Sustaining ethical ePortfolio practices: Insights from AAEEBL's Task Force Year 4

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Abstract

This paper recognises the importance of digital ethics when using ePortfolios and provides information about the development of a comprehensive resource from the Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-based Learning (AAEEBL) Digital Ethics in ePortfolios Task Force's four-year work. With the public release of ChatGPT addressing ethical challenges in education is critical. Over three years, the global Task Force diligently drafted, refined, and published a suite of digital ethics principles, strategies, scenarios, and resources, which is available as open source. In the fourth year (July 2022-June 2023), the Task Force formed three sub-groups to manage the growing number of objectives. The Development group explored intersections between principles and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), while evaluating data responsibility. The Outreach group disseminated the work through engaging workshops and publications, which also allowed the wider community feedback opportunities to further enhance the resources. Furthermore, the Research group undertook the ePortfolio Mapping Project to shed light on labour dynamics within ePortfolio practice across North America. The survey instrument was then adapted for data collection in Australia, and New Zealand. The paper highlights the significant achievements of these collective efforts, shares preliminary research findings, and offers valuable insights. It aims to promote ethical ePortfolio usage to enhance teaching, learning and assessment.

Practitioner Notes

1. Recognising potential ethical challenges in digital learning is critical.

2. ePortfolios enable integrated learning experiences to meet a range of pedagogical objectives, including the tracking of learning processes as well as end artefacts.

3. Learning how to apply ethical decision-making in using ePortfolios is essential.

4. Comprehensive resources have been developed to assist educators, students, professional staff, and other digital pedagogy stakeholders.

5. Research is underway into current ePortfolio practices which will inform future thinking, advocacy, and awareness.

Keywords: Digital ethics, ePortfolios, principles, research, survey, visibility of labour

Citation

Introduction

An ePortfolio can be as simple as a repository to store online artefacts or as complex as integrating learning experiences to meet a range of pedagogical objectives, or anywhere in between. Platforms range from free to use to institutional enterprise systems, with differing digital capabilities that impact pedagogical choices. The attractiveness of ePortfolios comes from the flexibility to scaffold learning, for example, with reflection and formative feedback, or designing authentic summative assessment tasks that engage students in real life scenarios. JISC (2008) defines an ePortfolio as:

> …the product, created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning. Behind any product, or presentation, lie rich and complex processes of planning, synthesizing, sharing, discussing, reflecting, giving, receiving and responding to feedback. These processes…are the focus of increasing attention, since the process of learning can be as important as the end product.

ePortfolio popularity has increased in tertiary education since in mid-1990s (Zuba Prokopetz, 2022). It could be argued that ePortfolios 'have been ahead of their time' pedagogically but as with all digital advances they can be disruptive to the status quo and require intentionality in implementation (Joyes et al., 2010). Given the rapid transition to online teaching and learning due to COVID-19 there was no time to plan new ePortfolio implementations. However, this difficult time did expose the need for greater awareness of and attention to digital ethics and the implications for students, staff and other stakeholders, such as limited access to reliable internet services and/or computers off campus for students and broader privacy and data collection issues as examples of concern (Slade et al., 2020).

More recently, ChatGPT, the large language artificial intelligence model released in late November 2022, caused a sensational response across the global education sector. The integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into education has focused attention once again on the need to measure the process of learning as well as the end products; an existing benefit of ePortfolio use. It has raised the expectations for both staff and students, to successfully engage online, know about digital citizenship and to be digitally mature. Yet students, (and others) need guidance and support to become mature digitally (Slade & Brown Wilson 2022), which includes the critical importance of ethical literacy and responsible ePortfolio usage.

Therefore, this paper aims to focus on the fourth year of the AAEEBL Task Force on Digital Ethics in ePortfolios within the context of the significant progression of work already undertaken on digital ethics in ePortfolios in previous years.

Literature

As outlined in Clark's (2019) commentary, over the past ten years, the field of ePortfolio research and practice, as evidenced in the AAC&U ePortfolio Forum, has evolved from initial definitional discourses and practice basics to a mature status. Clark (2019) and Cicchino et al. (2021) reflect on the keynote speech by Sol Bermann, University of Michigan, during the 2019 AAC&U Forum.

Bermann warned ePortfolio users about the current ethical challenges related to privacy, data collection, access and ownership that accompany technological advances. At the same time, discussions at the 2018 and 2019 annual AAEEBL conferences raised concerns about ethical literacy, firstly student understanding of ethical decision when choosing artefacts to include in their ePortfolios, and then more broadly about the provision of more resources for all stakeholder groups (Cicchino et al. 2021).

Simultaneously, in Australia, members of the ePortfolios Australia professional network took proactive steps to address ethical concerns they saw in their teaching practice. They established a research collaborative involving seven universities with the specific aim of examining student ePortfolio practices with vulnerable groups, such as patients and children. The researchers found that institutional policy was unable to provide students with nuanced aspects of ethic decision-making in different contexts and populations (Brown Wilson et al., 2018; Kirby et al., 2022) The results supported the inclusion of ethical literacy and eProfessional behaviour in curricula for professional degree programs.

The AAEEBL Digital Ethics in ePortfolios Task Force was established to respond to mounting international concerns about ethical challenges in ePortfolio use and the need for resources to support all stakeholder groups. The call for expressions of interest for participation in the Task Force was launched in September 2019.

Figure 1. *Timeline of the Digital Ethics Task Force*
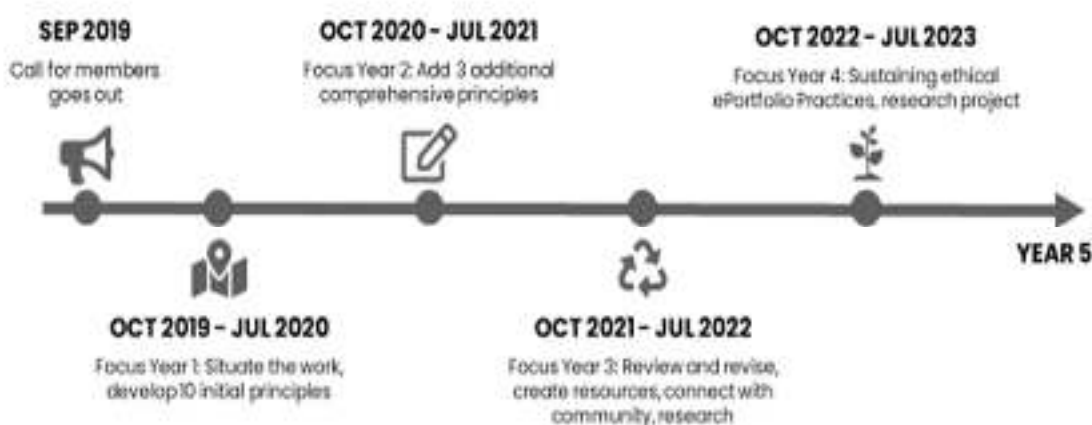
The first year began in October 2019 until July 2020. During this time the eleven members of the Task Force discussed, drafted, and published the 'Digital Ethics Principles in ePortfolios: Version 1' outlining ten principles, extended by strategies, example scenarios and further resources. The principles were collated into three domains depending on their focus as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *Details of Principles According to Domains in Version 1*

Domain	Domain Name	Principle	Description
1	Institutional Responsibilities	1-2	Support and promote awareness
2	ePortfolio Creators	3-8	Practice, respect author rights & re-use permissions, access to technology, privacy, content storage, cross-platform compatibility.
3	Platform Providers	9-10	Accessibility, consent for data usage

The Task Force members always viewed this work as a living document that could be iteratively reviewed and updated, including the incorporation of broader community feedback as time progressed. A more detailed account of the establishment of the Task Force and its work undertaken in the first year can be found in Cicchino et al. 2021.

In the second year (2020-2021) the Task Force added three more principles and revised the existing principles in 'Digital Ethics Principles in ePortfolios: Version 2'. The additional principles focused on evaluating ePortfolios, the challenges in the constructs of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and decolonisation (DEIBD) and the visibility of labour undertaken in ePortfolio use (Slade & Cicchino, 2021). In the third year, members focused on consolidation in the sector, providing support and offering a series of webinars. A new aspect of the work was the development of a multi-university research project to better understand ePortfolio work in North American higher education, through the lens of the ethical principle introduced the year before, namely visibility of labour and the implications for sustainable ePortfolio practices (Slade et al. 2022).

Members of the Task Force have provided yearly updates in the Australian ePortfolio Forum short peer-reviewed paper avenue. More details can be found in Slade, Kelly, Mize, and Stuart (2020); Slade and Cicchino (2021); and Slade, Zurhellen and Mize (2022).

Method

Dedicated to supporting ePortfolios users in its fourth year (2022-2023), the Task Force focused on providing current information, valuable open access (OA) resources, and relevant research findings aligned with the present educational context. The Task Force consisted of 14 members from the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. Work was distributed through three sub-groups - development, outreach, and research - each led by a co-chair. Members could choose whether they would like to work in only one sub-group or more, depending on interest and time availability.

A new initiative for the Task Force was the development of a research project. The purpose of the project was to understand more about ePortfolio use in higher education in the United States and Canada. More specifically, it sought to uncover which institutions are using ePortfolios and how they are using them, how ePortfolio practitioners are supported with personnel, time, training, and institutional acknowledgement, what differences there are across local contexts, and how these differences might influence ongoing usage of ePortfolios.

After obtaining human ethical approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of participating institutions, an anonymous survey was disseminated at conferences and other appropriate events, starting with the annual AAEEBL meeting in July 2021, on relevant social media platforms, professional listservs, professional organisations, and by taskforce members to their home institutions and those of interested colleagues.

Results

This section briefly outlines the work of the three sub-groups in Year Four. The Development group sought to identify connections or overlaps between the current principles and explored areas where the emerging affordances and constraints of artificial intelligence (AI) relate to digital ethics and ePortfolios. The meaning of each principle in *Digital Ethics Version 3 i*s explained in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

The suite of principles and definitions in Version 3

Principle	Definition
Support	Institutions should provide appropriate support for students, educators, administrators, and staff who create ePortfolios
Promote Awareness	Institutional administrators, staff, and educators are responsible for promoting awareness of digital ethics in ePortfolio making.
Practice	ePortfolio creators need opportunities to develop and practice the digital literacies necessary to create accessible and effective ePortfolios
Evaluation	ePortfolio evaluation should consider process, inclusion, reflective practice, and alignment with the stated objectives of the context in which the ePortfolio was created.
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Decolonisation (DEIBD)	Educators are aware of equity-related challenges and address learning needs related to each student's identities, cultures, and backgrounds as they create ePortfolios.

Principle	Definition
Accessibility	All ePortfolio platforms and pedagogy should be thoroughly vetted for accessibility according to the standards identified by one's culture, government, or profession.
Technology and Usability	Technology must be equitably available, usable, and supported for all students, educators, and staff engaged in ePortfolio work.
Data Responsibility	ePortfolio creators should know where their content and data are stored, who has access to them, how they might be used without those creators' knowledge, and how much control creators have over them.
Respect for Author Rights and Re-Use Permissions	ePortfolio creators should understand and respect author rights, best practices for re-use, and representation.
Visibility of Labour	The labour required by students, educators, and administrators to create, develop, implement, support, and evaluate ePortfolios should be visible, sustainable, compensated where appropriate, and counted toward evaluation and advancement.

Additionally, this group began work on a heuristic for evaluating the data responsibility of ePortfolio platforms. Lastly, they took a step back to take a broader overview of the principles, from conception to application, to gather feedback from the community to enhance the terminology and implementation.

The Outreach group sought opportunities to disseminate the work of the Task Force. Under the leadership of their co-chair, they actively coordinated and facilitated regular workshops in 2022-2023 on individual principles such as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging and Decolonisation (February), Evaluation (April), Support and Practice (June), Visibility of Labour (August), Accessibility (October), Respect Author's Rights and Reuse Permissions (March 2023), and Promote Awareness (April). At each of these workshops, the presenters addressed GenAI concerns as they began to emerge.

The Taskforce has also utilised social media, such as Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, and podcast platforms hosted by the Mahara Project at Catalyst IT, and Digication to engage diverse networks. Additionally, the group efficiently tracked outgoing communications, presentations at events such as the AAEEBL annual meetings and ePortfolio forums, and publications such as the International Journal of ePortfolio. In collaboration with the AAEEBL ePortfolio Review (AePR), the Digital

Ethics Task Force is also working on a special issue sharing open educational resources on the principles in practice. In preparation, participants at a workshop at the AAEEBL annual meeting in July 2023 and at a follow-up workshop in September 2023 were encouraged to share their own ePortfolio practices. These efforts are making a valuable contribution to supporting the sector and the success of the Task Force's initiatives.

The focus of the Research sub-group during 2022-23 was the implementation of the North American Mapping Project and the development of the Research Mapping ePortfolio Practice in Australia and New Zealand survey. The goal of this project is to begin making visible the labour that is required for ePortfolio pedagogy and practice to work well.

Survey Findings

Sixty-two responses were received, representing a range of higher education institutions. Figure 2 illustrates that most respondents are primarily involved in ePortfolios as instructors (educators), followed by roles in instructional support, program directors, assessment support, and in a generalised 'advocate' role. It is worth noting that specific titles are not uniformly established across institutions. Sixteen respondents identified as the primary ePortfolio "person" on their campus.

Figure 2.

Respondents' Primary ePortfolio Role
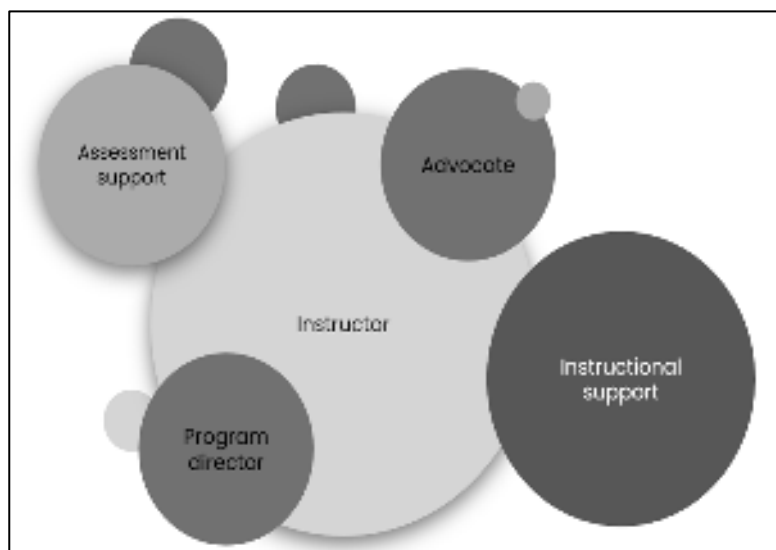
In response to the questions 'Identify where ePortfolios are used at your institutions (select all that apply)' an individual class context was most common, followed by use in a general education program. Use by individual students, at a department level, and in discipline-specific certificate or degree pathway programs were all identified by 28 participants (Figure 3).
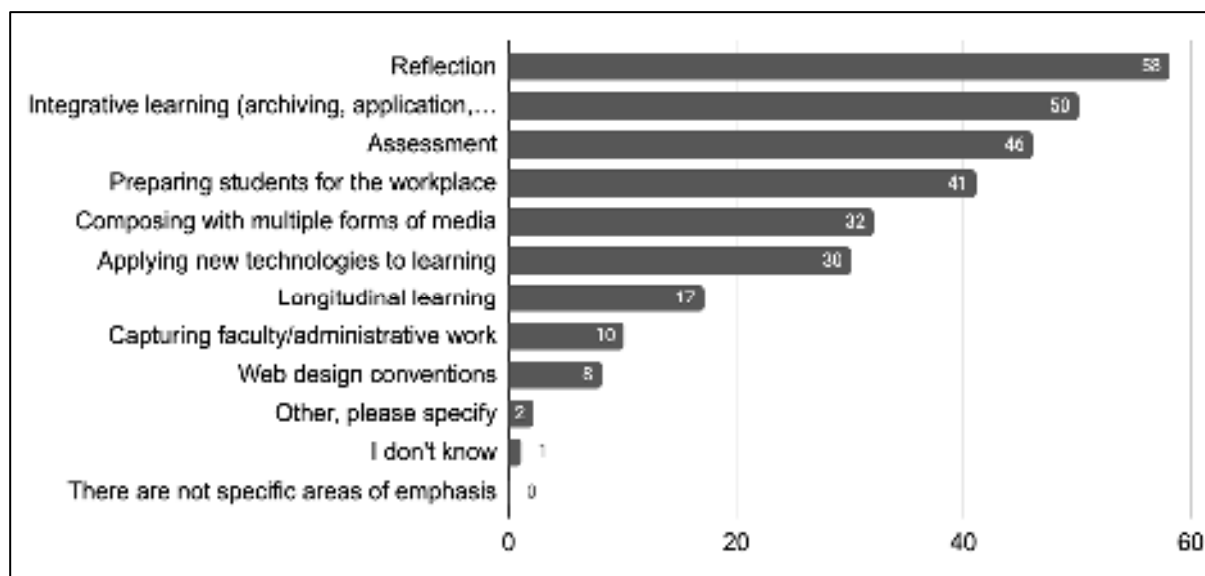
Figure 3.

Where are ePortfolios used in your institution?
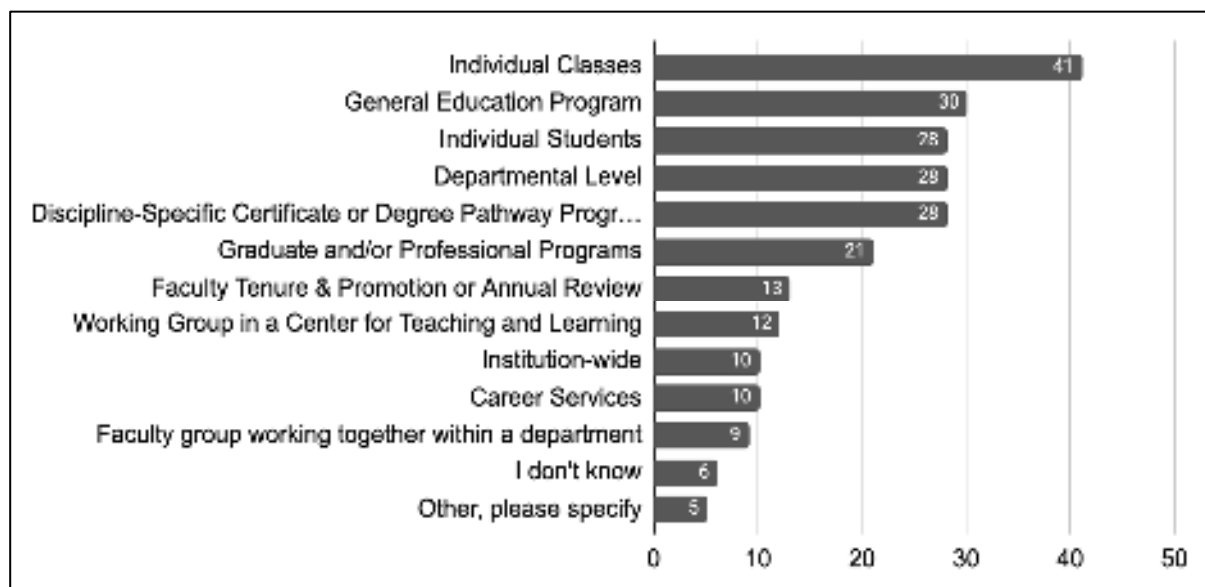
Respondents were asked 'Why are you using ePortfolios at your institution? (select all that apply)'. They agreed that ePortfolios are widely used for reflection, integrative learning, assessment, employability, and multimedia or multimodal composing (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Purposes for ePortfolio use

Respondents say that they work mostly with Teaching and Learning Centres, technology centres, and writing centres, with varying amounts of time spent on ePortfolio work as part of a range of

responsibilities. Figure 4 shows that respondents spend 'some' of their time on ePortfolios, particularly technology support, faculty development, instructional design, and student support staff. These categories also include staff who spend 'a lot' of time on ePortfolios, as well as those who supervise student workers.

Figure 5.

Time Spent on Primary Tasks
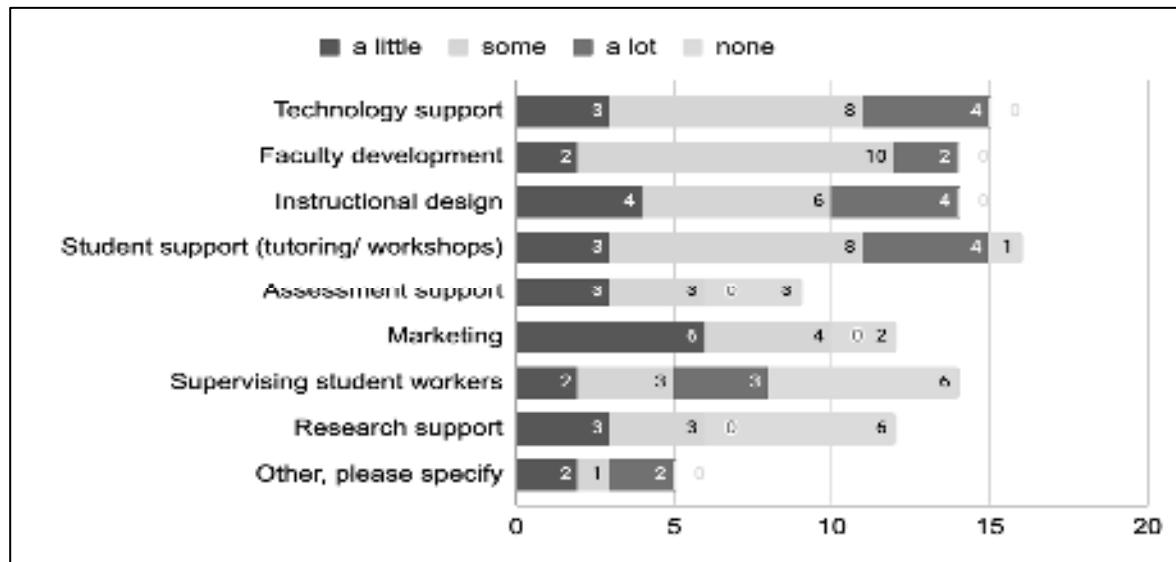
Respondents were then asked how ePortfolio work is valued at different institutions. Unfortunately, more than half of the respondents (n=37) felt that their ePortfolio endeavours are not acknowledged at all. Others received small rewards, a few workload releases, limited financial reward, and in some cases credit toward tenured positions and promotion.

Discussion

ePortfolio pedagogies play a significant role in the digital space because they can meet a range of learning objectives at varying levels of complexity. ePortfolios research confirms the valuable contribution to student learning that can be achieved through these platforms. As digital pedagogies become more mainstream, supporting students to be digitally mature becomes more urgent. Research by Brown Wilson et al. (2018) confirms that students do not always understand the nuances of ethical decision-making and need support to develop these skills. Similarly, ethical issues confront other ePortfolio stakeholders, and in particular educators need to be able to digest ethical challenges and then support their students in their learning processes. There was an international call for more resources to support these ePortfolio stakeholders (Cicchino et al., 2021).

The AAEEBL Task Force leaders and members responded to this call, and evidenced by the long-standing commitment from several participants who have served across all four years demonstrates that educators, whether in academic or professional roles, vendors, and others in diverse roles, recognise the importance of this work. Members representing different institutional

structures and cultures have come together, sharing in a rich dialogue of experiences and knowledge that transcended disciplinary boundaries (Gresham et al., 2023). At an organisational level, this work has strengthened links between AAEEBL and ePortfolios Australia, (a professional network in Australia and New Zealand) in facilitating webinars and other outreach events, managing time differences, and capturing a global audience of ePortfolio enthusiasts who know that digital pedagogies must be coupled with digital ethics education and want to learn more.

Initial results of the survey suggest that those doing the labour of ePortfolio work are mostly instructors or educators. Others using ePortfolios included program directors and those involved in instructional support and assessment. Much of this work seems to be supported by faculty development, instructional design, technology support, and student workers. It is often carried out in individual classrooms or in specific programs without significant institutional acknowledgment. Some practitioners received some financial compensation, workload release, or credit toward professional advancement. More data will become available in 2024-2025 as the data collected across Australian and New Zealand are analysed and findings are shared with the broader tertiary education community.

Conclusion

The work of the Task Force has been significant over the past four years, providing the sector with a comprehensive set of principles, explained by strategies and scenarios, and supported by extra resources, including workshops and webinars. Further, the principles continue to be viewed as a living document, allowing ongoing revisions and adaption to changing higher education contexts. Given the recent significant advances and public availability of generative artificial intelligence, these resources are increasingly important to support all in the education sector to become more ethically literate. The accompanying research project provides further evidence of current ePortfolio work and the invisible labour involved.

Acknowledgements

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