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Awareness and Usage of ePortfolios by Faculty in Higher Education in Ireland: Findings from a Faculty Survey



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Awareness and Usage of ePortfolios by Faculty in Higher Education in Ireland: Findings from a Faculty Survey

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Introduction

Electronic portfolios have a greater potential to alter higher education at its very core than any other technology application we've known thus far.

(Batson, 2002, 1)

Increasing numbers of institutions are realising the potential of ePortfolios as a tool for supporting student learning. The use of ePortfolios can enhance metacognition and integrative learning, can facilitate reflection and critical thinking and can help students to develop a digital and professional identity.

This report outlines the findings of a faculty survey conducted as part of the project *An ePortfolio strategy to enhance student learning, assessment and staff professional development*. The main purposes of the project is to create an ePortfolio framework that will encourage and enable educators to incorporate ePortfolios into their programmes/courses/modules, to empower students in their learning, to allow for more authentic forms of assessment and to foster a student-centred approach to learning.

The project is funded by the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* under the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund 2015 (Building Digital Capacity). The partner institutions are Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB), Institute of Technology, Tallaght (ITT) and Hibernia College.

As part of the data collection phase of the project, an online survey was administered to faculty in higher education institutions in Ireland to examine awareness and usage of ePortfolios by staff. The data arising from the survey will inform the development of an ePortfolio framework for use in higher education in Ireland.

This report summarises the main findings that emerged from the survey.

Methodology

An anonymous online survey was developed to explore awareness and usage of ePortfolios by faculty staff. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at DIT, the lead partner of the project. An email outlining the project and including the survey link was sent to Teaching and Learning departments in 17 Irish third-level institutions and distributed to approximately 7,000 faculty staff.

The survey remained open for April and May 2016 and 293 responded to it.

The survey comprised 21 questions made up of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. Two open-response questions were given at the end of the survey to allow respondents to include their own comments in relation to ePortfolios and to add a qualitative dimension to the findings.

The survey questions are provided in Appendix 1.



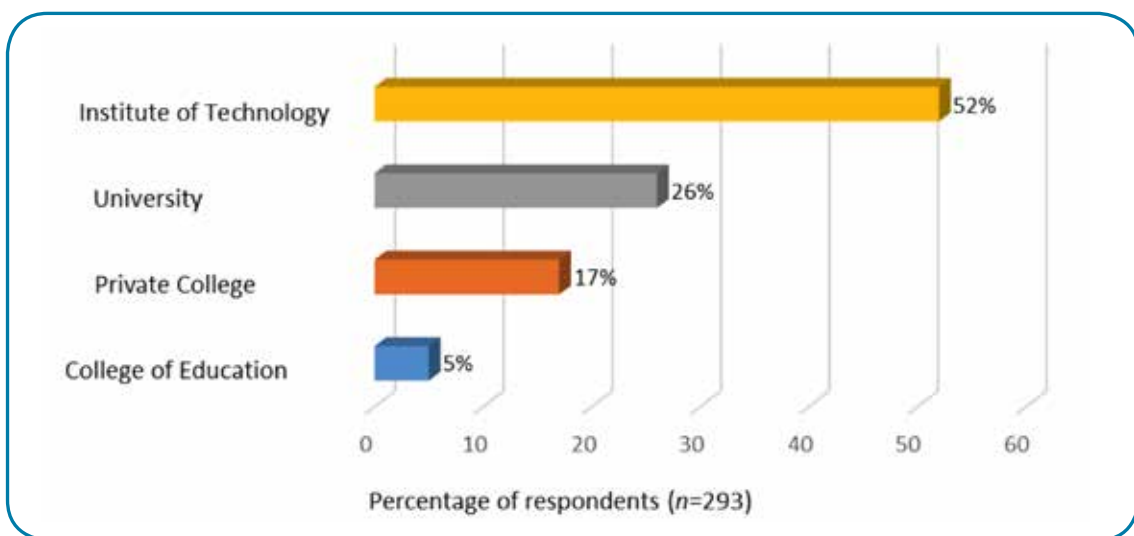
Faculty Survey Findings

The settings of the online survey software allowed quantitative reporting of findings from each question. These findings are outlined below.

Institutional context

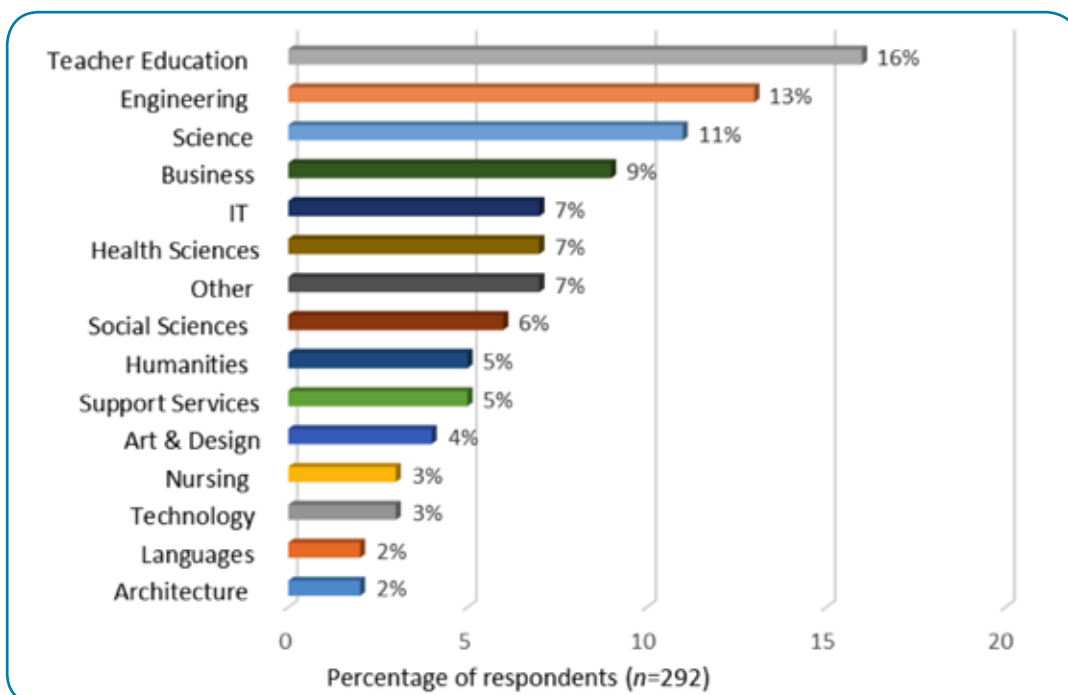
There were 293 responses to the survey. Just over half of respondents (52%) work in an Institute of Technology, 26% work in a University, 17% work in a private college and 5% were working in a college of education.

Figure 1: What type of higher education institution are you working in?



The majority of respondents are from Teacher Education, Engineering, Science and Business as shown in Figure 2.

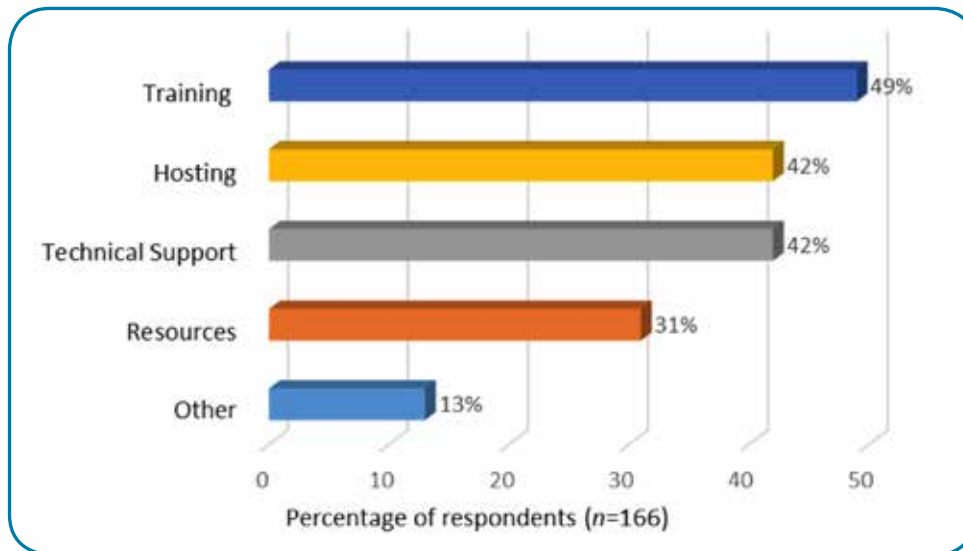
Figure 2: What is your disciplinary area?



Institutional support

In terms of institutional support, 70% of respondents indicated that their institution supports the use of ePortfolios mainly through training (49%), hosting (42%) and technical support (42%).

Figure 3: What supports does the institution provide for ePortfolios?



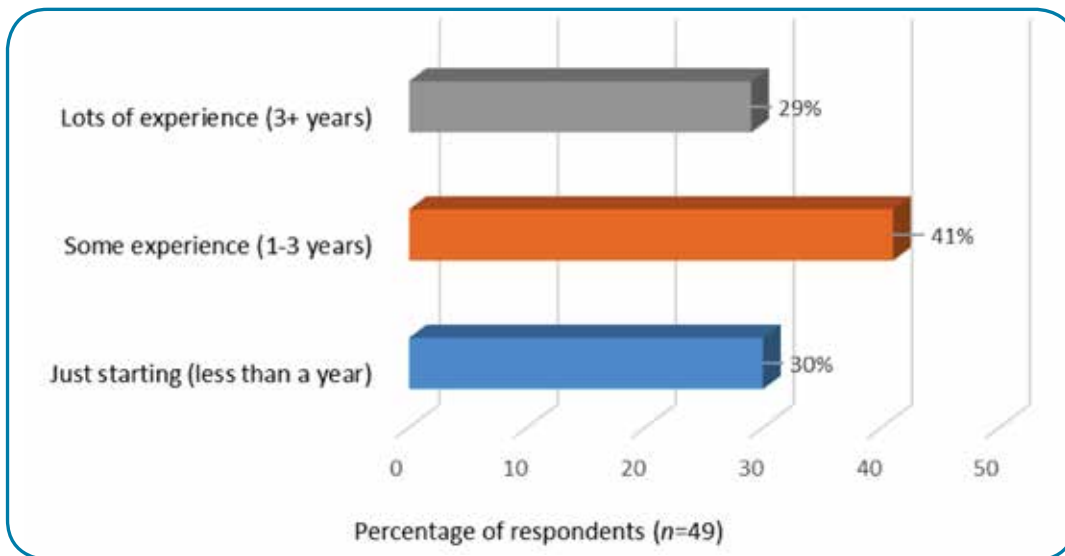
When asked whether students or employers/industry representatives had enquired about using ePortfolios in courses or the use of ePortfolios in institutions, 23% of respondents indicated that their students had asked them about using ePortfolios in their course and 20% indicated that employers/industry representatives had asked about the use of ePortfolios in their institution. This could suggest a growing awareness of the potential of ePortfolios as a personal and professional development tool by both students and employers.

Teaching practice

Only 27% of respondents selected 'yes' when asked if they use an ePortfolio in their current role. Of these, only 29% indicated that they have more than 3 years' experience of using ePortfolios in their teaching, as shown in Figure 4.

The majority of respondents (41%) indicated that they have 1-3 years' experience and 31% of respondents are just starting to use ePortfolios with less than a year's experience of using ePortfolios in their teaching. These figures may also suggest a growing interest in the use of ePortfolios for learning and teaching.

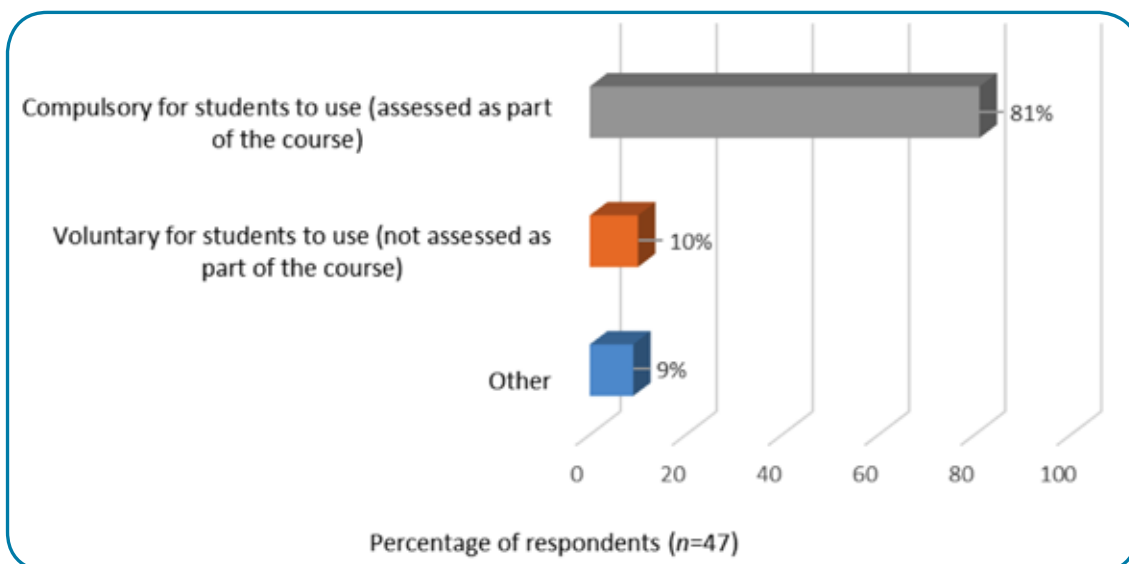
Figure 4: How long have you been using an ePortfolio in your teaching?



In respect of the disciplines in which respondents are using ePortfolios, the majority were in health sciences, clinical placements, teacher education, elearning, IT, digital media, business and social care.

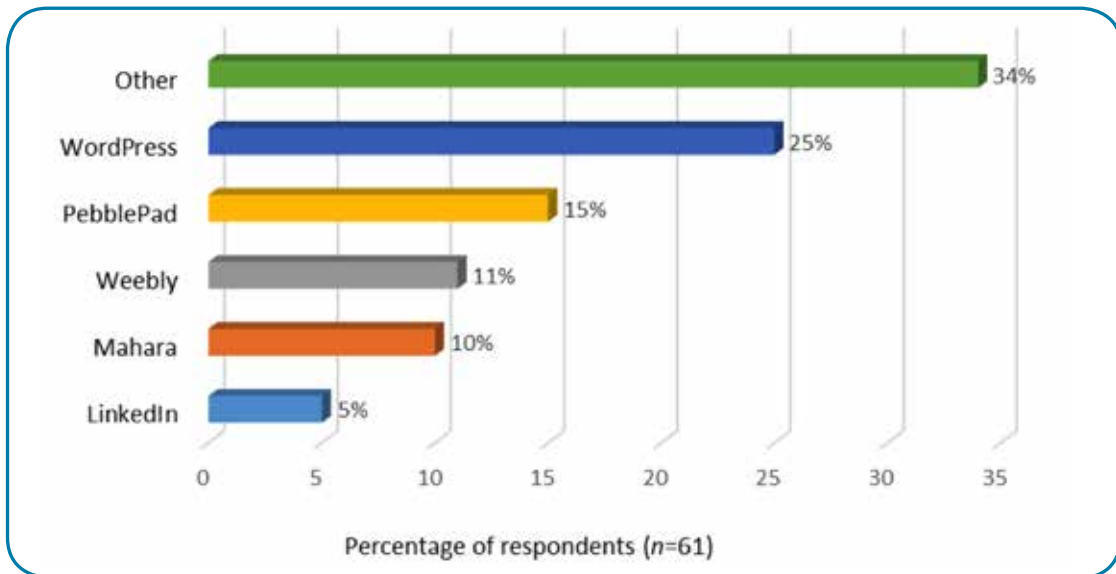
As shown in Figure 5, the majority of respondents (81%) indicated that they are using ePortfolios for assessment as opposed to 10% who make it voluntary for students to use and do not assess it.

Figure 5: ePortfolio aspect of course: compulsory or voluntary



When asked about the tools used by their students to create ePortfolios, there was a range of tools being used. The majority (34%) selected 'Other' indicating they use platforms/tools not listed in the question such as Student Diary Pro, Google sites and personal websites such as Wix, Zohosites, portfolium and myknowledgemap. 25% of respondents indicated that their students used WordPress. As shown in Figure 6, platforms such as Pebblepad, Weebly and Mahara were also selected as tools used by their students.

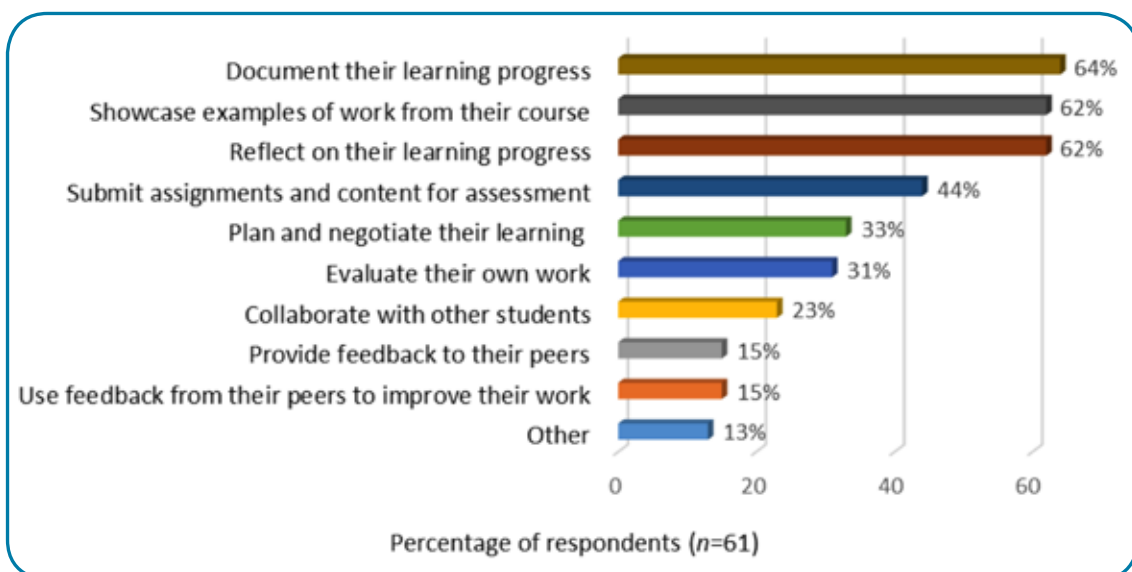
Figure 6: Which tools are your students using to create ePortfolios?



When asked about what using ePortfolios allows students to do in their courses, the majority of respondents indicated that using ePortfolios allows students to document their learning progress, reflect on their learning progress, showcase examples of work from their course and submit content for assessment as shown in Figure 7.

As shown also, only 23% of respondents indicated that using ePortfolios allows students to collaborate with other students and only 15% of respondents indicated that using ePortfolios allows students to use peer feedback to help students improve their work. Donnelly and O'Keefe (2013) recommend facilitating peer support between students to encourage the formation of communities of ePortfolio students who can discuss ePortfolio-related issues together.

Figure 7: What using ePortfolios allows students to do



Faculty level of satisfaction with including ePortfolios in their course

The survey also sought to gain an insight into satisfaction from inclusion of ePortfolios in courses.

The majority of respondents (87%) indicated that including ePortfolios in their course helps with student-centred learning, the showcasing and evidencing of learning and student self-reflection. The survey also revealed that 81% of respondents suggest that the inclusion of ePortfolios in courses helps students develop technology skills. Abrami and Barrett (2005, 6) suggest that creating an ePortfolio encourages ‘flexible, inclusive, and distributed evidence of learning’ and helps to develop multimedia technology skills.

In relation to including ePortfolios in their courses and assessment, only 47% of respondents indicated that the inclusion of ePortfolios helps achieve a balanced assessment workload across a programme. Similarly, only 43% of respondents suggest the use of ePortfolios in their course improved the accuracy and reliability of assessment. However, more than half of respondents indicated that including ePortfolios allows for a range of assessment types; formative (ongoing) assessment, summative (final) assessment and student self-assessment.

Table 2: Level of agreement with statements about ePortfolios

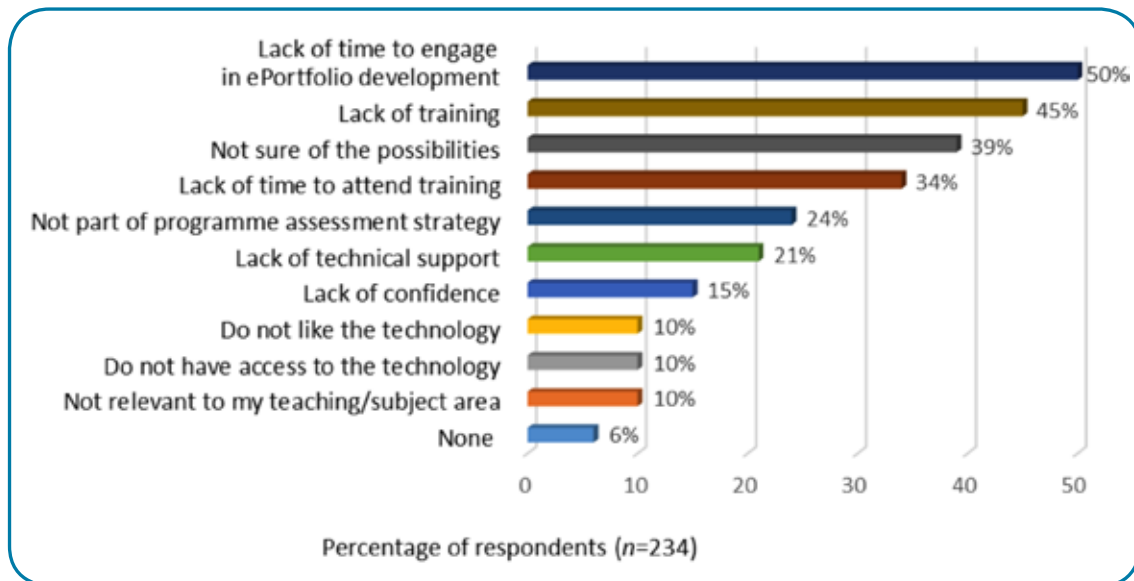
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Student-centred learning	38	49	11	2	0
Showcasing and evidencing learning	48	39	13	0	0
Student self-reflection	41	46	11	2	0
Strong technology skills	28	53	17	2	0
Formative (ongoing) assessment	32	45	23	0	0
Summative (final) assessment	23	52	21	2	2
Student self-assessment	20	47	31	2	0
Critical thinking skills	32	34	32	0	2
Lifelong learning habits	29	25	42	4	0
Balanced assessment workload across a programme	16	31	49	2	2
Improved accuracy and reliability of assessment	15	28	52	5	0

Perceived barriers to using ePortfolios

When asked about the barriers they perceive to using ePortfolios, half of respondents indicated that the lack of time to engage in ePortfolio development was a barrier. Lack of training (45%), technical support (21%) and time to attend training (34%) were also deemed to be barriers.

Only 10% noted not having access to the technology as a barrier and similarly, only 10% considered not liking the technology to be a barrier.

Figure 8: What do you perceive as the barriers to using ePortfolios in your institution?

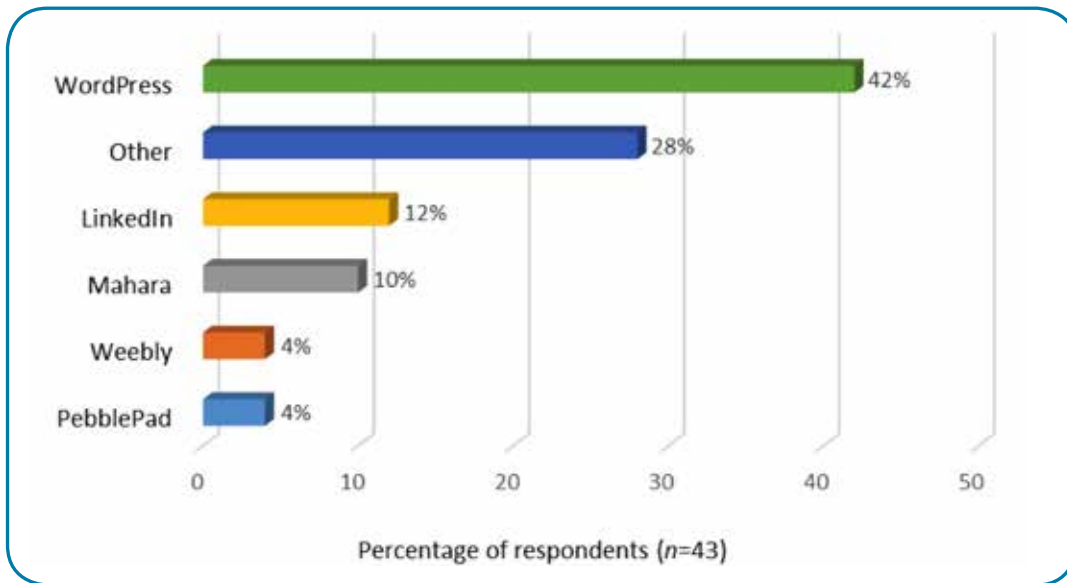


Personal practice

Only 21% of respondents selected 'yes' when asked if they have developed their own ePortfolio. Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005) suggest that teaching ePortfolios can be a valuable learning tool. They can be used for critical reflection and learning purposes, for career advancement, to showcase a faculty member's accomplishments to their students and to share teaching practices and achievements with peers.

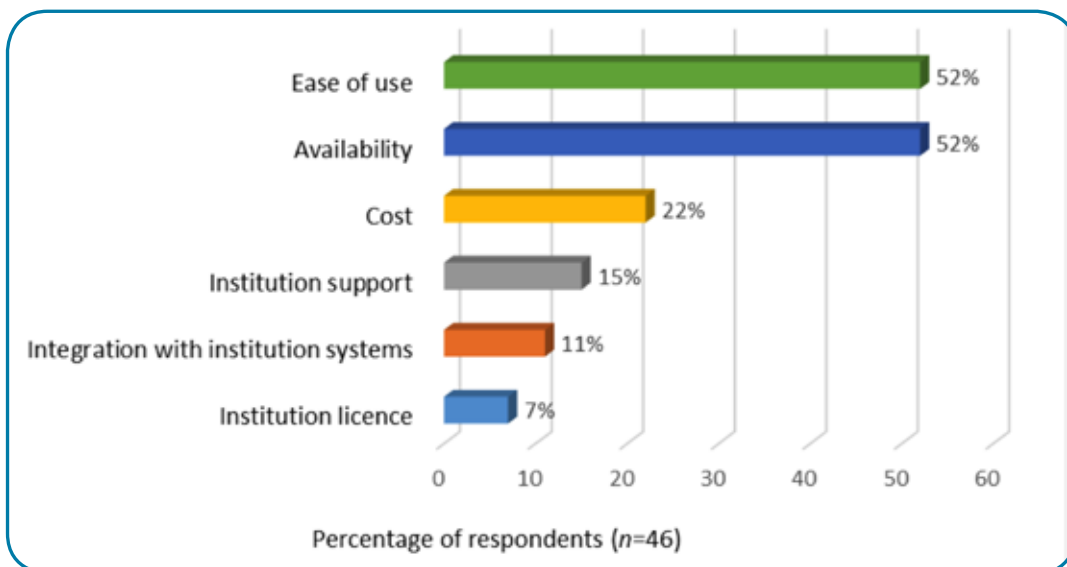
When asked about the tools used to create their own ePortfolio, 42% of respondents indicated that they used WordPress, as shown in Figure 9. LinkedIn, Mahara, Weebly and PebblePad were also selected. Other tools used by faculty included Google Sites and several institution-specific tools.

Figure 9: Which tool did you use to create your ePortfolio?



More than half (52%) indicated they selected a particular tool to develop their ePortfolio because of ease of use and availability. As shown in Figure 10, only 7% selected the option 'institution licence' and only 11% selected the option 'Integration with institution systems' as reasons for choosing a particular tool to develop their ePortfolio. This would suggest that the majority of respondents in this survey used presentational websites and blogging tools rather than institution-specific tools to develop their own ePortfolios.

Figure 10: Why did you select this tool to create your ePortfolio?



ePortfolio research

Only 5% of respondents had conducted research or written papers about ePortfolios.

Research topics by respondents who did were mainly in the area of health sciences, where continued professional development is an important element as shown in the qualitative responses below:

'Along with colleagues have submitted abstract to Pharmacy Education Conference, Manchester University, June 2016; have submitted conference proceedings to PebblePad "Pebbledash" conference, September 2016. Have also discussed eportfolio in teaching portfolio (PG Cert T&L).'

'National Council for Nursing & Midwifery Ireland funded a project in RCSI where I was employed. I built an eportfolio with an IT company Version 1. No money was available from the nursing board to continue but the publication indicated that nurses welcomed the eportfolio for continued professional development.'

'A limited meta analysis (if that's not a contradiction in itself) of the research available about the use of ePortfolios and especially the possibilities for them as ways to document a student's learning journey from the time they begin to learn about something to the last stages where they are ready to be assessed/examined in the subject.'

'As part of a project called ePrePP - electronic preparation for professional practice, we are evaluating the use of eportfolios (pebblepad) for health care students in pharmacy, nursing and medicine. We have used it in modules and on placement and are compiling data relating to students and tutors experience with it to date.'

'While I have not conducted research or written papers I have participated at the PebblePad Irish user group in Dublin and will be presenting at the AAEEBL conference in Edinburgh next month.'

'Currently working on a number of papers relating to formative assessment strategies (including the use of e-portfolios).'

Additional faculty views

Faculty were given an opportunity to give their own qualitative comments on the use of ePortfolios.

Comments demonstrated an awareness of the benefits and capabilities of an ePortfolio:

'Excellent tool and repository for evidence of learning, personal and professional development'

'Great idea - would like to have a more flexible institutional to allow portfolios to be assessed across a full programme rather than at individual module/course level'

Some respondents noted the potential of ePortfolios for career development and employability purposes:

'ePortfolio is undoubtedly the only way forward in developing evidence of continued professional competence. This medium of developing and displaying a portfolio of a professionals formal and informal learning as well as maintaining records of professional development and inter professional engagement is going to become a prerequisite for ongoing practice and colleges must work towards supporting students and professionals engagement with the process.'

'Students now live in a digital informal world; everything is instantaneous and immediate. Even the world of recruitment has changed dramatically in the last 5 yrs. E- portfolios must be cognisant of the world in which we operate...not the world we would like to operate in'

'I am aware of what they are and believe they could help prepare students and staff in marketing their work (in Art and Design), in establishing an online presence on multiple platforms. This is now an essential professional practice skill in Art and Design.'

'I don't understand why students are leaving college without ePortfolios. We have been using them for several years and they are fantastic for assessment purposes and for students to appreciate their learning journey. And then, organisations get to see what their capabilities are.'

'It is worth considering the use of eportfolios for outside the classroom learning - cooperative education, volunteering, clubs and societies etc.'

Others commented on the importance of identifying the purpose of an ePortfolio:

'I think that more discussion about them across the institutions is really a great thing and hopefully it will raise awareness as well as provide a space where the institutions can provide peer support to each other in their development. As with all portfolios, it is important to identify the basic purpose for which they are intended i.e. learning portfolios (process oriented) or showcase portfolios (product oriented) or along a continuum between these - although I think that one or another is the easiest way to start - for students using them anyway.'

'ePortfolios offer a different way of working, without the usual restrictions. Perhaps this is why people struggle in the start with the concept of an eportfolio.'

Quite a few respondents expressed concerns about the lack of time and level of support and training available to them in relation to using ePortfolios in their courses, which correlates with the quantitative responses earlier in the survey:

'Would like to attempt to implement but time is a barrier with the high teaching workload.'

'It requires a lot of time and is not feasible with large classes. Not suitable for all forms of assessment.'

'We had training provided but potential for more exists. The availability of adequate time and resources is essential for lecturers facilitating ePortfolios as well as for students. It was an exciting initiative and I enjoyed meeting students for supervision for this project and learned a lot myself.'

'I understand they are coming and I am broadly supportive but there is still a gap between the proposal to develop them and actual implementation.'

'I think there is a need to take the mystery out of e-portfolios. They are relatively straightforward to develop and assess but I think many people think they are complex. They can also be used across a range of disciplines (not just for IT-related disciplines).'

Some respondents commented on the importance of student engagement with the ePortfolio process.

'Eportfolios will only work if the students are comfortable with the system.'

'Getting more recognition today. Unfortunately too many are using them for assessment. It is personal. Assessment should be in VLE only. Student should indicate what they want to put into their eportfolio.'

'Lack of undergraduate student engagement with eportfolios - students greatly disliked the process and found the software very un-intuitive. A lot of hard work for staff and students alike.'

Summary

The purpose of this survey was to gain an insight into faculty awareness and use of ePortfolios in higher education in Ireland. Due to the small response rate, it is acknowledged that it would not be possible to generalise the survey findings to a wider population. However, the study produced a number of findings in relation to ePortfolio awareness and use that would be useful to bear in mind when introducing ePortfolio projects. These findings are also indicative of the findings in other studies such as Donnelly & O'Keefe (2013), Abrami & Barrett (2005), and Tosh, Light, Fleming & Haywood (2005).

While only 27% of faculty who took the survey currently use an ePortfolio in their course, it was encouraging to note that of those respondents, 29% indicated that they have more than 3 years' experience of using ePortfolios in their teaching, a possible indication that they have been beneficial to student learning and assessment. The fact that 31% of respondents are only beginning to use ePortfolios, with less than a year's experience, may also suggest a growing interest in the use of ePortfolios for learning and teaching. The survey also showed that ePortfolios are predominantly being used as a compulsory and assessed element of a course.

Overall, respondents indicated that the use of ePortfolios helped to achieve student-centred learning, the showcasing and evidencing of learning, and to develop student skills in self-reflection and the use of technology.

However, the survey also found that half of respondents indicated that a lack of time to engage in ePortfolio development was a barrier to using ePortfolios, which was reiterated through the qualitative comments of the survey. As suggested by Tosh, Light, Fleming and Haywood (2005), ePortfolios are increasingly becoming a part of students' higher education experience and the potential learning outcomes of the use of ePortfolios needs to be understood and valued by faculty and explained clearly to students.

In respect of faculty staff using ePortfolios themselves, the survey found that only 21% of respondents had developed their own ePortfolio, which may again be a result of the lack of time to develop them alluded to in the survey despite the benefits of developing a teaching ePortfolio suggested by Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005).

This survey, although small, gives an indication of the faculty perspective in relation to ePortfolio use in higher education in the Irish context. The survey findings will help to inform the development of the ePortfolio framework of resources arising from the collaborative project within which it was conducted. Beyond this project, a more in-depth survey of faculty may be appropriate in the future.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Online Faculty Survey

Awareness and Usage of ePortfolios by Faculty in Higher Education in Ireland

Survey: Introduction

You are invited to participate in this survey about ePortfolio awareness and use in higher education in Ireland.

The survey consists of 21 questions and should take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Your responses will help us to collect valuable data that will enable us to develop an ePortfolio framework for use in higher education in Ireland.

The survey is entirely anonymous. The results will be presented in the form of collated data and will not contain any personal or institutional details. This data may be used for publications, conferences, reports, etc. All data collected will be stored securely on an encrypted laptop/PC and in password protected folders.

Completion of this survey implies participant consent. To complete this survey, you have to be 18 or above.

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Orla O'Loughlen (Project Co-ordinator) (eportfolioevent@gmail.com).

Thank you for your participation.

Survey Questions

Institutional context

1. What type of higher education institution are you working in?

- University
- Institute of Technology
- Private College
- College of Education
- Other (please specify)

2. What is your disciplinary area?

- Science
- Nursing
- Engineering
- IT
- Teacher education
- Medicine
- Architecture
- Technology
- Drama
- Music
- Art
- Business
- Law
- Languages
- Humanities
- Social Sciences
- Other (please specify)

3. Does your institution support the use of ePortfolios?

- Yes
- No

4. What supports does the institution provide for ePortfolios?

- Hosting
- Training
- Technical support
- Resources
- Other

5. Have your students asked about using ePortfolios in their courses?

- Yes
- No

6. Have employers or industry representatives asked about the use of ePortfolios in your institution?

- Yes
- No

Teaching practice

7. Have you used an ePortfolio to assess Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)?

- Yes
- No

8. Do you use an ePortfolio in your current role?

- Yes
- No

9. How long have you been using an ePortfolio in your teaching?

- Just starting (less than a year)
- Some experience (1-3 years)
- Lots of experience (3+ years)

10. In what course are you using ePortfolios with your students?

11. The ePortfolio aspect of my course is:

- Voluntary for students to use (not assessed as part of the course)
- Compulsory for students to use (assessed as part of the course)
- Other (please specify)

12. Which tools are your students using to create ePortfolios?

(Check all that apply.)

- Mahara
- PebblePad
- Wordpress
- Weebly
- LinkedIn
- Other (please specify)

13. In my course, using ePortfolios allows students to:

- Showcase examples of work from their course
- Document their learning progress
- Reflect on their learning progress
- Submit assignments and content for assessment
- Collaborate with other students
- Provide feedback to their peers
- Use feedback from their peers to improve their work
- Evaluate their own work
- Plan and negotiate their learning
- Other (please specify)

14. How satisfied are you that including ePortfolios in your course helps to achieve the following outcomes?

	Very Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Student-centred learning					
Student self-reflection					
Critical thinking skills					
Strong technology skills					
Lifelong learning habits					
Formative (ongoing) assessment					
Summative (final) assessment					
Student self-assessment					
Improved accuracy and reliability of assessment					
Balanced assessment workload across a programme					
Showcasing and evidencing learning					

15. What do you perceive as the barriers to using ePortfolios in your institution?
(You may choose more than one option.)

- Lack of training
- Lack of time to attend training
- Lack of time to engage in ePortfolio development
- Not sure of the possibilities
- Lack of confidence
- Do not have access to the technology
- Do not like the technology
- Lack of technical support
- Not relevant to my teaching/subject area
- Not part of programme assessment strategy
- None

Personal practice

16. Have you developed your own ePortfolio?
- Yes
 - No
17. Which tool did you use to create your ePortfolio?
- Mahara
 - PebblePad
 - Wordpress
 - Weebly
 - LinkedIn
 - Other (please specify)
18. Why did you select this tool to create your ePortfolio?
- Cost
 - Availability
 - Ease of use
 - Integration with institution systems
 - Institution support
 - Institution licence
 - Other
19. Have you conducted any research or written any papers about ePortfolios?
- Yes
 - No
20. If you have conducted any research or written papers, please provide some details here:
21. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to ePortfolios?

Thank you for completing our survey. The results of the survey will be published later in the year.

If you have any queries, please contact Orla O'Loghlen (eportfolioevent@gmail.com).