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## Connecting through e-portfolio practice: trust, relationship & expertise

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### Abstract

Trust, relationships, expertise, and connections are essential components in the practice of authentic, programmatic e-portfolio practice. The behind-the-scenes educational practices of Educational Designers, a Program Director and Academics in the implementation and design of student-centred, authentic programmatic assessments is definitely not well researched. Thus, our paper introduces, analyses, and reflects on the different aspects and layers of e-portfolio implementation into a bachelor degree. Through our personal lenses, we uncover some of the key lessons we have learned during this unique opportunity. The paper is not about addressing the technological implementation of the e-portfolio platform, nor simply pedagogical underpinnings; instead, we focus on the convergence of pedagogical practice relationships which are essential during the process of emerging, connecting and sustaining e-portfolios through an ongoing community of practice, within the learning lifecycle.

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the convergence of the behind-the-scenes relationships that are essential during the process of emerging, connecting and sustaining e-portfolios through the learning lifecycle. Of particular note, we are reflecting on the relationships that affect the implementation of e-portfolio from a practice perspective. We focus on an e-portfolio initiative to build an approach based on: constructing and fostering relationships; and constructing student-centred activities to promote trust and support. We showcase how relationships can be formed with meaningful purposes that promote cooperation, equality and respect through shared practices. Attention to pedagogical relationships is much needed, and our first-person, positioned accounts serve as specific suggestions on how to foster meaningful relationships with each other.

The Bachelor of Media Communication (BMC) degree was introduced in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia in 2018. A key marketing component of the specialist media degree was to provide graduates with an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) on completion. With a diverse student cohort and over nine-hundred enrolments (by 2023), the BMC degree had a precipitous increase over the five years. This paper will showcase how like-minded individuals explored and implemented different ways of relating to each other and students alike.

The authors of the article were drawn to each other because of a strong and relatively deep commitment to acknowledging that education is a community-oriented endeavour. Coincidentally, this pedagogical convergence happened sequentially during 2019; a year after the initial commencement of the degree. Although one of the Educational Designers (EDs) had been already employed for eight months, the other was seconded from another department later that same year. The Program Director/academic commenced approximately nine months after the degree had commenced (mid-2019). Up until this time, there was minimal educational interaction between the two teams.

By the end of 2019, our main goal was to first understand our students and their needs, particularly around the use of the e-portfolio platform. We sought and responded to student feedback through a collaborative effort and implemented a specific 'space of belonging' (Gaunt, 2013). One example of this was a dedicated online platform for BMC students, which we launched in April 2020. This site served as a crucial anchor for further embedding the e-portfolio implementation and as an intercultural gathering place during the pandemic for geographically distanced students both within and outside of Australia (over 450 international students). Within the site, we created innovative online activities that engaged and inspired students to enhance their own learning. This strategy significantly fostered a sense of BMC community identity and countered potential feelings of disconnection and isolation that may have been present during the global pandemic.

As the BMC degree responds to an increasing global demand for graduates with a deep understanding of the role of media in contemporary social, cultural and economic life, it also offers a foundation for developing strong media and communication professional skills. BMC students develop their analytical, technical, and professional skills through a core program of professional communication units and specialist study in one of four streams: Journalism, Media, Public

Relations, and Screen. The ethos of BMC centres on critical perspectives; practical skills; commitment to interdisciplinarity; international and intercultural experiences; and employability. These principles underpin the current and future needs of our students and employers, and the world in which they will operate. All principles are systematically addressed across the breadth of the degree. The degree itself is intellectually informed by a rich tradition of critical and historical thinking in the study of media and communication, as well as by an experienced BMC Industry Advisory Board that works to maximise the quality and relevance of the degree. In particular, BMC Lab-based units are practice-oriented, offering a range of activities that utilise the Monash Media Lab (MML). This culminates in a key component of the course: a final year media project or industry-related experience. Most importantly, through their years of study, BMC students evidenced their learning and designed their own e-portfolio, which allows them to showcase their work for future employment opportunities.

It is crucial to point out that especially for students who are beginning their media careers, a portfolio is a significant and innovative strategy that allows them to present themselves and their creative works to potential colleagues and employers (Rowley, 2016). In the BMC course students are encouraged to think about how they might curate and present their e-portfolios, via assignments, in a way that demonstrates their critical thinking, communication skills, and creativity. E-portfolio was a new platform for the BMC degree, and students gradually navigated the platform to submit their assignments. This in itself is excellent practice for emerging media professionals who will be required to use proprietary software and platforms to deliver their work as part of their future careers (Liu, Volcic, Gallois, 2023). This provides further evidence of the deliberate and thoughtful ways that assessment tasks were collaboratively designed, created, and implemented in BMC units. The other advantage of e-portfolio is that it encourages students to think of their assignments in broader terms, and with multiple goals. While strongly written work provides a foundation, e-portfolio assignments ask students to express their ideas in multiple formats, including images, videos, infographics, and embedded media content. Formatting their individual e-portfolios, along with their critical and descriptive writing, supports students to illustrate a visual and textual story. This further fosters their abilities to learn and adapt to changing circumstances, to communicate with others about key knowledge and skills and to engage collaboratively to shape outcomes and solutions (Nielson, 2010).

In this paper, we will briefly introduce our literature review on the theme of relationships; followed by a short methodology section. The main purpose of our paper is to uncover our own narratives, our own stories and bring to light the convergence of the behind-the-scenes relationships that are essential during the process of emerging, connecting and sustaining e-portfolios through the learning lifecycle. We focus on an e-portfolio initiative to build an approach based on constructing and fostering relationships and creating student-centred activities to promote trust and support. Importantly, we consider *trust* to be when those involved depend on the other, “resting in interdependence and vulnerability without anxiety” (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p.64). We show how *relationships* can be formed with meaningful purposes that promote cooperation, equality and respect through shared practices. Attention to pedagogical relationships is essential, and our first-person, self-reflexively positioned accounts serve as specific ways about how to foster meaningful relationships with each other. In each commentary, we unpack the essences of our e-portfolio practices.

## Literature

Our review of the literature uncovered distinctive areas of relevance, yet nothing that was inadvertently connected to our specific area of interest – human relationships and technology practice implementation. Through our search efforts, we discovered little if any papers where research specifically addressed our own experiences when implementing e-portfolios. We did however uncover a fundamental connection between trust, human relationships and successful learning. We also discovered that the role and practices of EDs is inadequately illustrated in scholarly literature yet are considered essential in leading and supporting improvements in educational practices in collaboration with their academic counterparts (Bisset, 2018).

To facilitate a critical review of the literature, we inserted relevant and key terms into a variety of databases. Collaboratively, we reviewed the literature to ensure alignment with the key areas, and to make decisions about relevance and connection. Various articles and grey literature were scrutinised for recurring ideas, themes, concepts and relevance, and where needed we critically analysed if the literature should be included in this review. We commence our review by discussing human relations and successful learning before moving to the practices of EDs, and the trusting relationships they attempt to build with academics. These fundamental concepts and connections should not be understated in higher education.

In particular, Sidorkin (2022) focuses on the importance of human relations, as the basis for successful learning, with Biesta (2010) profoundly advocating that education is a social activity. Gravett (2023) expands on this idea stating that relationships and connections are fundamental to education arguing that it is ‘both human-to-human relationships, the interconnection between self and others, and the relations we have to, and within a much broader, material world’ (p. 2). The literature continues, referring to the power of pivotal ‘moments’ in teaching and learning exchange (Gravett, 2023; Schwarz, 2019). Within our paper we narrate and reflect upon how those moments of connections expand beyond the traditional teacher-student relationship, to include academic-professional, student-technology, student-content, student-self, and much more.

The role of the EDs has been in existence since the Second World War, yet the practices of these particular assets within higher education has remained ambiguous requiring further research if the group is to gain credibility, recognition and respect (Altena et al., 2019; Bisset, 2018). Working collaboratively with academics to facilitate quality educational practices, EDs are said to lack professional identity (Altena et al., 2019) and often reside in what is known as the *third space* (Bisset, 2018). Celia Whitchurch’s seminal work states that the *third space* is an in-between junction, existing at the borders and boundaries (2008, 2017). More recently Hallett (2018) argues that EDs are occupying a third space in universities, but that this space is between a number of different identities – academics, academic developers, and professional staff. The scope of this paper will not explore the concept of the *third space* nor that of HEW staff in detail, however it will reference the existing literature which provides insight into the characteristics of academic and professional staff relationships within the higher education context (See Bellaby et al., 2020; Bisset, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Slade et al., 2019). Fundamentally, what can be seen is movement towards a more flexible and collaborative view of roles and responsibilities, where

relations, rather than organisational structures, are of utmost importance (Whitchurch, 2008, 2010). Veles (2022) explains that the relationships in this space are, ‘...simultaneously constructed, defined, and enabled by the knowledge, expertise, and unique talents of the actors who come together...’ (p. 4). Most importantly, it is the building of trust in these relationships that is indispensable to our story, with the risk of the erosion of trust discussed more broadly in literature by Stotenkamp et al., 2017 and Whitchurch, 2010.

The definition of trust in the literature has evolved over the years, however the key components remain the same. Reina and Reina (2000) suggest that trust comprises three key categories - contractual trust (keeping promises), competence trust (a person's ability), and communication trust (being open and truthful). Expanding on this definition, a meta-analysis of literature conducted by McKnight and Chervany (2001) defined four categories of trust - benevolence (acting in the interest of others), integrity (honesty and truthfulness), competence (ability to perform a role) and predictability (acting in a consistent manner). Tshannen-Moran (2014) adds another layer to this body of work concluding that ‘[t]rust is one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent (p. 19-20)’. The addition of a ‘willingness to be vulnerable’, Tshannen-Moran’s (2014, p. 19) definition considers the complex nature of relationships as symbiotic and reciprocal. To conclude, we argue that the main ‘building blocks’ within education spaces remain relationships, connections, and trust.

## **Method**

Our method in this paper focuses on an inductive approach, which allows for themes to emerge from the raw data and moves from a broad reading of the data collected to narrow down and develop themes – in a self-reflexive way (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The methodology chosen was deliberately that of interpretative inquiry. We wanted to seek answers to questions that focus on how e-portfolio was collaboratively designed and implemented, and how this in turn impacted the overall learning communities. Specifically, we conducted in-depth interviews with BMC students, and asked for feedback from the BMC community on the e-portfolio strengths and weaknesses (Kudo et al, 2017). We see talking to students and listening to their voices as crucial in understanding the role of e-portfolio into educational spaces. This methodology then allowed for not only focusing on students’ voices, but also listening to colleagues and their views on e-portfolio implementation (Hansen & Machin, 2018; Volcic, 2008).

Further, we build our analysis on the basis of our own narratives, and also on the feedback we have received from our students as they engage with the process and production of their e-portfolios. We find students’ comments crucial in understanding and assessing the impact that an e-portfolio has had on their own learning.

## **Results**

### **Educational Designers - Ingrid D’Souza (ED1) and Carmen Sapsed (ED2)**

As EDs the relationship that is established and built with an academic, at the onset of any pedagogical project, is fundamental to the sustainability and success of the innovative idea. Yet, what is also known is that implementation of e-portfolios is often driven by enthusiasm, chance

and can be ad hoc at the best of times (Deneen & Brown, 2014; Stampel et al., 2017). Serendipitously, the call for support and implementation of e-portfolios in the BMC began during the first few weeks of ED1 commencing in the faculty position. Questions regarding curriculum design and effective e-portfolio practice (Chaudhuri, 2017) had been side-stepped and with reasonable student enrolment numbers, the course was about to commence. Students were promised a “*Portfolio upon graduation*”; yet there had been no involvement with the existing EDs, nor their expertise with constructive alignment; and no reasoning for the lack of collaboration was ever given. On the basis of our experiences, we have determined that a dedicated ongoing support network is essential in implementing any e-portfolio technology.

Paramount to this project, EDs worked closely with the existing course coordinator and teaching team; retrofitting the established course and unit learning outcomes while ensuring constructive alignment with the already approved e-portfolio assessment design. Soon after, there was a sudden change in the course’s educational leadership with the employment of a new, relatively young teaching team who indicated themselves that they had little, if any exposure, to the concept of e-portfolios as a pedagogical learning tool. Thus, new relationships had to be established with all involved in teaching the BMC degree, from the new Program Director to the more junior and sessional teaching team. Furthermore, the EDs had to facilitate, lead and support weekly connections so as to enable and undertake authentic assessments and ensure student learning. Openness and flexibility with innovative ideas was essential and pivotal to the project and our collaborations with our academic colleagues. We considered one of the biggest barriers to educational technology adoption being a lack of knowledge around how to use the technology (Lane et al., 2011), thus the provision of guidance and support was imperative in the successful implementation of the e-portfolio platform. Sociocultural theory strongly advocates that for (student) learning to occur, social interactions are essential (Vygotsky, 1978). This crucial theory was also relevant for both academics and EDs within the implementation, and success of the e-portfolios project.

Physical presence, conducting individual and group workshops with the teaching team enabled clarity in our dialogue surrounding authenticity and relevance of assessments; thus, enabling constructive alignment of learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2022). Our structured workshops covered both pedagogy and technology, focusing on the benefits of programmatic e-portfolio practice. Bennett et al. (2018) argue that successful and sustainable adoption of technology begins with academic staff having a conceptual understanding of both practices and the platform. Thus, academic staff had access to one-on-one sessions with the EDs, so they could design appropriate e-portfolio assessments, increase their critical knowledge of the platform, and problem solve any issues that were individualised to their content knowledge.

Further to this, we also became responsible for student support and resources, purely due to the contemporary nature of the innovation. These resources were designed with flexibility and a focus on enabling students to engage with guided activities within the actual platform. Just-in-time instructional videos were designed and created, and synchronous sessions were initially offered; until evaluative processes indicated that students were more inclined to access, and use, the former over the latter. Asynchronous self-paced orientation modules were then designed, enabling academic staff to embed this within the student’s learning journey. Although this self-

paced module was well-received, it did not diminish the need for personalised academic support when e-portfolios were implemented in other areas of educational practice.

During this time, relationships with university central teams (educational technology and information technology systems) were strengthened as they partnered and collaborated to establish faculty-wide e-portfolio implementation. Essential connections and close working relationships with our external hosting partners also enabled the system to accommodate students' needs, academics wants and desires, and the various external requirements of the course. The importance of connection, collaboration and trust (Findura, 2021; Tay et al., 2023), continues to be accentuated in the ongoing relationships that have extended beyond those established at the beginning of the project. In particular, the EDs have continued their relationships with the various teams regardless of new roles, changes to positioning and implementation of other learning and teaching initiatives.

### **Program Director/Academic - Zala Volcic**

A question that continues to intrigue me, over many years teaching, studying, and publishing in the fields of media studies and intercultural communication, is how a community of EDs, academics (and students), strangers when they start, can form relationships that enable them to create a unique sense of their identity (cultural, ethnic or otherwise), while developing a sense of belonging and becoming. For me, researching and teaching has always been about building relations. My research and teaching have centred on the idea that teaching is so much about our connection with the world. In that, my teaching aims to provide a way of metacognition that focuses on our efforts to co-construct a shared world through the ways in which we build relationships with one another. I have been committed to building communities within educational spaces - and the notions of trust and relationship are crucial to my pedagogical work. In that, my teaching approach has long attempted to inspire students to learn by combining a rigorous and generative curriculum with 'pedagogical compassion' – a sense of 'being there' for the students, and colleagues. This approach recognises the educational process as a *relational* endeavour in which students come into their own through the strength of the learning communities and the in-class and assessment practices that nurture their thinking and reflection (Gaunt, 2013). An emphasis on academic excellence and innovation, underpinned by community building strategies (and care and compassion for students' experiences, circumstances, and feelings), is evident in *major degree-wide initiatives* we have introduced from 2020-2023 to engage and inspire students, while fostering opportunities for sustained interaction and dialogue among students and staff.

### **Student Voices**

As previously indicated, the three authors were passionate about listening to students and the ongoing implementation of e-portfolio practice in the BMC degree, and continued to be guided by what the students voiced in different contexts. In listening to students, what we discovered, and what their narratives point to is the importance of e-portfolio in building their own creative/professional archives. According to one of the international BMC students,

As a third year BMC student, I improved my academic ability and obtained practical skills. I particularly remember two core units, Media Challenges and Communicating in the Digital Era. Teaching theories, the lecturer however also carefully designed interesting

assignments such as infographics, and short films, to prepare students to be industry-ready.... I also built an e-portfolio. I got an internship at TikTok this year. I believe it is mainly because my e-portfolio has directly and effectively presented that I am capable of doing my media job. Overall, big love to the BMC community! Here, I grow up (Solicited feedback; correspondence with BMC Director, Volcic, 21/5/2022).

And in the words of one 2nd year BMC student, the use of e-portfolio specifically points to the connections to educators, industry, and power of trust:

Assessments in BMC are very creative, and I can see how they are designed with a purpose to engage us to think and understand media industries, and to develop skills – communication skills; writing; filming; editing... I see these at the heart of my professional degree, BMC. I'm sort of looking at potential employers, I feel that especially in the industry I'm trying to crack into, the journalism industry, it's very much about understanding what industry needs and wants (Solicited feedback; correspondence with BMC Director, Volcic, 13/4/2022).

Professionally oriented assessments, including video essays, case studies, documentaries, podcasts, and industry reports, were the key assessment tasks that supported students beyond the course, and especially when they submitted these via e-portfolio. Examples of these innovative, practice-based assessments were present in all BMC units. For example, ATS2188 Writing Lab Assignment 1 asks students to choose a social media subject of interest (such as the influencer, the fan, the journalist, the creative, the troll, the activist). It orients them to the research about these subjects, and helps students form their own approach to their social media writing style and genre. Students first seek out a real-world example of their chosen subject on social media and evaluate that account in terms of how they fit (or reject) aspects of their communication genre. This allows students to learn from existing social media successes (or failures) and to understand how social media communication works in practice. Students creatively develop their fictional persona, with a social media profile and invented scenario to match their critical understanding of the expected communication genre.

The importance of our own ability to promote constructive interactions with diverse students was crucial, while we were together building a set of shared values. Communication between academics, the EDs and students was essential – and rather than thinking of communication as a direct and top-down relation, it can be seen as a process that can take place at any time, in many different locations. Together with EDs, we have collaboratively engaged to ensure that the student-curated e-portfolio emphasises professional growth and reflection. Our strong connection and trust of each other's expertise has allowed the e-portfolio integration to empower students enabling them to take extra care and pride in their work, while still meeting course learning objectives. With this respect, collaboration and expertise, we have developed assessment tasks that are intellectually and professionally authentic, helping to create a sense of distinctive achievement that comes from belonging to and building upon the teaching and learning community.

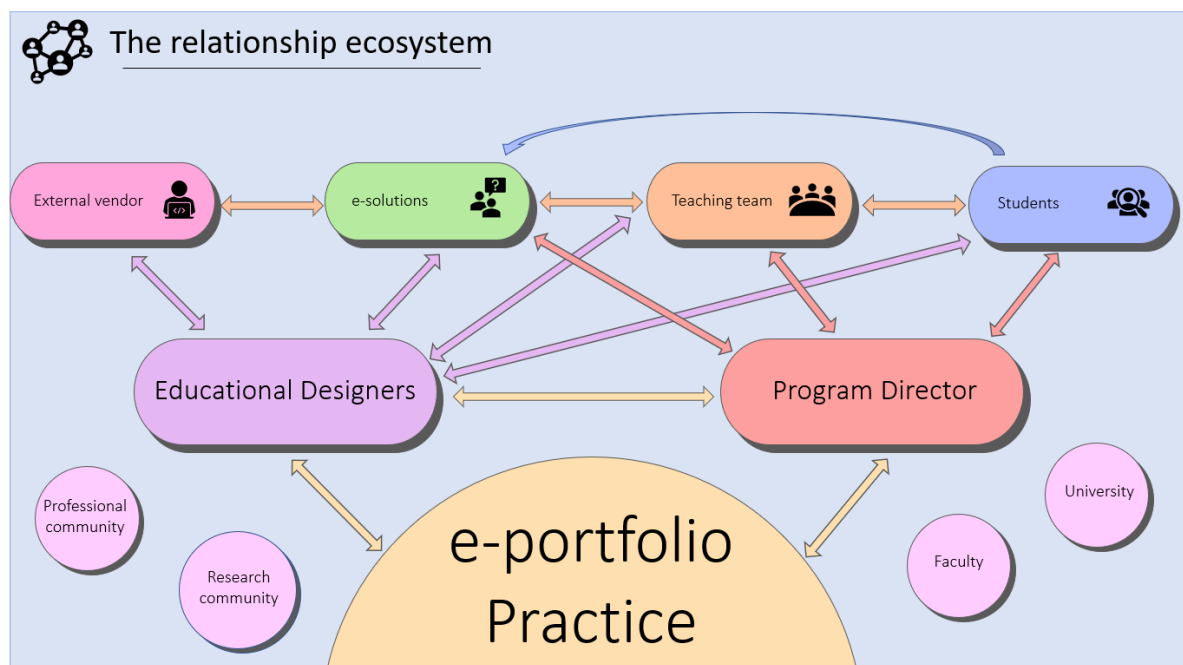


## Discussion and Conclusion

As we reflect and critically review our work over the last four years, there is an opportunity to consolidate our deliberations, our thinking and our learnings. The outcome of this is a relationship ecosystem; one of trust, collaborations and constantly evolving relationships in the context of the implementation process. The implementation of e-portfolios requires representation from many and varied avenues, and practices cannot be transformed without each element, as depicted in *The Relationship Ecosystem* (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The Relationship Ecosystem.*



Note: This figure provides a visual representation of the relationships between stakeholders involved in the implementation of e-portfolio practice in a degree program.

The key lessons to be taken from this work revolves around the importance of true collaborative relationships at each point in the ecosystem. These relationships are not passive nor are they one-way in their formation and nature. Those involved in this ecosystem are influenced by the various attributes that each convey and these are essential to the successful implementation of the project.

Firstly, we emphasise the importance of fostering a reciprocal relationship between students and the teaching team, led by the program director. Through our continued dialogue with students, we have discovered that the implementation of student-centred e-portfolio projects, within the BMC degree, has profoundly changed the students. They have shown motivation when undertaking

assignments, and this has been further highlighted in how they are assessed – this is then the fulcrum around which students engage with ideas, direct their learning, and develop new skills in their lifelong learning journey. We have anecdotally seen this through their enthusiasm and the overall summative grading schedule. Listening and learning from our students has enabled us to place them firmly within this pedagogical (and technological) implementation project, and allowed them to be considered as partners and not just recipients of the outcome. The ongoing engagement with students throughout the process of e-portfolio implementation, has ensured that the students' voices were always heard and changes could be made to the approach based on valuable input from our student colleagues.

Secondly, we advocate for the allocation of adequate consideration and resources to effectively manage relationships within the vast ecosystem. For successful implementation, our ecosystem spanned from external vendors, through to professional and academic staff within the University, and of course students. We also note the influence of the faculty and the university within which we work, and the broader professional and research communities in which we individually and collectively belong. In these we celebrate the extensive benefits gained from utilising the expertise available in these various spaces. Sustaining these relationships can be time consuming and sometimes challenging, due to competing priorities, however we advocate that considered focus on these relationships is a valuable addition to e-portfolio implementation.

Finally, we advocate for the importance of trust-based relationships between academics and professional staff, specifically in this case the two EDs and the Program director. The e-portfolio project's success has been based on the trust, relationships, expertise and connections that we have built among ourselves and others - a testament to the power of collaboration within the practice community. As Liu, et al., (2023) argue, it is crucial to recognize ways in which social relations are changed -- and how it remains essential to focus on education that happens through and with human relations and trust. In conclusion, this project and our narratives are a beginning positioning; there is still further work to be done. Our hope is that by telling our unique but undocumented story, that we have begun the imperative conversation. We now reach out to others to continue to recognise, document and discuss the valuable attributes and assets that are required for such a momentous outcome. The Program Director recently commented that "...eportfolios are now business as usual, they are embedded...and part of the BMC", and that is the greatest achievement.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest with respect to the contents of this manuscript. The authors have not used artificial intelligence in any aspect – ideation, design nor written as per Crawford et al. (2023). The authors list the following CRediT contributions: **Ingrid D'Souza**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, review and editing **Carmen Sapeed**: Writing – original draft, review and editing, Visualisation **Zala Volcic**: Writing – original draft, review and editing, Resources

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