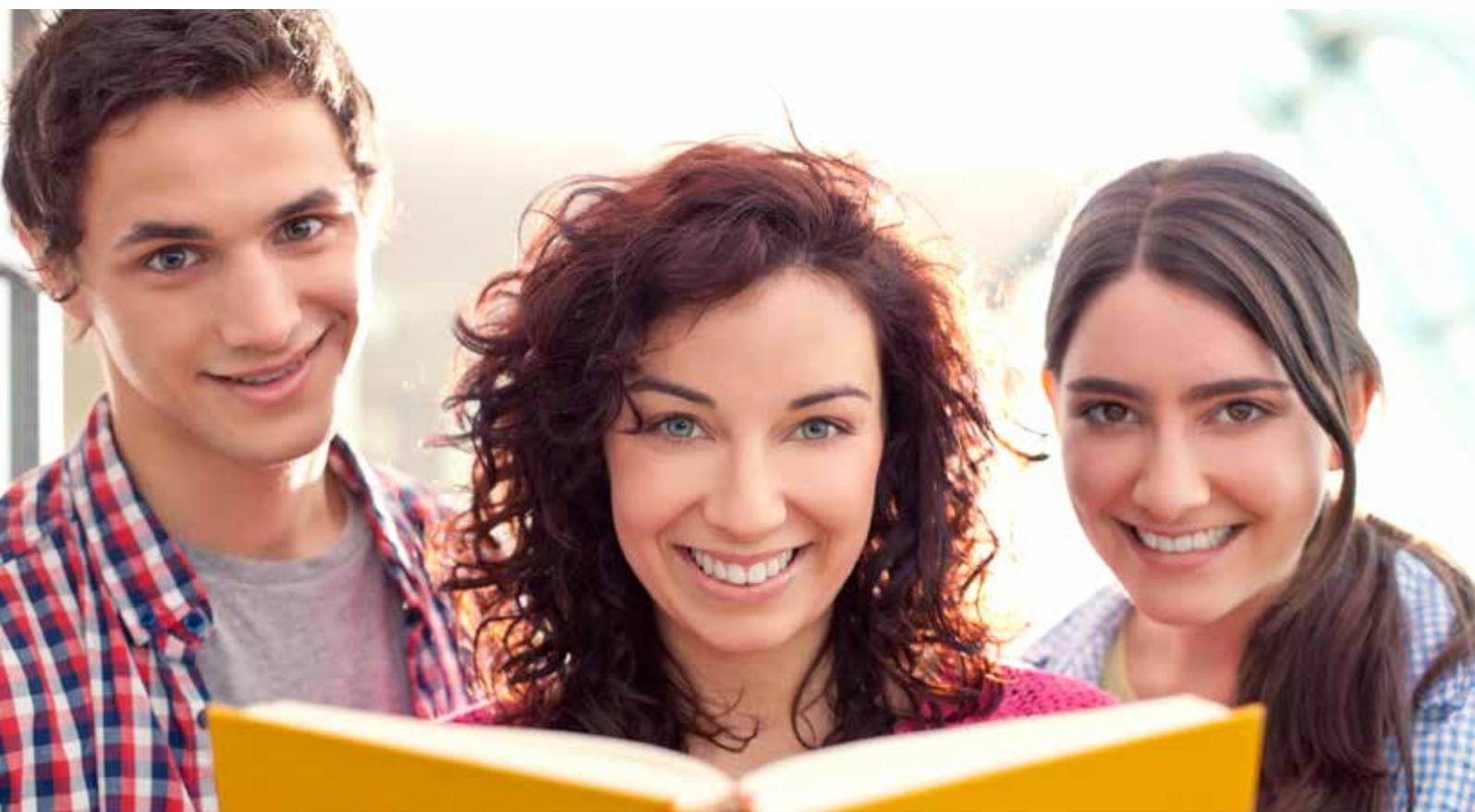




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Awareness and Usage of ePortfolios by Students in Higher Education in Ireland: Findings from a Student Survey



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Introduction

The e-portfolio is a tool for documenting and managing one's own learning over a lifetime in ways that foster deep and continuous learning.

(Jenson & Treuer, 2014, 55)

In today's rapidly changing academic environment, increasing numbers of institutions are realising the potential of ePortfolios as a tool for students to construct and manage their own learning experience. According to Batson (2002), electronic portfolios have a greater potential to alter higher education at its very core than any other technology application we have known thus far.

Using ePortfolios can provide students with a space to develop the ability to think critically about how they learn, to develop their digital literacy skills and to create a showcase of their achievements that they can present to prospective employers. A study by Jisc (2008) suggests that ePortfolios provide the link between learners' social and personal experiences and their academic and work-related aspirations.

This project *An ePortfolio strategy to enhance student learning, assessment and staff professional development* seeks to create an ePortfolio framework that will encourage and enable academic staff to incorporate ePortfolios into their programmes/modules, to empower students in their own 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 student survey was administered within the partner institutions to examine awareness and usage of ePortfolios by students. The views of students was seen as important to this project as the findings from the survey will help to inform the development of an ePortfolio framework for use in higher education in Ireland. Thanaraj (2012) noted the lack of research on student perceptions of ePortfolios and considered it important that the student perspective of ePortfolios is investigated.

This report summarises the main findings that emerged from the student responses collected from the online survey.

Methodology

An online survey was developed to explore student awareness and usage of ePortfolios. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at DIT, the lead partner of the project. The survey link was distributed to all students in DIT and Hibernia College, and made available on the VLE home page in ITT. The survey link invited students to participate in an anonymous online survey about their awareness and use of ePortfolios. The timing of the survey made it difficult to conduct the survey in all partner institutions because it coincided with assessment and exams, and came after other national and EU surveys, which would lead to potential survey fatigue.

The survey was sent to approximately 21,500 students by email and the survey was open for the month of May 2016. A total of 412 responded to the survey, which equates to approximately 2% of the target student population. This low response rate can be attributed to the timing of the survey, which could not be administered until students had completed their exams.

The survey comprised 11 questions made up of a combination of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. One open-response question was 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 student survey is provided in Appendix 1.



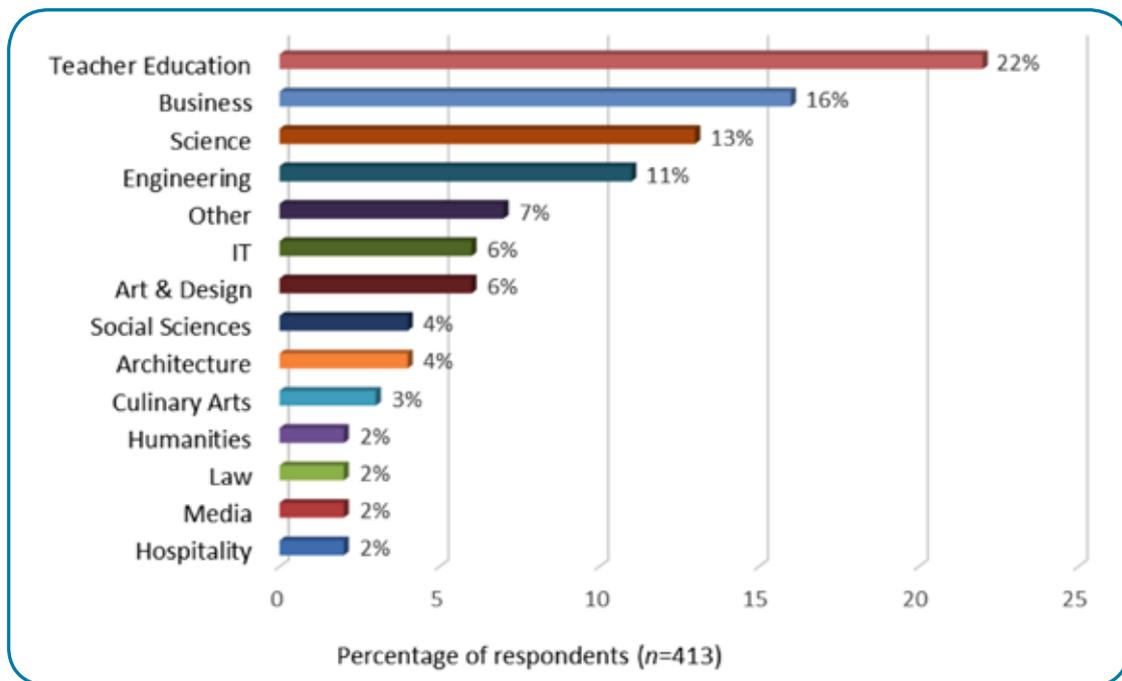
Survey Findings

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

Respondents' institutional type

There were 412 respondents to the survey across a range of disciplines, the majority of which were in Teacher Education, Business and Science as shown in Figure 1.

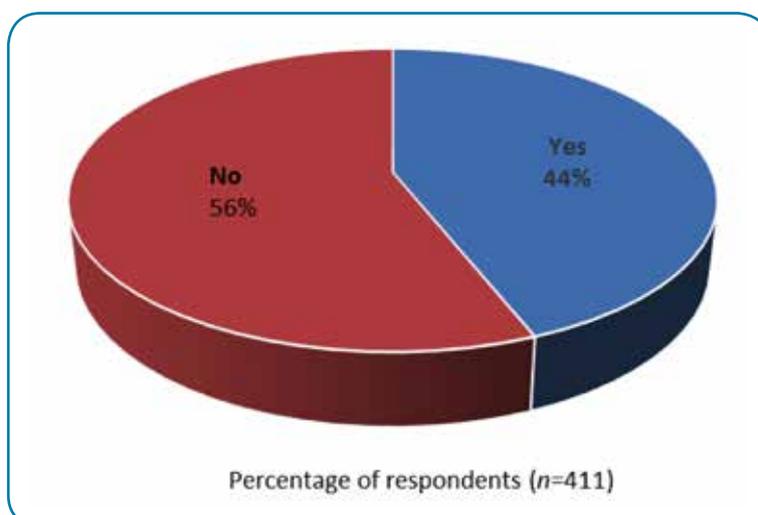
Figure 1: What course are you studying?



Student usage of ePortfolios

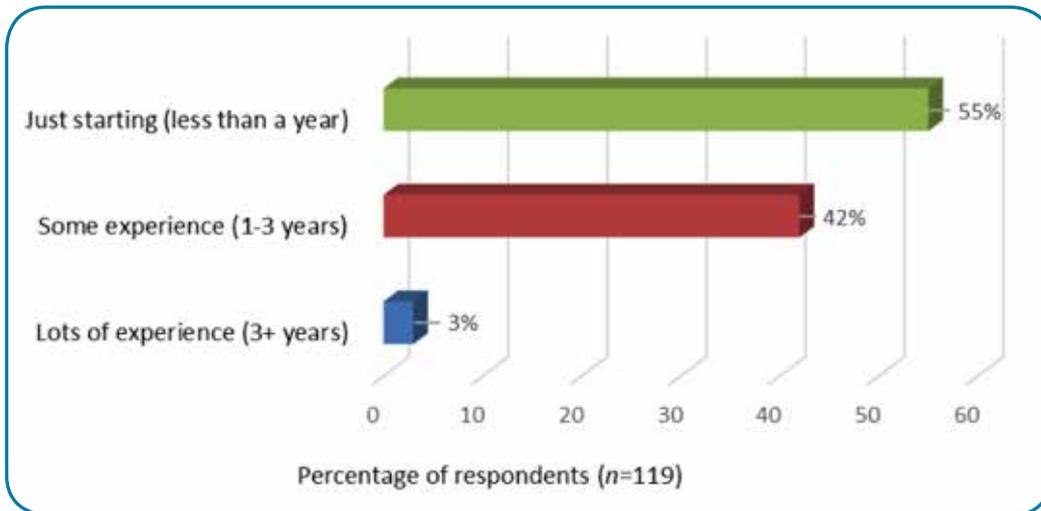
Only 44% of respondents selected 'yes' when asked if they use an ePortfolio in their studies.

Figure 2: Do you use an ePortfolio in your studies?



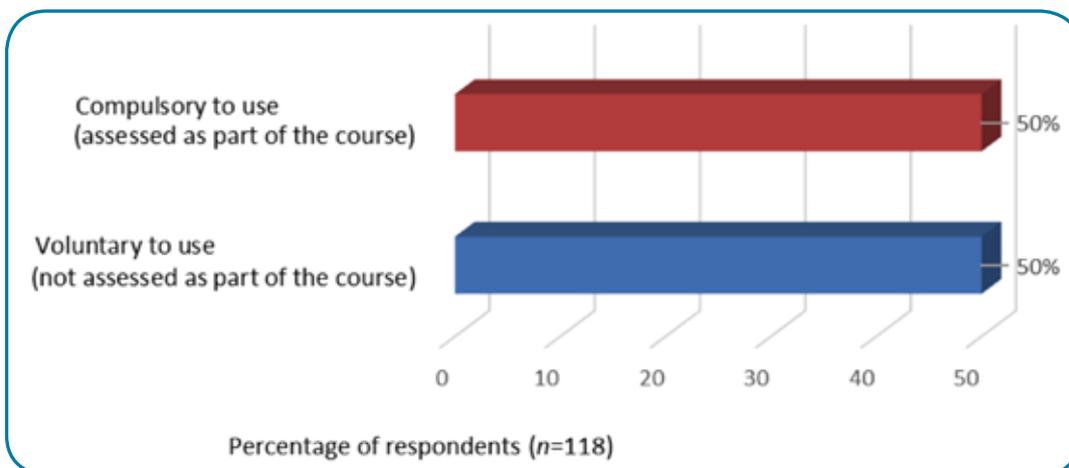
More than half (55%) of students who indicated they do use ePortfolios in their studies suggested they have been using it for less than a year, as shown in Figure 3. Only 3% have been using an ePortfolio in their studies for more than three years.

Figure 3: How long have you been using an ePortfolio in your studies?



As shown in Figure 4, 50% of students who indicated they use an ePortfolio in their studies were required to do so as part of an assessment.

Figure 4: ePortfolio aspect of course: compulsory or voluntary



How ePortfolios helped students with their studies

The majority of students indicated that they found ePortfolios helped them with their studies. 75% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios offered a place for storing examples of coursework and 68% agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios allowed them access to their coursework and assessment items.

As shown in Table 1, respondents were also largely in agreement that ePortfolios allowed them to monitor their learning: 66% either agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios allowed them to evaluate and reflect on their learning processes, while 64% agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios allowed them to keep track of learning experiences and reflect on weak areas.

Just over half agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios help them organise their work to prepare for future employment. The findings were similar for the question relating to the role played by ePortfolios in helping them to become more effective and independent learners. Similarly, just over half of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that ePortfolios allowed them to store examples of extra-curricular activities relevant to their future career.

In conclusion, the majority of respondents indicated that they found ePortfolios helpful in the context of their current studies, mainly as a repository for coursework and an opportunity to keep track of and reflect on their learning. Just under half use it to help them prepare for future employment and career development.

Table 1: The extent to which an ePortfolio helped with studies

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Provided a place to store examples of coursework	30	45	20	3	2
Allowed access to all my coursework and assessment items	25	43	18	10	4
Allowed me to evaluate and reflect on my learning processes	15	51	22	8	4
Allowed me to keep track of learning experiences and be able to reflect on any weak areas	17	47	23	10	3
Helped me organise my work to prepare for future employment	13	41	28	12	6
Helped me become a more effective and independent learner	10	44	28	15	3
Allowed me to store examples of my extra-curricular activities relevant to my future career	14	38	22	18	8

Student views about the process of ePortfolio

The survey also sought to gain an insight into how students viewed the process of creating and using ePortfolios. The majority of respondents (73%) indicated there are benefits to ePortfolios and 49% stated that they enjoyed creating their ePortfolios. However, 65% also indicated that ePortfolios can be time consuming.

The survey also revealed a level of uncertainty about how to create and use an ePortfolio: 52% of respondents were unsure about what to include in their ePortfolios and only 36% agreed that they had received clear guidelines in relation to this. Similarly, only 27% of respondents selected that they received support when they experienced difficulties, with 33% unsure and 40% disagreeing. Over half of respondents (52%) indicated they did not receive training on how to create and manage their ePortfolios.

In respect of the effectiveness of ePortfolios as a learning tool, only 45% of respondents found ePortfolios to be effective in assessing their learning, while 34% were unsure and 21% disagreed. Similarly, just 44% felt that the ePortfolio encouraged them to produce better assignment submissions, while 31% disagreed.

In conclusion, the survey suggests that in order to maximise the benefits of ePortfolios, students need training and support in the use of ePortfolios.

As suggested by Eynon, Gambino & Török (2014), it is important that ePortfolios are placed in the wider context of skills development and integrative learning when introduced to students.

Similarly, the inclusion of training and a scaffolded approach is required to ensure that the learning processes involved are made explicit both in the context of the discipline and the use of ePortfolios themselves so that students can see the benefit of the ePortfolio to their own context and are prepared to invest the time necessary to create and develop them.

Students indicated that there are benefits to using ePortfolios.

Under half of the respondents indicated they found ePortfolios to be an effective means of assessing their learning.

Students indicated they did not receive adequate training on how to create and manage their ePortfolio.

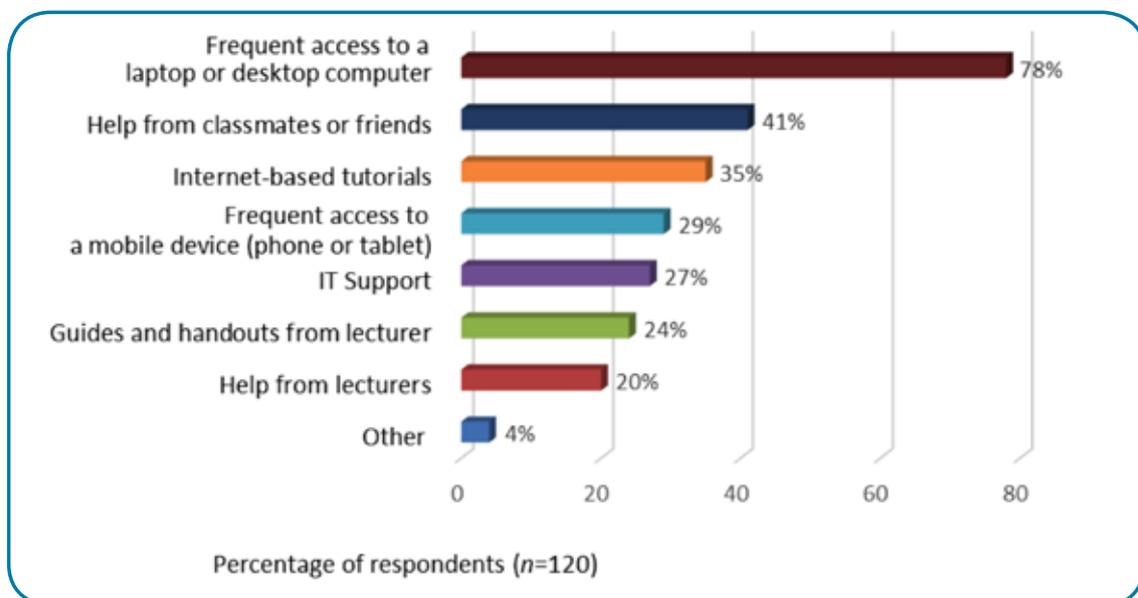
Table 2: Level of agreement with statements about ePortfolios

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that there are benefits to ePortfolios.	23	50	22	2	3
ePortfolios take a lot of time to complete.	19	46	25	8	2
I was unsure about what to include in my ePortfolio.	13	39	23	22	3
I enjoyed creating my ePortfolio.	8	41	30	16	5
ePortfolios are very effective in assessing my learning.	10	35	34	11	10
The ePortfolio encouraged me to produce better assignment submissions.	13	31	25	23	8
I may show my ePortfolio to prospective employers.	16	27	25	27	5
I received clear guidelines on what to include in my ePortfolio.	5	31	31	19	14
I received support with my ePortfolio when I experienced difficulties.	3	24	33	24	16
I wasn't always honest in my reflective writing as I knew the contents were being assessed.	6	18	32	33	11
I received training on how to create and manage my ePortfolio.	5	15	28	39	13

Useful support resources

When asked about useful support resources, 78% of respondents considered frequent access to a laptop or desktop computer as important when creating their ePortfolios. Interestingly, frequent access to a mobile device (phone or tablet) was considered a useful support resource by only 29% of respondents. As can be seen in Figure 5, help from classmates and friends (41%) was considered to be more useful than help from lecturers. 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. Internet-based tutorials (35%) were also considered to be more useful than guides and handouts from lecturers (24%) and help from lecturers (20%).

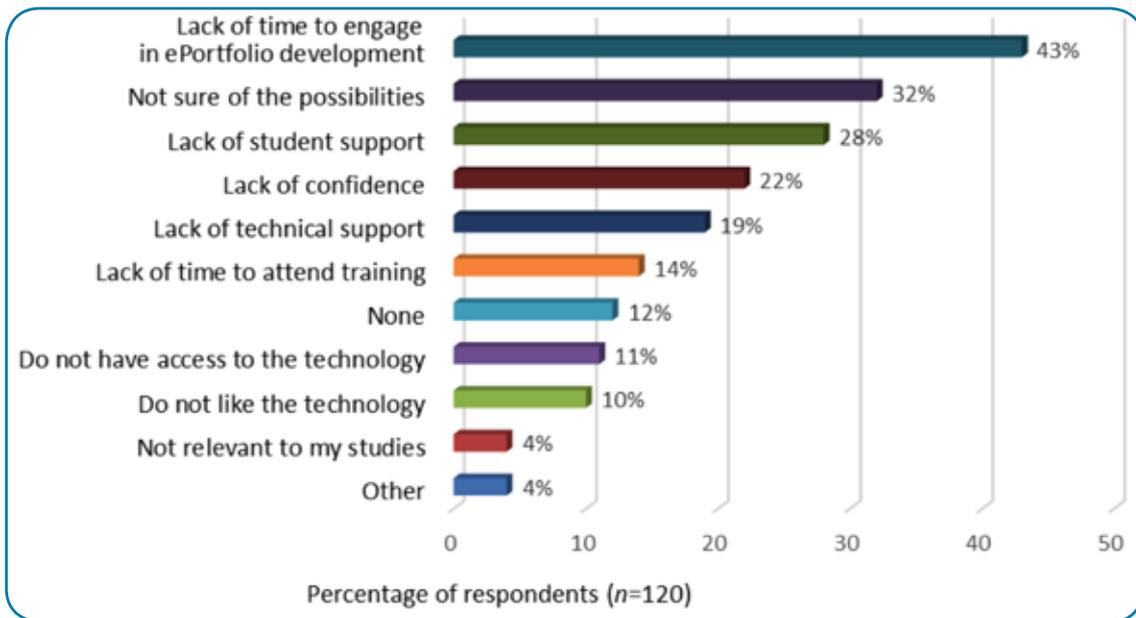
Figure 5: Which support resources were useful when creating your ePortfolio?



Perceived barriers to using ePortfolios

When asked about the barriers that they perceive to using ePortfolios in their institutions, 43% of respondents selected the lack of time to engage in ePortfolios. 32% of respondents were unsure of the possibilities of ePortfolios in their studies. Lack of student support (28%), technical support (19%) and time to attend training (14%) were also considered by some respondents to be barriers to using ePortfolios in their institutions. Only 11% noted not having access to the technology as a barrier and similarly, only 10% considered not liking the technology to be a barrier.

Figure 6: What do you perceive as the barriers to using ePortfolios in your institution?



Factors influencing students' decisions not to use an ePortfolio

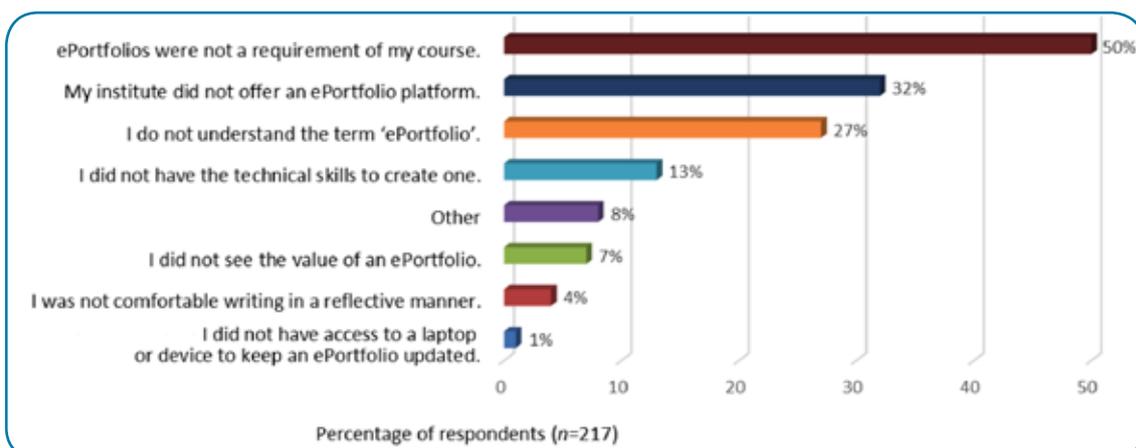
The respondents who did not use an ePortfolio in their studies (56%) were asked which factors influenced their decision not to use an ePortfolio. As shown in Figure 7, 50% selected 'ePortfolios were not a requirement of my course'. Other reasons included the fact that their institute did not offer an ePortfolio platform and that they did not understand the term 'ePortfolio'.

Access to a laptop or device was not considered to be a barrier by many of the respondents, with only 1% selecting 'I did not have access to a laptop or device to keep an ePortfolio updated.' as a factor influencing their decision not to make use of an ePortfolio.

Top 3 factors influencing student decisions NOT to use an ePortfolio:

1. ePortfolios were not a requirement of the course.
2. The institute did not offer an ePortfolio platform.
3. They do not understand the term 'ePortfolio'.

Figure 7: Which factors influenced your decision not to make use of an ePortfolio?



Additional student views

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

These comments from students demonstrated that many were aware of the benefits and capabilities of an ePortfolio.

One respondent stated that they are:

'Useful (cost effective and easy to access/share) – I'm sure they will replace copy portfolios in certain fields in time to come.'

Another respondent referred to ePortfolios as a:

'Very important development in storing and organising my work. Ease of access.'

Some respondents told how they took the initiative of creating an ePortfolio themselves for employability purposes:

'It was not part of my course. We had to make a portfolio and I was the only one to make a digital one. It's much better as you can email it off to people.'

'They have at no point been in use in my college. I took it upon myself to source and create an eportfolio to have a method of showing potential employers my skill set and work examples. College assistance in curating portfolios would be very useful.'

Quite a few respondents expressed concerns about the level of support and training available to them in relation to creating an ePortfolio, which correlates with the quantitative responses earlier in the survey:

'At this point in time there simply aren't enough lecturers that are aware of the possibilities of E-Portfolios. Within my course lecturers use a wide range of online and offline notes/submissions/information. The issue is that lecturers are ignoring the potential for e-portfolios instead of learning up on them.'

'I do not really know how to use this resource still after two years of study.'

'We were told that ePortfolios were there but I personally made no use of it, nor does it seem as though (looking at ePortfolio for my cohort) my colleagues did either. It was often alluded to by lecturers, but I still do not see how I could have used it, was it private, public, to whom it is visible, nor do I understand how it differs from saving stuff in google Drive and sharing ideas in the available online forums.'

'Classes on the process of making a good eportfolio as well as just general good portfolios would be extremely helpful.'

'We need to be trained on the proper use of eportfolios.'

Summary

The purpose of this survey was to gain an insight into student awareness and use of ePortfolios in higher education. 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 and O'Keefe (2013) and Tosh, Light, Fleming and Haywood (2005).

It was encouraging to note that 44% of students who took the survey currently use an ePortfolio in their studies. The fact that more than half of these have only been using it for less than a year suggests that there is a growing interest in the use of ePortfolios for learning either through the institution or by the students themselves. The survey showed that approximately half the students were using ePortfolios voluntarily in their third-level studies and half were required to use them by their institution. Of those who indicated they did not use an ePortfolio, the top three factors influencing this were the fact that Portfolio use was not a requirement of their programme, that their institute did not offer an ePortfolio platform and that respondents did not understand the term 'ePortfolio', indicating they did not have knowledge of the use or benefits of ePortfolios.

Overall, respondents considered their ePortfolio to be helpful as a repository for coursework and an opportunity to keep track of and reflect on their learning. However, the use of ePortfolio for preparing for future employment and career development was not as strong in the survey findings. Although the data does not strongly show that students are using ePortfolios for the purpose of preparing for employability, it is not an indication that students do not see the benefit of their use for this purpose. For lecturers looking to incorporate ePortfolio aspects in their programmes or modules, it may be worth focusing on the employment-related benefits of ePortfolios to help students recognise this important aspect of ePortfolios and encourage student buy-in. Jisc (2008) noted that employability can be a strong driver for students to engage with ePortfolios as they are able to personalise the view that they present to different prospective employers.

While 73% of respondents indicated that there are benefits to the use of ePortfolios, 65% of respondents indicated that ePortfolios take a lot of time to complete and many felt that this was a barrier to their use. It may be useful for lecturers and course providers to consider setting out the context of the learning in respect of the use of ePortfolios themselves as well as the disciplinary learning for which the ePortfolio is being used. Setting the learning and skills development in context of course learning and future employment can help students. This aligns with JISC findings that students can struggle to understand the purpose of ePortfolios in the absence of structured activities designed specifically to address this aspect (Joyes, Gray & Hartnell-Young, 2010).

The survey also found that 52% of respondents indicated they did not receive training on how to create and manage their ePortfolio and this was also expressed by some respondents through the qualitative aspect of the survey. The planning stages of an ePortfolio project is an opportune time to consider the level of training and technical support students will need for the set up and use of an ePortfolio as well as how to produce artefacts from it. As suggested by Tosh, Light, Fleming and Haywood (2005), it is important to promote and explain clearly the benefits and added value of ePortfolios in order to increase the likelihood of student engagement. They recommend providing adequate training so that students can spend more time on the content of their ePortfolio rather than dealing with technical issues.

This survey, although small, gives an indication of the student perspective in relation to ePortfolio use in higher education in the Irish context. The survey findings will help to inform the development of an ePortfolio framework of resources for use in higher education in Ireland. Beyond the time constraints of this project, a more in-depth survey of students may be useful in the future.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Online student survey

Awareness and Usage of ePortfolios by Students 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 10 questions and should take you no more than 3 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.

What is an ePortfolio?

An electronic portfolio (also known as an ePortfolio, e-Portfolio, digital portfolio or online portfolio) is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a user, usually on the Web. Such electronic evidence may include input text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries and hyperlinks.

Survey Questions

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

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

2. What course are you studying?

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

3. Do you use an ePortfolio in your studies?

- Yes
- No

4. What do you perceive as the barriers to using ePortfolios in your institution?

(Check all that apply.)

- Lack of student support
- 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 studies
- None
- Other (please specify)

5. How long have you been using an ePortfolio in your studies?

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

6. The ePortfolio aspect of my course is:

- Voluntary to use (not assessed as part of the course)
- Compulsory to use (assessed as part of the course)

7. To what extent do you think an ePortfolio helped you with your studies?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Provided a place to store examples of coursework					
Allowed me to evaluate and reflect on my learning processes					
Allowed me to keep track of learning experiences and be able to reflect on any weak areas					
Allowed access to all my coursework and assessment items					
Allowed me to store examples of my extra-curricular activities relevant to my future career					
Helped me become a more effective and independent learner					
Helped me organise my work to prepare for future employment					

8. Indicate your agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoyed creating my ePortfolio.					
I may show my ePortfolio to prospective employers.					
The ePortfolio encouraged me to produce better assignment submissions.					
ePortfolios are very effective in assessing my learning.					
I received clear guidelines on what to include in my ePortfolio.					
I received training on how to create and manage my ePortfolio.					
I received support with my ePortfolio when I experienced difficulties.					
I was unsure about what to include in my ePortfolio.					
I wasn't always honest in my reflective writing as I knew the contents were being assessed.					
ePortfolios take a lot of time to complete.					
I feel that there are benefits to ePortfolios.					

9. Which support resources were useful when creating your ePortfolio?

- Frequent access to a laptop or desktop computer
- Frequent access to a mobile device (phone or tablet)
- Guides and handouts from lecturer
- Internet-based tutorials
- Help from lecturers
- Help from classmates or friends
- IT Support
- Other (specify)

10. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to ePortfolios?

11. Which factors influenced your decision not to make use of an ePortfolio?

- I do not understand the term 'ePortfolio'.
- ePortfolios were not a requirement of my course.
- I did not have the technical skills to create one.
- I did not see the value of an ePortfolio.
- My institute did not offer an ePortfolio platform.
- I was not comfortable writing in a reflective manner.
- I did not have access to a laptop or device to keep an ePortfolio updated.
- Other (please specify)

Thank you for completing our survey. If you have any queries, please contact Orla O'Loughlen (eportfolioevent@gmail.com).