

# Supporting students' ePortfolio process in Higher Education

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In the framework of the Empowering ePortfolio Process (EEP) project, “*ePortfolios are student-owned digital working and learning spaces for collecting, creating, sharing, collaborating, reflecting learning and competences, as well as storing assessment and evaluation. They are platforms for students to follow and be engaged in their personal and career development, and actively interact with learning communities and different stakeholders of the learning process.*” (Kunnari & Laurikainen 2017, 7) With this collectively created definition by partners from five different countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Portugal), we want to emphasize the ownership of students in their learning process and their central role in creating their own ePortfolios, which can be used as *workspaces* during the learning processes and *showcases*, especially when trying to find a job or connecting with the world of work (see Barrett, 2010). Digital portfolios need to both harness the learning and collect the evidence of achievement, and the tensions that exist between these two purposes need to be taken into consideration (Trevitt, Macduff, & Steed 2014). Therefore, both the process and the products are important, and these are intertwining all the way. Students can benefit by making their learning process transparent and from the product perspective, digital platforms create new opportunities for students to be engaged in collecting the evidence of their competences. These digital platforms also create opportunities for students to collaborate and share learning between peers and/or between students and teachers (Rodrigues, Pires, & Pessoa 2017).

Our EEP project (Erasmus+ KA2 project funded by the European Union), is focusing on promoting student-centered education through the development of empowering and dynamic approaches to ePortfolio processes in Higher Education (HE). The common challenge experienced by all the partners has been that the learning and assessment practices in HE need to be improved. For example, students' participation in their assessment practices has been limited, the variation of assessment methods has been too narrow, and the assessment of professional competences has not been connected to real life environments. Regarding learning, Bologna has put the focus on student-centered learning approaches, and there is still the need to improve pedagogic practices aiming to promote students' development and their transformative capabilities. According to Vieira, Silva & Almeida (2009), transforming pedagogy in HE is an inevitable need. Further, the development of students' digital competences is important, as “Institutions are charged with developing students' digital citizenship, ensuring mastery of responsible and appropriate technology use, including online communication etiquette and digital rights and responsibilities in blended and online learning settings and beyond.” (NMC Horizon Report 2017, 24).

Further, the European Commission (2017) notices the importance of digital competences for the citizens in coping with the invasion of technology in daily life, and member countries have made their own alignments for the development of digital competences. For example in Finland, the aim for 2030 is to have 70 per cent of citizens using a digital ‘my life portfolio’

for life management purposes. (Foresight 2030, 2017). Introducing ePortfolios in education from early levels on can be one solution to meet these challenges. EEP project is focusing on higher education but the improved process around ePortfolios benefits all levels of education. Indeed, EEP aims to strengthen the alignment between learning and assessment practices and targeted competences needed for life in general and for the demands of the world of work, and in that way to increase students' academic success, responsibility and motivation in their learning and career management. It also promotes students' active citizenship and social participation in the digital world, as well as fosters their relationship with themselves, with their peers and with the world of work. In this development, we need to hear students' own voices. What do they think about ePortfolios and what can we learn from them to be able to improve and strengthen the empowerment in the ePortfolio process?

This collection of articles presents the main outcomes from five EEP partner countries and of the second project phase, which focuses on students' perspectives on how they understand the nature of ePortfolios and how they see the benefits and challenges of using them. In addition, we were interested in how students experience what kinds of competences are needed in the creation of ePortfolios, and what kind of support they wish to have from the teachers or the educational organization. Each partner conducted an investigation in their particular organizational context focusing on variety of student groups within their institutions, from different scientific areas, degrees and study levels. All these different examples of respondent groups from bachelor and master level students to adult students in continuing education programs and teacher education provide a rich representation of data to investigate students' own ideas and perspectives in terms of ePortfolios.

The purpose of this article collection is to share the results of these investigations on students' perspectives on ePortfolio process. In each of these articles, authors discuss the four following themes based on student experiences:

- **Students' experiences and perspectives on ePortfolios:** how would they define ePortfolio, their previous experience in using portfolios (if any), their thoughts about ePortfolio as an assessment tool
- **The triggers that support students' engagement in ePortfolio process:** the benefits and challenges of ePortfolios, motivation to use ePortfolios
- **Competences developed during ePortfolio process:** general and digital competences, the current level of digital skills of the students
- **Supportive factors in ePortfolio process:** what is needed from the teachers in ePortfolio process, what kind of environments support learning, what kind of support is needed from the educational organization, how the support from peers can improve the learning process

These small-scale studies and their analysis are interesting cases and examples from a qualitative perspective and do not represent the entire situation of the partner organizations. Nonetheless, they created interesting data on both the expectations of the students who have never used ePortfolios and the experiences and perceptions of those students who already had experiences using ePortfolios during their studies.

## What we learnt from students' perspectives

In summarizing the findings, we can see that students had a general positive and engaged attitude towards the use of ePortfolios for learning and assessment purposes. Benefits of ePortfolios were seen as multiple and relevant for both students and their professional careers in the future. Students felt that ePortfolios promote their development at personal and professional levels, reinforcing autonomy and the sense of authorship, giving transparency and visibility to the learning process and to the outcomes of competence development. These findings correspond to the previous study related to students' adaptation to using ePortfolios by Lopez-Fernandez (2009), highlighting students' positive opinions and self-efficiency through the eportfolio as a tool to manage their learning and assessment, and further, students feeling that an ePortfolio was valuable as a personal developmental learning tool. According to our studies, the students also highlighted the combination of ePortfolios with collaborative student-student and student-teacher as contexts to provide relevant learning. In addition, the students felt that ePortfolios are easily accessible and shared with others, and their use is a low cost and sustainable process to support personal development and lifelong learning. In addition, Hope (2005) argues that an optimal digital portfolio reflects the understanding and behavior of the student and this is the reason for carefully doing the assessment. However, in our sample, the diversity of students' experiences related to the use of ePortfolios, lead to different conceptions about the process and the tools: not all of them were familiar with the definition of ePortfolio and thus understood it in several different ways. Nevertheless, the general tendency was to see it as an online student-owned learning space, based on technological and digital tools, that can store and share their reflections, learning outcomes, achievements and evidence of competences, by using non-traditional resources — such as blogs, CV's, web pages and LinkedIn profiles.

According to our studies, students saw the benefits of ePortfolios, but there was still a need to raise the awareness of ePortfolios and to enhance students' own authority in creating them. Students were sometimes confused with the meaning of ePortfolios and they did not fully understand why they should use them. Furthermore, in some cases the use of ePortfolios in the analyzed higher education settings was still emerging only and not very systematic. There appeared to be a lack of sufficient support from the structures of the educational programs and/or the organization. Indeed as a general conclusion, in these situations to give an adequate support to teachers and tutors (for example, through training and development opportunities) could improve the desirable changes in their practices. Further, the use of these kinds of tools should be built into the core strategy of the institute and/or to the curricula of its educational programs. In all the articles, there are conclusions that are more specific and discussions to support the more comprehensive use of digital portfolios.

Regarding the competences needed in creating an ePortfolio, students revealed two-folded development needs: firstly, operating in digital environments and secondly, creating content, namely various evidences of competences. On one hand, the students stated that it is possible to create ePortfolios with the basic ICT knowledge and skills, at the same time rating themselves globally with a medium/intermediate level of expertise. On the other hand, they recognized that the process of ePortfolio creation has contributed to the

development of a much wider and complex range of competences: organizational skills, systematization, reflection, critical thinking, creativity, collaborative and communication skills, amongst others (see also Barrett 2010).

According to our study, the main challenges related to the use of ePortfolios were the lack of digital confidence of students (and teachers) and technical constraints of the platforms as well as the digital support from the guiding teachers, the educational programs and the whole institute, which makes the use of ePortfolios unstructured and not reaching its full potential. In addition, the support from the teachers in guidance of content making and giving feedback was sometimes seen as a bottleneck, which seems to be mainly because of time management or resource issues. Furthermore, some students found it challenging that their ePortfolio content should be open: indeed it should be respected that not all students want to publish their ePortfolios. One solution could be to separate the roles of ePortfolios as described in the beginning of this article: *workspace* with reflections of personal learning process could be private or shared with a restricted group of people, and *showcase* could be more open demonstrating the competences of the student.

The articles in this collection provide different aspects of ePortfolios from the perspective of different kinds of students. They demonstrate how students perceive ePortfolios, their benefits and challenges, and what the process of using ePortfolios requires from the teachers, educational programs and organizations.

The next analysis in the EEP project is currently already under process and it will focus on the ideas and expectations of the world of work – do they think ePortfolios could be an asset in recruitment, what kind of an ePortfolio would they want to see and do ePortfolios help employers to choose more suitable workforce to better match their needs. Then again, the third and final EEP analysis will tackle the issues of teachers' guidance process related to ePortfolios, which has already been addressed in the students' answers and comments. As expected, the students found the teacher's role in the process rather crucial and relied significantly on the support of the teacher. However, peer guidance and assessment can be equally beneficial for the students and easier to achieve on time and at a deeper level. In addition, peer feedback can be as motivating as the formal feedback from the teachers. This peer participation and sharing of ePortfolios is one area that could be further investigated in the upcoming analysis.

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