

# E-portfolio Implementation Trial

**Coonara Community House Inc**

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## Acknowledgment

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## Purpose

The purpose of the E-portfolios Implementation Trials<sup>1</sup>, conducted by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's (Framework<sup>2</sup>) E-portfolios business activity<sup>3</sup>, was to identify the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of an e-portfolio system which supports learners move into, through or out of vocational education and training (VET) quickly and easily.

## Organisational overview

Coonara Community House<sup>4</sup> (Coonara) is located in the City of Knox in Melbourne's south east. The City of Knox has a population of 154,000 people.

Coonara delivers up to 50,000 hours of accredited training each year, including 18,000 hours in children's services, with an average of 20 learners enrolled in the *Diploma of Children's Services*.

It is a pre-requisite for entry into the *Diploma of Children's Services* to have successfully completed the units of covered in the *Certificate III in Children's Services*. On average, 90% of the learners who enrol to study the *Diploma of Children's Services* have worked in the child care industry for several years. The requirement to offer RPL (recognition of prior learning) to these learners has necessitated a re-evaluation of the RPL process.

Coonara is highly regarded in the Melbourne adult and community education (ACE) sector for its use of innovative e-learning, and this project has extended this focus.

## Trial overview

The Coonara trial introduced the Mahara<sup>5</sup> e-portfolio system (Mahara) as a tool for creating an RPL portfolio for learners enrolled in the *Diploma of Children's Services*.

The trial compared the RPL completion rate for two groups of learners: one group which used e-portfolios for RPL, and a second group which used a traditional paper based RPL process. The trial also evaluated the ease of use and implementation of the e-portfolio into the RPL process.

After initial interviews for positions in the *Diploma of Children Services*, 16 learners were offered RPL. Of these six advised they had basic computer skills and were offered the opportunity to participate in the e-portfolio trial. The remaining 10 learners were enrolled to complete RPL by the paper-based method.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/content/e-portfolios-funding>

<sup>2</sup> The Framework is the national training system's e-learning strategy: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au>

<sup>3</sup> The E-portfolios business activity supports the development of national e-portfolio standards to improve the portability of learner-collected evidence of learning: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/e-portfolios>

<sup>4</sup> Coonara Community House: <http://www.coonarahouse.org.au>

<sup>5</sup> Mahara: <http://mahara.org/>

## Implementing the e-portfolio system

Coonara used the Mahara e-portfolio program hosted by VETSA Teaching and Learning<sup>6</sup> as this was an established Mahara install freely available for VET use.

Coonara's teaching staff initially found the Mahara e-portfolio program confusing, with the various layers of tabs to navigate the system. However, once this structure was understood, it was easy to use and well received by the learners in the trial.

Coonara's ultimate plan is to integrate Moodle<sup>7</sup> learning management system (LMS) with the Mahara e-portfolio program to support e-learning at Coonara.

Mahara has been well received by the learners and staff who have used the program, and the potential of the system is becoming evident.

Coonara plans to continue using the Mahara e-portfolio program, integrated with Coonara's current course wiki, to provide as many different online learning experiences as possible for their learners.

The Mahara e-portfolio program has been embraced by the Diploma class to the point that two learners in the trial are happier using their e-portfolio than Coonara's course wiki system to blog and have added a link from their personal wiki page for their trainer to read their continuing blogs in their e-portfolio.

### **Strategies to enable e-portfolio use**

The trial was contained to one class. Trainer, Liz Grigg used the e-portfolio program and developed the training sessions for delivery to the learners. Lynne Gibb (also the lead trainer for *Diploma of Children's Services*) and Liz's team initially worked with the trial e-portfolio group over four two hour sessions, to introduce these learners to the Mahara e-portfolio program.

Coonara developed a website dedicated to the RPL process for Coonara's RPL learners<sup>8</sup>. This website was a central location for RPL information – background, process, eligibility, options, Mahara e-portfolio instructions<sup>9</sup>, documentation, and tutor assistance.

Over time, Coonara would like to make this website their central point for RPL information. The website features downloadable step-by-step instructions for using the Mahara e-portfolio program, links to example e-portfolios, and information on expectations on the RPL process<sup>10</sup>.

In the future, Coonara would like to incorporate e-portfolio training into the beginning of each accredited class where RPL is offered. This e-portfolio induction class could possibly be generic for a range of courses.

On conclusion of this trial it appears that participants in the Mahara e-portfolio RPL process were more likely to feel positive about RPL and complete the RPL process.

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<sup>6</sup> VET SA teaching and learning: <http://eportfolio.vetsa.net.au/>

<sup>7</sup> Moodle: <http://moodle.org>

<sup>8</sup> RPL at Coonara: <http://coonararpl.coonarahouse.org.au/>

<sup>9</sup> Coonara's instructions for using Mahara: <http://coonararpl.coonarahouse.org.au/E-portfolios#toc5>

<sup>10</sup> E-portfolios at Coonara: <http://coonararpl.coonarahouse.org.au/E-portfolios>

## **Barriers to implementing e-portfolios**

One barrier to using an e-portfolio can be a learner's ICT literacy skills. For this reason, the project team factored in providing learners with basic ICT instructions for using computers and the internet as part of their e-portfolio training.

There are a number of sites providing video and step by step instructions and demonstrations for using the Mahara e-portfolio program<sup>4</sup>. As these sites are discovered and tested, these links will be added to the Coonara RPL and e-portfolio page<sup>10</sup>.

## **Future directions**

Implementation with other groups of *Diploma of Children's Services* learners and trainers will need to occur before the e-portfolio system is offered to the wider Coonara staff and embedded across the organisation. This will enable the usability of the training documentation to be further assessed. Once this documentation is confirmed, the system can be rolled out across the organisation, with a presentation to the lead trainers responsible for RPL assessment in the first instance. By allowing for additional time before organisational implementation, the first group of learners would have completed their e-portfolios, and actual examples of learner work could be used in demonstration of adaptability and usability of the Mahara e-portfolio program, including its portability and exportability of their information.

E-portfolios will be embedded across the organisation through targeted professional development for trainers and skills building tools for learners during their orientation phase, or through pre-vocational preparation workshops.

Verifying learner documents was an area which Coonara found challenging. Coonara's solution, in the absence of any way of electronically verifying existing qualifications and documentation, was to sight the original document and notate the learner's records to ensure that the scanned images in the learner's e-portfolio would be considered AQTF compliant. This, to some extent, defeats the purpose of the e-portfolio. Some guidance about e-portfolios and AQTF compliance would be very useful for Coonara and the sector as a whole.

Participating in the trial has enabled Coonara to identify other ways that e-portfolios can be used in the RPL process, particularly for *Diploma of Children's Services* learners who are already employed in child care centres at a Certificate III level. For instance:

- If several learners are employed at the same centre, evidence common to the centre, ie minutes of staff meetings, employer's letter etc could be used. This would cut down work on the part of the centre coordinators and streamline the process for potential learners.
- E-portfolios could allow learners from more remote areas to take advantage of Coonara's online training. Negotiations with an Indigenous centre in Alice Springs to do this have already commenced.

## **Additional materials**

### ***Learner feedback***

All learners who participated in the trial were keen and positive at the beginning of the trial. They indicated that they had the basic ICT skills to enable them to take part in the trial. All indicated that they increased their skills and knowledge in ICT during the e-portfolio training sessions. Two of the six e-portfolio trial learners had below

expected skills in ICT at the commencement of training sessions and required additional assistance.

Four of the six learners were keen to complete their e-portfolio for RPL, one had completed and submitted for assessment the first unit at the time of writing this report. Two others were close to completing their first unit.

All were happy with their experiences using the e-portfolio for the RPL process at Coonara. They all enjoyed getting to meet and know their fellow learners before commencement of the actual course of study.

Two were keen to maintain their e-portfolio for future work opportunities.

Two of the learners were very excited to learn that they could continue their blogging in the e-portfolio as they found it easier to use than their course wiki.

Comments from the Trainer's blog at week 3:

*"I really like this method of preparing learners for RPL, be it online or not. It gives them so much more help and when I finally come to assessing the evidence, it will be much more efficient, easier to do and take half the amount of time. This project is giving us a great opportunity to really look at our RPL procedures and to streamline them".*

Comment from same trainer's blog at week 4:

*"I am quite impressed with Mahara as an RPL tool. Although it takes a little while for learners to come to grips with, it appears to provide a coherent, logical and useful tool with uploading of artefacts, quite a user-friendly process. I think that the hardest part was deciding how to set up the layout. Once this was decided, the rest fell nicely into place".*

A learner commented in one of her blogs in her e-portfolio:

*"Like most of the things we learn, this (e-portfolio) is something we can learn by practising and being familiar with. It's a practical learning program, which you find interesting and easier once you are on the track!"*

Later she commented:

*"Some of my (work) colleagues [ibid] were enrolled to do Diploma in Children's [ibid] services in TAFE colleges and they were busy carrying huge folders around [ibid], photocopying, binding etc. They were a bit curious, what I was doing all the time on a computer, if I study the same course as they do. I explained to them that I was working on my e-portfolio. E-what? That was the question they asked. When I explained further, my colleagues [ibid] were a bit disappointed that they were doing the course in the traditional method!"*

Then finally:

*"Now I'm quite ready to put my online RPL application, well it will not going to be an easy task it seems, but my personal point of view is, everyday, there is something new to learn, although you are very competent in the work place for 15 years, still there is no limit of learning new skills".*

## **Resources**

The following resources were used by Coonara to enable their learners to use of an e-portfolio system to support the RPL process:

Trial websites:

Coonara e-portfolio information and 'how to' instructions website:

<http://coonarapl.coonarahouse.org.au/E-portfolios#toc5>

Coonara RPL (recognition of prior learning) website:

<http://coonarapl.coonarahouse.org.au>

## For more information

### For more information on Coonara's E-portfolios Implementation Trial:

Lynne Gibb, E-learning leader - [lynne@coonarahouse.org.au](mailto:lynne@coonarahouse.org.au)

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### For more information on the Australian Flexible Learning Framework:

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Website: [flexiblelearning.net.au](http://flexiblelearning.net.au)