Employability and Lifelong Learning in the Knowledge Society

Selected papers from the ePortfolio 2007 conference

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This special issue brings together the top ranked academic papers that were presented at the ePortfolio2007 conference in Maastricht in October 2007. The annual ePortfolio conference – 2007 was the 5th edition – is on its way to become a key European and international event for the growing community of professionals interested in, and working with, ePortfolios. It brings together policymakers, researchers, teachers, trainers, human resource managers and technologists around the central theme of electronic portfolio usage in such diverse settings as education, unemployment support, HR management and lifelong competence development. The central theme for 2007 was “Employability and Lifelong Learning in the Knowledge Society”, and the scope was to

“explore how the ePortfolio can contribute to finding the solution to the challenges of today and tomorrow in building an inclusive and sustainable knowledge economy and society. We shall explore the ability of the ePortfolio to capture the most advanced work in the field of technology and research, and get the best out of emerging social and business practices in order to promote employability and lifelong learning.”

The papers in this selection meet the challenges set forth in the conference programme. They span a fairly wide spectrum of usage situations in lifelong learning, ranging from formal education, through in-service teacher training for special education to the employability of older adults. Taken together, the usage situations illustrate the inclusive potential of ePortfolio usage. The papers also cover different stages in the research process, ranging from a well-argued research design, through cutting edge technological additions, evaluations of pilots in actual practice to a critical reflective contribution on the assumptions underlying the discourse on employability.

The academic track was co-organised by the TENCompetence consortium (www.tencompetence.org), an integrated research project that aims at setting up a technological and organisational infrastructure for lifelong competence development, and which investigates the options of integrating ePortfolio into a suite of open access lifelong learning services. Specifically the papers by Rob Peterson and colleagues and Marco Kalz and colleagues take this wider TENCompetence perspective.

The first paper in this special issue – by Rob Peterson and colleagues – describes the results of a Bulgarian-Australian research collaboration centred around a community of practice for the professional development of educators in Bulgarian special education. On the basis of elaborate evaluative research, a need for competence-centred professional development activities is seen as beneficial to the community. Therefore, a proposal is formulated aimed at integrating ePortfolios and competence-related learning units into the community of practice. The proposed usage of an ePortfolio in this specific case is as a showcase portfolio, i.e. in order to substantiate learning results in the development of competencies related to special education. The paper by Peterson et al. was awarded the conference’s Best Paper Award by the academic review panel for its relevance to both research and practice.

The second paper – by Hilary Stevens – describes the results of an evaluative case study that used an ePortfolio –both as formative and showcase tool – to enhance the employability of older adults in the UK. The main findings are that ePortfolios may be effective tools in giving participants a
better understanding of their skills and attributes, and may well enhance their self-confidence. However, these results are dependent on a programmatic approach, i.e. next to the availability of the portfolio technology, three main factors were deemed crucial: an explicit process of reflection and evidence building, mentor support and group support. The findings suggest that the ePortfolio software alone would not have sufficed. The need for such a programmatic approach is probably more outspoken for an older adult audience.

The third paper – by Pier Giuseppe Rossi and colleagues – is based on a multiple-case evaluation study of the use of formative ePortfolio’s in higher education. The authors describe three study programmes in which ePortfolio were used between February 2006 and July 2007: two master’s programmes (delivered by online or blended learning) and an in-service-training programme, with a total of 200 participants. The research set-up combined qualitative and quantitative analysis. As a result of the analysis, the authors suggest five guidelines for effective formative use of ePortfolio’s in formal educational programmes. The first finding supports Stevens’ suggestion that explicit structuring and scaffolding are quite important when using ePortfolio’s. The second suggestion is that a combination of compulsory and voluntary portfolio activities is more effective. The third guideline stresses the need for redundant and flexible tools within the ePortfolio, while the fourth suggests that learning paths be complemented by reflective practice. Finally, the authors suggest that experts provide scaffolding and motivation.

The fourth paper – by Marco Kalz and colleagues – reports on the results of a pilot study in which a language-based analysis technique – latent semantic analysis – was used to support the assessment process of showcase or dossier portfolio’s. These portfolio’s were assembled by candidates in the context of a process of ‘prior learning assessment and recognition’. On the basis of a literature review, a model for prior learning assessment supported by latent semantic analysis is presented. Preliminary results from a test pilot at the Open University of The Netherlands suggest that the model has methodological value and may prove useful for assessing prior learning by matching ‘evidence’ documents in the portfolio with learning goals and content in a course or curriculum. Further analysis – e.g. against the assessment of human experts – is needed to further support the findings. The paper concludes by mentioning some of the limitations and further possibilities of the technique.

The final paper – by Darren Cambridge – is of an altogether different nature. The author takes a more philosophical perspective and critically reflects on the assumptions underlying the discourse surrounding the use of electronic portfolios in relation to employability. The author argues that the discourse on ePortfolio in relation to employability is currently limited to an economical perspective, whereby human beings are shaped into means to fulfil economic objectives, thereby reducing them as individuals. An alternative perception maybe found in the discourse on integrative learning, in which humans are considered as consisting of two types of self, the network self and the symphonic self. A thorough examination of two ePortfolio projects suggests that these selves need to be woven together, layering the networked and symphonic, to create ePortfolios that promote employability while asserting the value of their authors as whole human beings.

We are convinced that this selection of papers presents the reader with a good sample of the ongoing academic work within the realm of ePortfolio for employability and lifelong learning.