institutions and two are private. The federal government has the primary responsibility for the public funding of universities, although, administratively, the majority of institutions have been established under state and territory legislation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations DEEWR, 2010a). Accordingly, regulation and governance is spread across the federal government, the state and territory governments and the institutions themselves. In 2008, the number of university students in Australia exceeded one million (1,066,100). The study mode ratio is roughly 70% full-time to 30% part-time. 63% of enrolled students are aged under 25 years, 55% are female and 17.5% are international students (Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS, 2010).

In Australia, a national research project has successfully documented the state of play in ePortfolio practice in Australian higher education, while a parallel study has investigated emergent practice in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This chapter provides an overview of ePortfolio practice in Australia. It examines the policy context for ePortfolio activity in Australia, introduces the Australian ePortfolio Project and then presents a review of the research findings.

THE POLICY CONTEXT FOR EPORTFOLIO ACTIVITY IN AUSTRALIA

Higher education policy is set against the background of the broader education policy. Following the federal election in Australia in November 2007, the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) established a Review of Australian Higher Education (the Bradley Review). The terms of reference for the review panel included the need to report on the sector’s “fitness for purpose in meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy” (DEEWR, 2008a), as well as the options for ongoing reform. The issues of national productivity, participation in the labour market and the ability to respond to the needs of industry were topical, specifically in the context of positioning of higher education within the broader tertiary education sector in order to achieve a more integrated relationship with vocational education and training. In 2009, the Federal Government responded to the recommendations of the Bradley Review by proposing a reform agenda that promised to “transform the scale, potential and quality of the nation’s universities and open the doors to higher education to a new generation of Australians” (DEEWR, 2009).

One of the critical aspects of current government policy is to consider the relationship between education and employment given the present focus on the skills shortage in Australia. The significance of policy drivers for ePortfolio practice in Europe and the UK should be considered in the Australian context. The Australian education community is committed to the goals of the Bologna Process, which encourages greater consistency and portability of qualifications within and across different education systems. The Bologna Process aims to facilitate communication and movement between European education institutions. An Australian Government discussion paper released in 2006 argued that there is a danger of Australia losing European enrollments if such a system were to become the international norm without Australia as a party (Department of Education, Science and Training DEST, 2006). Australia’s role as a major education provider in the Asia-Pacific region was also a factor to consider. The importance of student mobility, which can be supported through formal documentation such as the Diploma Supplement (http://www.aei.gov.au/AEI/GovernmentActivities/DiplomaSupplement/default.htm) as well as through the personalized records of learning.