

# USING E-PORTFOLIO TO ENABLE EQUITY STUDENTS TO REFLECT ON AND DOCUMENT THEIR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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The focus of higher education is shifting towards building students' skills and self awareness for future employment. This means that there is an increasing need for teaching tools which provide a context for skills development and an opportunity for students to prepare for the transition from education to professional practice. This paper considers how QUT E-Portfolio has been integrated into the core undergraduate law unit, Principles of Equity, at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as a means of enabling students to reflect on and document their skill development in that unit.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980's, much time and attention has been devoted to the incremental development of graduate attributes, to complement the acquisition of professional knowledge, in every field of Australian tertiary education. This shift in educational focus, which centres on building students' skills and self awareness for future employment, has also highlighted the desirability of work integrated learning experiences, and teaching tools, which provide: a context for skills development (that highlights their relevance to employment); and an opportunity for students to prepare for the transition from university to professional practice.

There is also a growing recognition that authentic student learning involves students learning via their own 'active behaviour' and not just through 'what the teacher does.'<sup>1</sup> Therefore, from the student's perspective work integrated learning experiences provide an opportunity for students to augment their theoretical training with practical skills, learn about career options, explore their abilities and mature as they move towards transition to the professional workplace.<sup>2</sup> E-learning tools provide a platform from which to explore learning opportunities which meet all of these imperatives.

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1 See generally John Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2003).

2 C Cates & P Jones, (1999) Learning Outcomes and the educational value of cooperative education, paper presented at the 1999 WACE/CEA International Conference on Cooperative Education, downloaded from <[www.waceinc.org](http://www.waceinc.org)> on 29 August 2006, World Association for Cooperative Education, Boston.

After considering further the higher education context which has brought online work integrated learning to the fore,<sup>3</sup> this paper discusses how QUT E-Portfolio,<sup>4</sup> an e-learning tool which students can use to document and present their academic, professional and personal development in the format of an e-portfolio (electronic portfolio), has been integrated, at the Queensland University of Technology, into the core undergraduate law unit LWB240 Principles of Equity, as a means of enabling students to reflect on and document their skill development. Student perceptions on the ability of this tool to provide a ‘real world’ context for their skills development, and their overall learning experience, are also considered.

## II. THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The higher education sector in Australia has undergone a period of rapid change during the last decade. An altered funding model, new levels of competition between providers, an increasing emphasis on research quantity and quality, and a larger, more diverse and demanding student population, are all factors which have contributed. The strategies currently employed by Australian universities in these changing times are both proactive and reactive in nature. A substantial number of strategies are aimed at improving the quality of the educational experience for the new student body.

In 2005, using an analysis of data collected from the 2001–2004 *Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)*, which aims to gain insight into students’ perception of the quality of their educational experience by surveying every graduate a few months after the completion of their studies, a study was conducted by Geoff Scott of what ‘retains students and promotes engagement in productive learning in Australian higher education.’<sup>5</sup> Scott found that there was general agreement that in the current higher education context, universities faced a dilemma involving ‘how best to balance mission (achieving the key purposes of the university) with market (giving students what they want in order to gain and retain them—even if this is specific, skills focused job training).’<sup>6</sup> The beneficial learning experiences created through work related learning tasks have proven to be a positive factor in improving student experience with research showing that ‘engagement in activities contribut[es] to enhanced academic outcomes.’<sup>7</sup>

Queensland University of Technology is conversant with the need to balance mission and market, and has utilised its strategic planning process to emphasise the importance of improving the student experience while strengthening ‘real world’ engagement. One of the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategies is to ‘strengthen the real world focus of learning experiences through

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3 Material in this section has been drawn from Melinda Shirley, Iyla Davies, Tina Cockburn and Tracey Carver, ‘The Challenge of Providing Work-Integrated Learning for Law Students – the QUT Experience’ (Paper presented at the ACEN Conference, Griffith University, 27-29 September 2006).

4 Also known as Student Portfolio.

5 Geoff Scott, *Accessing the Student Voice: Using CEQuery To Identify What Retains Students and Promotes Engagement In Productive Learning in Australian Higher Education – Final Report of a Project funded by the Higher Education Innovation Program and The Collaboration and Structural Reform Fund Department of Education, Science and Training* (2006) Department of Education, Science and Training (i) available at <<http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/B8C7FFCF-DD44-4983-A6CD-999F6F1CF893/10606/HEIPCEQueryFinalv21stFeb06.doc>> at 6 September 2007.

6 Ibid 42.

7 A Furco, ‘Strengthening Community Engagement in Higher Education’ (Seminar held at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 12 October 2005).

developing and strengthening active partnerships and collaborations within and beyond the University.’<sup>8</sup> The *QUT Learning and Teaching Plan 2007–2011* commits each faculty to:

Providing opportunities for work-integrated learning that facilitate student transition to professional practice; and reviewing and integrating emerging technologies which can most effectively support student learning, and creating physical environments to complement those learning experiences.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, objective three (High Quality Learning Environments Including Physical and Virtual Environments) provides that ‘QUT will provide high quality learning environments and experiences to foster and support effective student learning to be at the forefront of developments in new teaching technology and pedagogy.’ Objective 3.2 provides that QUT will:

Ensure the learning experiences, curriculum, and assessment of all courses are consistent with, and strengthen, QUT graduate capabilities and foster critical thinking including by complete implementation of (inter alia) the student e-Portfolio tools (to emphasise development of graduate capabilities) ...

Further, objective 3.3 provides that QUT will ‘facilitate optimal student learning outcomes by seeking out and capitalising on emerging technologies and integrating information and communications technology into our teaching.’

The Faculty of Law at QUT is one of the largest law faculties in Australia. In 2005 the Faculty had 2,419 students enrolled in its Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and associated double degree courses. Of those, 647 were enrolled as external students. The Faculty caters effectively for the diverse learning needs of students through a range of on and off campus delivery modes, all of which include components of online delivery which provide a greater level of flexibility in terms of accessing study materials and resources, access to staff and the completion of assessment items. In addition, steps have been taken to ensure that graduates enter the workforce with appropriate levels of theory and knowledge combined with the requisite capabilities and skills required of both law and justice professionals to operate effectively in the context of professional practice.

In its major review of the Federal Civil Justice System,<sup>10</sup> the Australian Law Reform Commission concluded that legal education should be more concerned with ‘what lawyers need to be able to do’ as distinct from the traditional Australian approach which has been centred around ‘what lawyers need to know.’ In response to that recommendation, and a number of other reports echoing the same theme,<sup>11</sup> the QUT Faculty of Law integrated professional attributes, or skills, within the content of all substantive undergraduate law units to facilitate incremental capability development throughout the LLB degree.<sup>12</sup>

To ensure incremental development, each specific skill was broken down into three levels to represent gradual attainment. The first level involves scoping of the component parts of the

8 *QUT Learning and Teaching Plan 2005-2009* (2005) Queensland University of Technology available at <[http://www.appu.qut.edu.au/resources/learn\\_teach\\_plans/](http://www.appu.qut.edu.au/resources/learn_teach_plans/)> at 6 September 2007.

9 *QUT Learning and Teaching Plan 2007-2011* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <[http://www.appu.qut.edu.au/resources/learn\\_teach\\_plans/](http://www.appu.qut.edu.au/resources/learn_teach_plans/)> at 6 September 2007.

10 Australian Law Reform Commission, *Review of the Federal Civil Justice System*, Discussion Paper No 62 (1999).

11 Australian Law Reform Commission, *Managing Justice – A Review of the Civil Justice System*, Report No 89 (1999) [2.21]; American Bar Association, *Legal Education and Professional Development – An Educational Continuum* (1992) (MacCrate Report); C McInnis, S Marginson and A Morris, *Australian Law Schools After the 1987 Pearce Report* (1994).

12 See generally, Sally Kift, ‘Lawyering Skills: Finding their Place in Legal Education’ (1997) 8 *Legal Education Review* 43; Sharon Christensen and Sally Kift, ‘Graduate Attributes and Legal Skills’ (1997) 11 *Legal Education Review* 207.

skill, the second level provides an opportunity to practise the component parts of the skill and the third level offers an understanding of the skill in the context of practice. Broadly speaking, those three levels are developed through core units in the first, second and third years of the LLB respectively.

Essential to the project was the pedagogical aim to embed skills training within the content of learning and to specifically assess competency levels within each of the skills through a reflective process that would lead to the development of a 'student capability profile.' To be effective, this learning approach required each skill to be developed through a cycle of instruction, practice, feedback and assessment both horizontally and vertically through the LLB degree. This project was implemented effectively from 2000 to 2003.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the above studies and policies favoured (at both a macro and micro level) the integration, within the Queensland University of Technology undergraduate law unit LWB240 Principles of Equity, of online teaching tools which provided: a context for skills development and work integrated learning; and an opportunity for students to prepare for the transition to professional practice. This was achieved via the use of QUT E-Portfolio, which enabled students to reflect upon and document their skill development in that unit.

### III. E-PORTFOLIO

QUT E-Portfolio, also known as Student Portfolio, is a web based tool which students can use to document and present their academic, professional and personal development in the format of an e-portfolio (electronic portfolio).<sup>14</sup> An e-portfolio has been described as 'an interactive learning object or a learning landscape, which allows engagement and the formation of learning through various modes of communication.'<sup>15</sup> The *QUT Manual of Policies and Procedures* 'promotes the use of the electronic portfolio to assist in learning and teaching, preparation for employment and in the development of graduate capabilities.'<sup>16</sup>

The main elements of the QUT E-Portfolio application, and the benefits of the use of e-portfolios in a learning environment context, are described below.

#### A. *QUT E-Portfolio Elements*

The QUT E-Portfolio application consists of the following three core elements:

##### 1. *Experiences*

Students are encouraged to reflect on experiences drawn from a wide variety of situations, including their education, past or present employment, community based activities, and recreational pursuits. Each experience recorded in E-Portfolio must be associated with one of ten core skill areas. These skill areas have been defined with reference to generic employability attributes, industry

13 For a discussion see, Sharon Christensen and Natalie Cuffe, *Embedding Graduate Attributes in Law – Why, How and is it working?* (2002) Central Queensland University available at <[http://lifelong.learning.cqu.edu.au/2002/papers/Christensen\\_Cuffe.pdf](http://lifelong.learning.cqu.edu.au/2002/papers/Christensen_Cuffe.pdf)> at 4 September 2007.

14 QUT E-Portfolio is available online to all Queensland University of Technology students at: <[www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au](http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au)>.

15 D Mihram, 'ePortfolios' (Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Teaching and Learning with Technology Conference, University of Southern California, 17 September 2004).

16 *Manual of Policies and Procedures*, (2006) Queensland University of Technology ch F, [1.6] available at <<http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/>> at 6 September 2007.

group standards, and the QUT graduate capabilities. They include skills such as: communication; teamwork; problem solving and critical thinking; leadership; and social and ethical responsibility.

## 2. *Artefacts*

QUT E-Portfolio also enables students to publish, and link to the documentation of their experiences, examples of their work and other relevant documents (termed ‘artefacts’) that demonstrate their skills and provide evidence of their achievements.

## 3. *Views*

If students wish to release their portfolio to another person (or to a group of people), for example their tutor or a prospective employer, they can do so by creating and releasing a ‘view’. A view is a particular selection of portfolio content. Students can create different views, tailoring each one to a specific audience or purpose.<sup>17</sup>

## B. *Benefits of E-Portfolios*

Research on the use of e-portfolios in a learning environment has found that such tools provide students with an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on all of their activities and achievements.<sup>18</sup> The process of active reflection within this framework is intended to help students to recognise the variety, depth and ongoing development of their knowledge and abilities, increase their confidence in themselves as an emerging professional, and help them identify skill areas in need of improvement.<sup>19</sup> Reflection on academic experiences should lead students towards a better understanding of the connection between their coursework and the graduate capabilities they are expected to develop while at university. This will help them to review and refine their educational goals, and encourage them to take a more active role in their learning and development. In addition to encouraging reflective thinking and the development of lifelong learning skills, QUT E-Portfolio enables students to build a comprehensive repository of information that will provide them with a valuable resource for demonstrating their skills, knowledge and achievements to prospective employers.

Elizabeth Hartnell-Young is seen as the pioneer of the use of e-portfolios in the Australian context through her work on multi media professional portfolios.<sup>20</sup> She notes that Australians are enthusiastic in the uptake of new electronic technologies. Consequently, the short and long term benefits of e-portfolio development, for students in an Australian university environment, have been summarised as:<sup>21</sup>

- building the capacity to develop and record quality stories;
- being better organised;
- focussing on the process of reflection and skill development;
- enhanced access to both employers and potential employers; and

17 For a more detailed explanation see, *Project Information* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/projectinfo/>> at 17 March 2007.

18 M Bhattacharya, ‘Electronic Portfolios, Student Reflective Practices, and the Evaluation of Effective Learning’ (Paper presented at the AAREducation International Education Research Conference, Fremantle, 2-6 December 2001).

19 For a discussion of the development of the QUT E-Portfolio see: Col McCowan, Wendy Harper and Kim Hauville, ‘Student E-Portfolio: The Successful Implementation of an E-portfolio Across a Major Australian University’ (2005) 14(2) *Australian Journal of Career Development* 40.

20 Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, ‘Developing Multimedia Career Portfolios In Australia: Opportunities and Obstacles’ (2001) 17(3) *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal* 45.

21 McCowan, Harper and Hauville, above n 19, 49.

- developing valuable lifelong learning skills.

#### IV. USING E-PORTFOLIO TO REFLECT UPON AND DOCUMENT SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN THE LAW UNIT ‘PRINCIPLES OF EQUITY’

The skills modules in LWB240 Principles of Equity – teamwork and letter writing – build upon skills theory and practice which students have already studied in the first year of their undergraduate law degree, and incorporate this theory and practice at various stages in the unit’s lecture and tutorial program.<sup>22</sup> In particular, students are required to engage in teamwork activities and then, in teams of four, write and submit a letter of advice in relation to a specified tutorial question dealing with the law relating to fiduciaries (the ‘team letter writing exercise’). The outcome of the team letter writing exercise – the letter – is assessed and weighted at ten percent of the assessment in the unit.

The letter writing skill components of the unit are lectured face to face during the first hour of the week two lecture, where students are guided through the principles relevant to writing and structuring a client focused letter of legal advice. Students are also referred to an online talking PowerPoint presentation which contains an overview of teamwork theory relevant to enabling effective group work.<sup>23</sup> Internal students then engage in the team letter writing exercise in compulsory face to face tutorials during weeks two, four and five of the teaching semester. Following the implementation of an online team letter writing exercise model in semester one 2006, external students are now able to elect to engage in the team letter writing exercise online, and in the same timeframe as the internal students. Those students not adopting this option engage in the exercise at an External Attendance School over a period of two hours.<sup>24</sup>

Following student feedback which indicated that students did not appreciate the benefits of engaging in the skills components of the unit, in semester one 2007 it was decided to integrate the use of QUT E-Portfolio into the LWB240 Principles of Equity unit to provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon and document their skill development following completion of their team letter. The aim was to provide a context for the students’ skills development (that highlighted the skills’ relevance to future employment) whilst also contributing to the students’ preparation for the transition to professional practice.<sup>25</sup>

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22 For a discussion of the integration of skills into the complimentary unit, LWB241 Trusts see, Melinda Shirley and Wendy Harris, *Assuring Quality in the Assessment of Negotiation Skills: A Case Study in the Teaching of Trusts* (2002) 9(3) Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law available at <<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/claw/issues/v9n3/harris93.html>> at 4 September 2007.

23 The theory focused upon is the ‘Ten Commandments of Teamwork’ outline in: Graham Gibbs, *Learning In Teams: A Student Guide* (1994).

24 Given the unavoidable time constraints associated with conducting this activity during an external attendance school weekend, during which students must also attend seminars and assessment relevant to all other units they are studying, students are strongly encouraged to begin preparing for the team letter writing exercise individually before forming their teams at the External Attendance School.

25 The project follows on from the excellent foundation work of Natalie Cuffe and later Judith McNamara, both of the QUT Faculty of Law, who successfully integrated QUT E-Portfolio into the core undergraduate first year unit LWB143 Legal Research and Reasoning. In LWB143 students are given a workshop on the use of E-Portfolio for recording their skills and achievements. There is no compulsory requirement to use E-Portfolio in the unit, but a strong link is made between student learning and the need to reflect and record their experiences for use with job applications in the future.

Following completion of the team letter writing exercise, students were therefore required to use QUT E-Portfolio to reflect on and document their skill development in the areas of teamwork and letter writing (communication), which are the focus of skill development in LWB240 Principles of Equity. Each student was required to complete an individual e-portfolio entry. To introduce QUT E-Portfolio and to explain its significance in terms of reflecting on and documenting skill development, particularly in the context of preparing for their future careers, and in particular making job applications, Mr Col McCowan, Head, Careers and Employment at QUT gave a presentation at the lecture which dealt with letter writing skills. This presentation was recorded and made available for all students on the unit's online teaching site and the accompanying Power-Point slides were saved as a resource for students.

After surveying the students in relation to their prior experiences with QUT E-Portfolio at the beginning of the semester, and ascertaining what they would like to learn more about, materials were developed for students (taking into account the survey responses) in relation to the application of E-Portfolio in LWB240 Principles of Equity. These materials were made available to students via the unit's online teaching site.

The materials aimed to facilitate student engagement with and reflection upon the development of their work related skills in the unit by particularly addressing the following student concerns commonly reflected in the preliminary survey;<sup>26</sup> namely:

- I would like to learn more about how to use it more efficiently
- I would like to have a simple guide
- I did not really understand how to add [artefacts] to it
- I would like to learn more about where it is, how to access it
- I found it difficult to do reflections
- I would like to learn more about better techniques at writing the e-portfolio.

As students sought the most assistance in relation to structuring and writing an explanation of an activity (or experience) and then reflecting upon the skills derived from it, the materials included the instructions outlined below in Figure One.

### *Figure 1*

#### *How to create an experience of your skill development in LWB240 Principles of Equity*

You should reflect upon your skill development and document your experience as soon as possible after you have completed your team letter writing exercise. Someone has to read your reflection so keep it short and to the point. Consider using a hyperlink to an example of work that supports your experience.

##### *1. Selecting an experience*

The following scenario is an example of an experience that a student might choose to reflect on and include in their e-portfolio.

<sup>26</sup> The survey, entitled 'E-Portfolio Reflection,' was distributed during the first tutorial and asked students to provide comments upon the following four matters:

1. Some ways in which I think that E-Portfolio can be used and why it might be a useful resource are ...
2. I would like to learn about the following aspects of E-Portfolio ...
3. (If you have used E-Portfolio before ...), what I liked most about using E-Portfolio was ...
4. (If you have used E-Portfolio before ...), what I liked least about using E-Portfolio was ...

*I recently studied the subject Equity at QUT. In this unit, I was required to complete a project. This project required me to work in a team of four and produce a client letter. My team had a couple of mature age students.*

*There was immediately a clash of values between the younger students (who'd come to uni straight from school) and the mature age students.*

*I had to find some middle ground between my team members' differing views. I decided to call a team meeting to set up some rules for the group. When the project was over, the team received a Credit. The project might not have been a brilliant success, but the task was completed satisfactorily.<sup>27</sup>*

## *2. Reflecting on your learning*

STAR L stands for **Situation, Task, Action, Result** and lessons **Learnt**.

STAR L can help you to structure your reflections about an experience in such a way that the meaning and outcome of the experience can be clearly identified and communicated to others.

- **Situation** – The *situation* is the context in which the experience occurred.

In our example above, the experience took place at the Queensland University of Technology within the context of a team project. This project was undertaken as part of Principles of Equity (LWB240). The team had four members, two of whom were mature age students.

- **Task** – The *task* is what was actually required of you in the situation.

If an experience occurred during a project at uni, the associated task might have been related to organisation (e.g. managing project documentation), teamwork (e.g. ensuring that each team member was aware of their responsibilities), or communication (e.g. delivering a presentation as part of the project).

In our example above, the task was to resolve a problem that arose as a result of personal differences.

- **Action** – *Action* refers to the steps that you personally took in response to the task.

When reflecting on your actions, ask yourself why you chose to respond in that particular way.

In our example above, the action was initiating and organising a team meeting to develop some ground rules.

- **Result** – *Result* refers to the outcome of your actions. How did your actions contribute to the completion of the task? How did your actions affect the final outcome of the situation?

In our example above, the action resulted in successful conflict management, and contributed to the satisfactory completion of the project.

- **Learnt** – *Learnt* refers to the things you have learned from the experience.

Highlight any skills or abilities that you have developed or improved as a result of the experience. Think about whether you have gained a deeper understanding of any particular issues. Think about how you might apply what you've learned to other situations.

In our example above, we might have learned that setting team rules is a good way to impersonalise any issues or conflict, and that this should be done as early in the process as possible.<sup>28</sup>

27 Adapted from QUT E-Portfolio: *Getting Started – Selecting an Experience* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/forstudents/gettingstarted/selecting.jsp>> at 17 March 2007.

28 Source QUT E-Portfolio: *Getting Started – Reflecting on Learning* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/forstudents/gettingstarted/reflecting.jsp>> at 17 March 2007.



### 3. Recording the details of your experience

After using the STAR L process to reflect on the above experience, the final e-portfolio entry might look like this:

*Team letter writing project for LWB240*

*I was required to participate in a team letter writing project for the subject LWB240 Principles of Equity. Teams of four were allocated randomly and our team had two mature age students in it. There was immediately a clash of values between the school leaver students and the mature age students.*

*I undertook to try to find some middle ground in terms of the expectations of each sub group. This was an extremely difficult task because neither sub group was initially willing to accommodate the others' views. Eventually I called a team meeting and with their help tried to draw up a set of group rules in terms of both process and desired outcomes. These were agreed to on a trial basis and roles were allocated accordingly.*

*Although it was not brilliantly successful and there was still minor skirmishes, we did get the task done satisfactorily and achieved a Credit. I now know that setting group rules to work by is a good way to impersonalise an issue(s) before it potentially arises and should be done very early in the process.<sup>29</sup>*

In addition to an explanation of what was required of students in relation to the writing and completion of an e-portfolio experience, instructions, resources, quick reference guides and tip sheets were also provided as to: how and where to access QUT E-Portfolio; how to add artefacts (such as the team letter, team rules, meeting agendas and agreed work plans) to the documentation of an experience; and how to save and print entries and artefacts.<sup>30</sup> Finally students were referred to a range of student support services, such as the 'Frequently Asked Questions' link on the E-Portfolio site,<sup>31</sup> as well as dedicated email support from QUT support staff and the general help desk for information technology support.

## V. EVALUATION

In order to measure the effectiveness of the integration of QUT E-Portfolio into LWB240 Principles of Equity, an evaluation was conducted, which adopted a qualitative approach using survey method, to collect and analyse student perceptions on the nature and impact of the use of this tool on their learning environment and experience. After making their E-Portfolio entry, as part of the

29 Adapted from: *Portfolio Capabilities Sample Portfolio* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <[https://qutvirtual.qut.edu.au/portal/pls/portal/sp\\_resource\\_links\\_p.show?p\\_arg\\_names=p\\_show&p\\_arg\\_values=portfolios#](https://qutvirtual.qut.edu.au/portal/pls/portal/sp_resource_links_p.show?p_arg_names=p_show&p_arg_values=portfolios#)> at 17 March 2007. See also QUT E-Portfolio: *Getting Started – Recording The Details* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/forstudents/gettingstarted/recording/>> at 17 March 2007.

30 For example, students were referred to: *QUT Student Portfolio Student Quick Reference Guide* (2006) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/forstudents/guides.jsp>> at 17 March 2007.

31 *Frequently Asked Questions* (2007) Queensland University of Technology available at <<http://www.studentportfolio.qut.edu.au/forstudents/faq.jsp#ASPQ7>> at 11 September 2007.

team letter writing exercise, students were asked to complete (and submit either online or in paper form) a survey providing written comments in relation to the following three matters:<sup>32</sup>

1. What I liked most about using E-Portfolio to reflect on and document my skill development was ...
2. What I liked least about using E-Portfolio to reflect on and document my skill development was ...
3. What I learned from engaging in the Team Letter Writing Exercise and documenting my skill development was ...

Through the use of this open questionnaire a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation was collected from which the following emergent themes were identified.

### *A. Benefits of E-Portfolio*

Student responses commonly indicated that they welcomed the opportunity provided via QUT E-Portfolio to actively reflect upon and evaluate their participation in the LWB240 Principles of Equity team letter writing exercise, and to think about the task and the skills derived from it. For example, student comments included:

- It made me think about what I learned from the experience, rather than just viewing it as a necessary school task to be gotten through.
- It really made me read into the exercise and draw out what skills I learnt as a result of this ‘hands on’ task.
- I am really excited about E-Portfolio because it gives me an interactive resource to guide my skill reflection.
- It helped me to learn about myself, my strengths and weaknesses. It will certainly prepare me for my next teamwork activity.
- It made me really think about what I learnt and experienced in writing the letter, when I would not usually think about such things.
- Documenting skill development allows you to reflect on the process you actually went through. It isn’t something you might normally do and being forced to makes you realise the skills you actually do possess, especially [with regard to] teamwork/communication.

These responses therefore indicate that engaging in this reflection process helped students to realise the personal and educational benefits of engaging in the skills component of the unit – something that some of them would not have otherwise done or appreciated, respectively.

Secondly, and consistently with previous observations on the use of e-portfolios in a learning environment, which argues that reflection on academic experiences should enable students to better understand the connection between their coursework and the graduate capabilities they are expected to develop whilst at university,<sup>33</sup> students opined that:

- Documenting my skill development enables me to learn from one experience to another, and see my development as a student and my ability as a team member.
- I am realizing that over the semesters and subjects my skills are definitely growing in strength and type.

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<sup>32</sup> Unrelated to the use of QUT E-Portfolio, students were also asked to comment upon:

1. What I liked most about working in my team to complete the letter writing exercise in Equity was ...
2. What I liked least about working in my team to complete the letter writing exercise in Equity was ...

<sup>33</sup> See above n 18-21 and accompanying text.

The utilisation of QUT E-Portfolio within LWB240 Principles of Equity consequently augmented student appreciation that their lifelong skills were progressively developing throughout their LLB degree.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in terms of information storage, many students acknowledged that over time people commonly lose track of information. They therefore particularly valued E-Portfolio as a convenient data storage device:

- Knowing that I can keep my information in this one particular place, which I will be able to add to and amend, in order to build a strong academic portfolio.
- E-Portfolio has a very structured approach toward documenting and storing experiences from university, and the relevant skills that were developed. Therefore, if used consistently the user will build up a number of experiences that will be useful to draw upon for interview and employment purposes.

Students also commented favourably upon the materials developed in response to the features of E-Portfolio that the preliminary survey of their prior experiences with this tool indicated that they would like to know more about.<sup>35</sup> For example, student responses included:

- I have known about E-Portfolio ... but never really understood how to use it, though I realised it could be great – so having the excellent worksheets I now know how to use it!
- ... the instructions given on the LWB240 OLT [online teaching] site were very helpful.
- At first I did not know what to write, but once I looked at [the] examples I realised what was required of me.

These identified benefits therefore further facilitated student engagement with E-Portfolio and their reflection upon the development of their work related skills.

However, concerning E-Portfolio's ability to provide a 'real world' context (or relevance) for students' skills development, and their overall learning experience, perhaps the most important benefit identified by the evaluation was that this tool enabled a significant number of students to link the skills achieved in the team letter writing exercise assessment item to the skills needed in the workplace. Consequently, after this exercise a greater number of students appreciated the future work related benefits of engaging in the skills component of the unit, in addition to the general benefits (in terms of personal and educational development) discussed above. For example, responses to the question '*what I liked most about using E-Portfolio to reflect on and document my skill development was...*' included:

- It made me think beyond the subject and re-enforced the end goal of my degree – which is to gain professional employment. It made the subject seem really relevant to my overall goal.
- It allowed me to think of this activity as something that would be of good use for when I leave university and go on to practice law.
- It made me realise some of the qualities and experiences employers look for in potential employees. It also made me see how what we do at uni relates to the workplace.
- This is an effective tool for me to use for the future in compiling all my skills gained throughout my degree, and I'll be able to release it to prospective employers.

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34 For further discussion of the QUT Faculty of Law's aim to facilitate incremental skill development throughout the LLB degree, see above n 12 and accompanying text.

35 These materials, and the preliminary survey conducted, are discussed at above n 26-31 and accompanying text.

- [E-Portfolio] will undoubtedly prove a huge help in composing a CV and displaying my [academic] experience and previous work to potential employers.
- It ... helped me recognise the skills I was developing and their relevance to my future career.

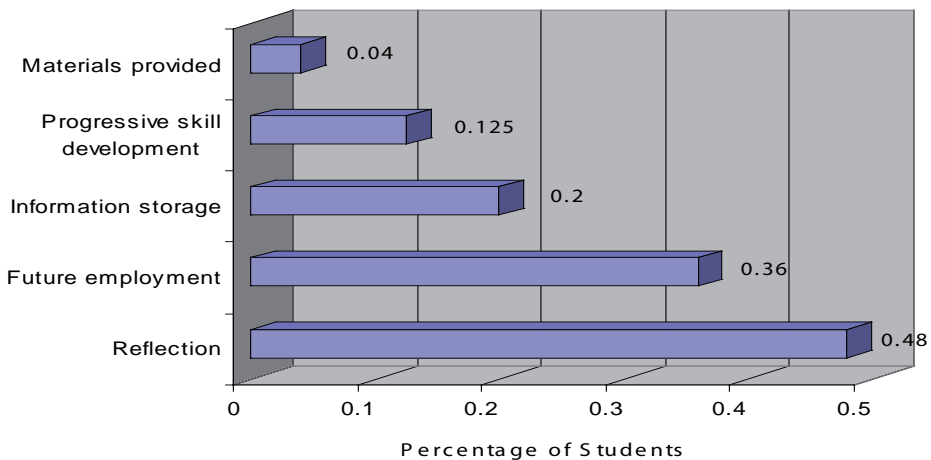
Responses to ‘*what I learned from engaging in the teamwork letter writing exercise and documenting my skill development was*’ included:

- That the team letter writing exercise gives one essential skills which will be needed once I enter the workplace.
- To actually think about what I gain and how it will help me in my chosen career.

Therefore, in general, student perceptions indicated that the integration of E-Portfolio into LWB240 Principles of Equity, as a means of enabling student reflection upon (and documentation of) their skill development, led to greater student appreciation of the “real world” relevance of engaging in the skills component of that unit – the team letter writing exercise. The survey responses indicate that after the implementation of this initiative, students were more likely to appreciate that they were being made to engage in the development of graduate attributes, to complement the acquisition of professional knowledge, for a reason. This was in contrast to prior feedback which indicated that students did not appreciate the benefits of engaging in the unit’s skills components.<sup>36</sup> As such the utilisation of E-Portfolio assisted to highlight the skills’ relevance to the students’ future employment, whilst also positively contributing to their preparation for the transition to professional practice.

The benefits identified above, in terms of: reflection; progressive skills development; information storage; materials provided; and future employment, are summarised in Figure Two below according to the percentage of students surveyed who addressed them.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 2: E-Portfolio Benefits



<sup>36</sup> Discussed at above n 25 and accompanying text.

<sup>37</sup> Based upon a sample of 176 students.

### B. *Criticism of E-Portfolio*

Despite these benefits, seven percent of students surveyed<sup>38</sup> considered that the use of E-Portfolio, and/or reflection upon their skills development, had no, or very limited, work related benefit for them. These students also opined that they would not use E-Portfolio in the future.

Of this small percentage, the most common reason given for this opinion was that the student concerned did ‘not regard E-Portfolio to be relevant to someone at [their] life stage.’<sup>39</sup> This seemed to either be because the student was: mature aged and already in gainful employment; or not concerned about applying for jobs in the immediate future (being only in the second year of their four, or five,<sup>40</sup> year LLB degree). For example, student responses included:

- As an experienced mature age student many of my skills and attributes are already documented in my resume ... It sometimes seems that it is a waste of time to input information into E-Portfolio when I cannot see myself using it in the future.
- I can see relevance in some cases (job seeking etc), but personally these applications don’t apply.
- Sometimes it feels like a waste of time doing it because I won’t be applying for jobs for some time.

Other students failed to appreciate that the communication and teamwork skills reflected upon in the LWB240 Principles of Equity team letter writing exercise were transferable to occupations outside the legal profession:

- The E-Portfolio will not be very relevant in my future ie: I will not be practicing law.

Nevertheless, despite this criticism, it remains that the significant themes identified by the student responses are in overall support of the benefits of using e-portfolios as teaching tools. As one student stated:<sup>41</sup>

- This exercise improved many of my skills that will be integral if I ever enter a law firm, as teamwork is essential and letter writing will be an integral part of the job. Overall learning how to improve my skills and document my experience was a great development in my life as a law student.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Effective e-learning tools offer modern universities the opportunity to provide authentic work integrated learning experiences for law students. Such learning approaches (by supplementing the acquisition of knowledge with the building of students’ professional skills and self awareness for future employment), require significant adaptation of the traditional learning theories which have underpinned educational literature in this field to date. However, the current policy imperatives of the Australian higher education sector, and the rapidly changing nature of today’s students’ learning preferences, suggest that it is a worthwhile goal. This is supported by the student perceptions on the QUT E-Portfolio tool incorporated in the unit LWB240 Principles of Equity at the Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology. By providing an online tool via which students can reflect upon and document their skill development for use in future employment, this project provides a working example of an attempt to reconcile the above imperatives in the design of an

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38 This equates to 13 students out of a sample of 176.

39 Seven out of 13 students.

40 In the case of combined degree students. This period may be even longer for students studying the LLB degree on a part-time basis.

41 Emphasis in original.

authentic and rewarding learning experience for law students preparing for the “real world” of professional practice.