# ePortfolios: what employers think

**Kim Watty** and **Jade McKay** explain the benefits – for both employers and business graduates – of ePortfolios, and what empolyers think of them

Graduate employers are seeking the best and brightest students who provide a strong "cultural fit" with their organisations. Solid grades are important but not critical for many employers. They are looking for evidence of well-developed generic/employability skills as they cast a keen eye on potential hires.

In higher education institutions around the globe, ePortfolios are increasingly being viewed as a tool to not only improve the learning experience of students but also to enhance the employability, career development and professional identity of business graduates.

In the diverse and constantly changing landscape of the global business world, graduates are required to be able to operate successfully in the complex 21st century environment. Developing business graduates who are equipped to operate within this complex global business environment is thus a priority for higher education institutions.

In light of their potential to develop engaged, reflective lifelong learners, and develop and showcase employability, it is not surprising that ePortfolios are increasingly being used in higher education institutions around the globe.

In the US and Canada, for example, 54% and 52% of students respectively report having used them in their studies and this is a trend that looks set to continue. In the Australian context, interest surrounding ePortfolios continues to grow. But while ePortfolios are used extensively in some disciplines, business education has been slow to embrace their potential.

Our own study found that using ePortfolios in business education not only helps students prepare for careers in the knowledge economy but also equips them to operate in the new, complex 21st century business world.

## How they benefit students

For business graduates, the competitive market for employment demands that they are able to stand out in a crowd. An ePortfolio provides an opportunity for graduates to do precisely that. It functions as a record of a student's learning, evidencing what they have achieved over the course of their academic career and enabling them to use it well beyond their degree as they enter the professional world or pursue further studies.

An ePortfolio can be used as a reflective tool documenting their strengths and challenges they may have faced. More importantly, it has the potential to provide a snapshot view of what makes the student an employable graduate.

The importance of this is heightened by the fact that universities are now faced with a generation

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...and similarly in Canada 52% of students said they had used ePortfolios

of students who are always connected, communicating and clicking and ePortfolios speak to this tech-savvy generation. And in an age when one's digital presence is of utmost importance – particularly in the professional world (see, for example, LinkedIn) – ePortfolios offer a way for students to develop and promote their brand equity or professional digital identities.

Increasingly, this online information is accessed as part of the employment process used by graduate employers. ePortfolios thus offer a way for students to develop successfully their online presence and showcase their competencies including communication, academic grades, creativity and key digital literacy-related employability capabilities.

At the Deakin Business School in Australia, for example, ePortfolios are widely used at both whole-of-degree and whole-of-major levels, enabling students to collect, curate, reflect and share evidence of their learning in the skills areas relevant to graduate employers.

**What is an ePortfolio?**

According to one definition an ePortfolio is "an electronic collection of meaningful artefacts which provides evidence of learning, competencies and employability".

As two academics explain:

"Recent years have seen growing interest in electronic learning portfolios (e-portfolios) as a tool to support student learning across higher education. The concept of an e-portfolio is multifaceted – it is a technology, a pedagogical approach, and a process, as well as a product. Its purpose can range from tracking development within a program to finding a job or monitoring performance".

An ePortfolio provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their unique and diverse approaches to learning and to generate evidence of the employability skills valued by graduate employers, including digital literacy, self-management, creativity and innovation, communication and problem solving, to name but a few.

Providing this evidence may enhance the opportunity for graduate employers to source the best candidate. While the primary purpose of

ePortfolios is to provide students with a broader, scaffolded and more integrated learning experience to foster stronger preparation for their professional life, research shows that ePortfolios have the potential to enhance graduate employability; prompt students to reflect on learning; provide a repository of student work, achievement and feedback and provide evidence of student achievement of professional capabilities.

ePortfolios are also said to facilitate a range of competencies and benefits including:

- Active learning skills
- Goal setting (both education and career)
- Independent learning/autonomy
- Collaborative learning
- Cross-curricular competencies
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Self-assessment, self-evaluation and self-regulating skills
- Digital literacy skills
- Work readiness
- Lifelong learning
- Self-management
- Self-awareness

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**So what do employers think?**

In our national study, a total of 14 interviews were carried out with Australian business employers. Respondents varied in terms of the types of organisations in which they worked (ranging from large organisations, medium-sized businesses, sole enterprises, the "Big Four" accounting firms, retail, consulting and marketing).

Employers were asked a series of questions about ePortfolios including:

1. What role do they play in the application process?
2. Are they valuable? Why? What do they tell you about the applicant?
3. Is there a role for extending ePortfolios into the workplace? Why?
4. Do you see this type of resource as having a role to play in an application for employment?
5. How might they be best used?
6. What evidence/information would you like to see in an ePortfolio?
7. What might they reveal about an applicant that your current process does not?
8. Is there are role for extending ePortfolios into the workplace? Why? How?

While the majority of employers interviewed did not have knowledge of ePortfolios, once explained to them, all employers saw their potential in the recruitment process. This potential was seen to lie in offering a better "feel for the person", "bringing the graduate to life" and providing greater insight into graduate attitudes and experience, and overall insight into graduate capabilities and employability.

One employer commented that "it just provides that terrific additional depth that you can't really put on a CV" while another said: "I guess it would give... more of an insight into the individual and their background... So it's a... more personalised kind of approach than what we do see... on paper it sort of brings the person to life, which is important... I guess it would depend on how focused the ePortfolio is and how well put together it is but that in itself would say a lot about candidates".

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Employers identified the following as key benefits:

- Provides a body of evidence
- Helps in the recruitment process (with narrowing-down selection)
- Caters to the next generation
- Helps employers get a "feel for the person"
- Offers an in-depth understanding of the applicant

Touching on the importance of the ePortfolio approach in the current technological era where younger generations are *au fait* with technology, one respondent stated: "The culture of the next generation of applicants joining us... they are digital natives and are used to it and should we not provide this avenue?"

Employers viewed ePortfolios as a way to extend and enhance traditional recruitment processes to some extent.

"I quite like the concept of having a body of evidence that can be used to sort of help you understand how they think and how they form their conclusions and judgements... I think it then differentiates those candidates... it's giving us even more insight into those individuals."

They also indicated that ePortfolios have the potential to reveal the following about applicants that traditional interview processes cannot:

- Personalised body of learning evidence against generic skills
- Learning style and preferences
- The lens through which they view the world/life
- Communication tool

The employers were further asked what type of content and inclusions they would like to see in a graduate ePortfolio. They indicated that they would like to see graduate ePortfolios contain items such as evidence and background relevant to the job application; applicants critiquing something; evidence of learning, progress, thinking, judgement; and offering information more visually.

Employers did, however, allude to potential issues with ePortfolios in graduate recruitment. They suggested that ePortfolios might be time-consuming, may end up being template-like and that information might be difficult to verify. These issues are important as we progress ePortfolios in business education.

**Sources and further reading**

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Further information about the study can be found at – www.buseport.com.au
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