ePortfolios as a vehicle for recording Recognition of Prior Learning at RMIT University

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Background

The vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia provides skills and knowledge for work through a nationally recognised training and accreditation system that operates across all states and territories. The national training system, known as the National Skills Framework, comprises of three key elements: training packages, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Training packages are sets of nationally endorsed standards (units of competency) and qualifications (groups of units of competency) that are used to assess people's skills in specific industries, industry sectors and / or enterprises. The AQF is a framework for the fifteen nationally recognised qualifications, eight of which are competency based in the VET sector. Finally, the AQTF is the national set of standards and quality indicators used to ensure high quality training and assessment services provided by Registered Training Organisations (RTO) (DEEWR, 2008).

Training packages consist of core and elective units of competency each of which is sub-divided into elements and performance criteria. The performance criteria outline the specific skills and knowledge sets that need to be demonstrated in order to be assessed as competent in a unit. These are based upon a generic set of key competencies (Mayer, 1992) contextualised for a specific industry and more recently have also incorporated employability skills (Allen Consulting Group, 2006).

An underpinning premise of Competency Based Training (CBT) is that learning occurs in both formal and informal contexts. Under the AQF, each qualification must provide a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pathway as an alternative, or non-institutional, access point for a source of credit. RPL is a process whereby an individual's non-formal and informal learning experiences can be assessed against nationally accredited competency standards, and in turn used for entry into, or partial or total credit towards, nationally accredited qualifications (AQF, 2004). While there are various ways to assess RPL, for example on the job observation, reflective journals, photographs etc, these are generally presented as a paper-based portfolio of evidence. This portfolio of evidence is then submitted as part of an assessment process which also includes an interview with an RPL assessor and a Subject Matter Expert. However, the concept of 'portfolios' in current practice is being moved away from, 'as it conjures up the idea of large lever-arched folders and collections of evidence which is no longer considered good practice' (AFLF, 2009).

According to the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework), 'a good practice RPL model includes facilitated self-assessment, links to units of competency and qualifications, evidence validation (not gathering and collection), use of a variety of evidence forms that corroborate the individual's competence and a conversational approach to assessing' (2009, p. 1). The Framework acknowledges the potential role ePortfolios can contribute to RPL candidates, in particular remote candidates, through:

- utilising templates to structure the presentation of RPL evidence, and tags to organise and find artefacts, which helps streamline the assessment process
- reducing the need for paper based, hard copy evidence and limiting excessive evidence collection
- developing and strengthening information and communication technology (ICT) or digital literacy skills (p. 1).

While the uptake of ePortfolios for RPL is in its infancy, this case study reports on a work-in-progress trial of PebblePad, an ePortfolio platform, as a vehicle for recording RPL in Certificate IV in Financial Services (Accounting) in the Business TAFE School at RMIT University. RPL can be a difficult and vexatious process for candidates, assessors and institutions alike, with the belief that it is often easier to do the course than apply for RPL (Cameron, 2004). We believe that an the use of an ePortfolio will offer a transparent and streamlined RPL process that addresses the points outlined by the Framework above.

The Association of Accounting Technicians RPL Project
Recent changes in government policy have seen the introduction of The Tax Agent Services Bill (2008) which was approved in March 2009 and will come into effect from January 1, 2010. Among the new regulations are:
- Tax agent services and BAS (Business Activity Statement) services will need to be registered by a national Tax Practitioners Board.
- To be eligible for registration, providers must meet minimum educational qualifications and relevant experience requirements which would be equivalent to a Certificate IV in Financial Services (Accounting).

This will affect many practitioners with long standing work experience who are already working in the financial services area. They will now need to complete a minimum of a Cert IV qualification in order to comply with the new legislation, professional standards and accreditation requirements. The Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) has recognised that many practitioners will have a great deal of knowledge that can be mapped against competencies offered in the Cert IV in Financial Services (Accounting), so therefore RPL will need to be offered as a means to identify if applicants can be given full or partial credit toward the units of study required in the Certificate. RMIT has been selected as one of the provider of choice to run the RPL process on behalf of AAT as well as provide selected gap training in collaboration with other providers. A series of forums explaining the new requirements and the RPL process will be held across Victoria from July 2009, and extend across Australia from 2010. It is anticipated that there will be up to 30 RPL applicants in the initial Victorian trial, with numbers expecting to reach up to 300 applicants when it is rolled out nationally.

There have been many challenges and issues identified so far in this process. Firstly, AAT stipulated that RPL has to be offered nationally for all applicants. The issues this raised for the RMIT TAFE Business School included:

- How could they deliver a consistent service across Australia?
- How could they manage candidates who do not have student numbers to access the university's virtual learning environment, BlackBoard?
- What options were there to facilitate RPL, especially outside of central Melbourne?
  - Online or paper-based self-assessment tools?
  - Which of these options would be less onerous for applicant and assessor?
- How would they make it easy to access and simple to use?
- What questions would they ask of applicants to help them prepare for RPL?

These questions in themselves reflect the key points identified in the Framework's ePortfolios for Assessment report (see above).

Within the broader university context, RMIT started a trial of a potential enterprise-based ePortfolio system, PebblePad, in 2008. As part of the evaluation process, areas of strategic importance were identified for inclusion in the trial, including RPL (Botterill, Allan, Faulkner, 2009). Upon hearing of the RPL project in Business, the ePortfolio Project Leader approached the school and suggested that they participate in the trial

to assess the ability of an ePortfolio system to address candidate, client and organisational needs. As a result, the TAFE Business School have agreed to participate in the trial, as PebblePad fulfilled their criteria to offer a flexible means of evidence gathering and assessment.

The design and development of the RPL process
With the decision made to trial an ePortfolio for RPL in the Cert IV, the design and development of an appropriate process started. Upon an initial enquiry for RPL, applicants will be sent an appropriate information pack giving an overview of the units of competency, procedures, costs etc. Once the applicant has decided to proceed, they will be sent a registration form and an RPL self assessment matrix. Once this is completed, they will have a one-to-one consultation with an assessor in a manner that best suits the applicant, e.g. face-to-face, phone, email or an online environment such as Elluminate. In this interview, the assessor will help the applicant fill in the RPL application, and give advice regarding potential RPL credits and gap training. It is at this stage that the applicant can nominate how they would like to collect and present their evidence, either as a paper-based portfolio or as an ePortfolio. This choice is considered important so that applicants can chose the most appropriate format to suit their needs and digital literacy abilities. If the applicant chooses to undertake the evidence collection using an ePortfolio, they will be given a PebblePad account. They will then have a month to complete the evidence collection and attach it to a specially designed Profile. Once this has been submitted, a formal RPL interview will be convened in which the applicant will be granted full or partial credit for the Cert IV and appropriate gap training identified if applicable.

The Profile Builder
The profile builder function has been a key element in the decision to trial PebblePad in the Cert IV. The profile builder allows staff to create frameworks of competency / capability statements and students can then attach evidence against these. In this case, the TAFE Business School has taken the units of competency required for the full certificate and used these as a basis to create profiles for the RPL process. In the initial phases of consultation with the ePortfolio Project Leader, the team realised that there was some overlap among the different units of competency and that the same evidence could be used for a number of them. As a result, they grouped the elements and performance criteria into clusters and skills sets so as to eliminate repetition for the applicant. The clusters are:

- work environment
- budgets
- accounting operations
- law.

Figure 1 shows part of the work environment skills set. Here, the unit of competency FNSICIND401B - Apply Principles of Professional Practice, has been converted into a profile. This shows the second element and its associated performance criteria. Applicants are able to provide evidence of their knowledge and how it underpins their practice through written responses. Once they have added their responses, they can finish and attach evidence to their profile.

Figure 1: Profile builder in PebblePad

Figure 2 depicts the evidencing page. Here applicants can attach evidence to the performance criteria as well and explicitly reflect on why they have used this evidence. Therefore the profile becomes a working RPL document as applicants work through the clusters and gather evidence for the RPL interview. The visual guide provided by the traffic light sequence makes this a powerful tool for applicants to independently manage their RPL application. A green traffic light indicates that there is evidence attached to the performance criteria, while the red indicates that there is no evidence attached at this time.
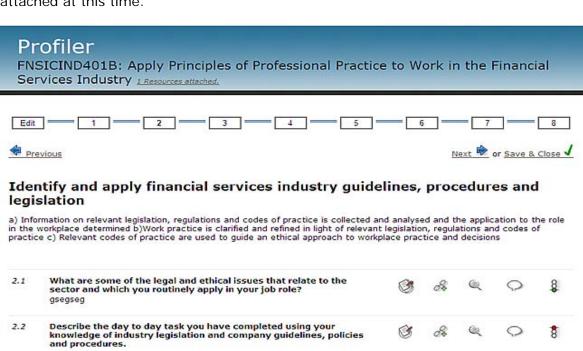

Figure 2: The evidencing page

Once the applicant has completed their profile, they will be able to submit it to the assessor. The assessor is then able to review the evidence and the reflections before the final interview. The assessor is also able to make comments upon evidence and direct the applicant to areas that may need more input. This profile creates a transparent process for both the applicant and the assessor.

Next steps
The TAFE Business School at RMIT are still in the development phase of this process. They see that an ePortfolio can add flexibility and transparency to the RPL process and allow applicants, who may be geographically removed from RMIT, a way to complete an RPL assessment. The use of ePortfolios also allows for greater use of multi-modal evidence, as well as reducing the need for large paper-based portfolios. Additionally, applicants own and manage their ePortfolios at all times as they decide who they will share it with. This therefore supports the views of the Framework, that an 'e-portfolio is able to streamline evidence identification and validation, and enable assessors to effectively make judgements about the authenticity of evidence when it is verified through legitimised sources' (AFLF, p. 1).

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