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## From paper to the web: the ELP in the digital era

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## **From paper to the web: the ELP in the digital era**

**Inma Álvarez**

### **ABSTRACT**

The Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio (ELP) was originally designed as a structured compilation of forms and self-assessment grids language learners in Europe could use to document their linguistic and cultural experiences and to reflect on them. It was a paper-based portfolio and continues to be replicated as such. Despite quick changes in the portfolio landscape in recent years, nowadays only a few electronic versions of the ELP have been created. This chapter reflects on the main characteristics and issues around the original conception of the ELP and suggests that the full potential of this portfolio has yet to be realised in a digital environment. Based on the experience gained from the development of an electronic ELP for adults at the Open University in the United Kingdom, it is argued that the ELP as a learning guide, self-reflection instrument and self-assessment tool can be significantly enhanced and made more relevant and accessible to new generations of learners with the help of technology.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Theories and empirical studies on the potential of portfolios at all levels of education suggest that the ELP is indeed a great creation for the field of languages. It is, however, down to language educators and researchers to work on this model, make it relevant to new and diverse learning contexts, and promote and disseminate their experiences using it. After more than a decade since the birth of the ELP there is not much research outcome on whether the ELP is adequate for a variety of target groups, on whether it is applicable to diverse contexts, on how culturally transferrable different models are, and on what challenges educators face during the creation process of new models. There is also very little evidence about the extent to which the two basic functions of the ELP, namely the pedagogic function, and the documentation and reporting function, have been successfully applied by users of different

models. This lack of research publications on the ways in which the ELP has been developed and used is even more intriguing when compared with the ample academic work available in the area of educational portfolios.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter offers a discussion of the main issues around the current format and models of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), focusing in particular on how they could be transformed in the digital era, specifically for adult learners. There have been many pointers in the general literature to the advantages of transferring our traditional paper-based portfolios to digital ones. This chapter aims at finding those pointers and rising awareness of where the future of the ELP lies. It is divided in four sections.

The first section provides some background information about the design and developments of the ELP as well as proposing a description of its main characteristics based on current portfolio typologies. The ELP is revealed as a personal language history in progress. This portfolio conceptualization of the ELP exposes its complex nature and its great potential for language education.

In the second section, a number of issues around the original conception, current use and promotion of the ELP are highlighted, followed by a suggestion of the ways in which those issues could be overcome with the aid of technology. It also exposes the solutions that need to be found for a coherent electronic design. The issues emphasised have to do with the limitations of a print-based model versus an electronic model, and the development of learner autonomy.

The third section reports on a pilot project which explored issues around the creation and use of an electronic ELP developed for adult distance learners at The Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom. The main focus of this project was to test the efficiency of such a tool for independent learners. The study assesses format appropriateness and analysis of current language learners' needs and interests, the suitability of the ELP template's structures and

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly a similar concern about lack of information was raised in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; so a survey was conducted in 2005 to 'get a general overview of the extent to which the CEFR is known and used and on the experiences gained in using it' (p. 2) see (Europe, 2005, p. 2)

navigation in a digital environment, as well as the technical challenges of recreating it in a different format.

Finally, in the last section, conclusions based on theoretical reflection and practical experience suggest that the potential of the ELP as a learning guide, self-reflection instrument and self-assessment tool can be significantly enhanced using a virtual environment instead of a paper format. But difficulties for developers and users of e-portfolios are also acknowledged. A number of recommendations are put forward on how the ELP could be enhanced and expanded taking advantage of current technology. In particular, it is suggested that immediate efforts go towards an ELP repository and the production of inclusive portfolio tools accessible and open to all kinds of learners.

## **BACKGROUND**

The principles of educational portfolios have been linked to some of the most influential theories of the 20th century, in particular to John Dewey's ideas on the importance of reflection in education (Cummins & Davesne, 2009; Moore, 1994), Jean Piaget's process of development and Paulo Freire's critical thinking philosophy (Moore, 1994). The focus of portfolios is on learners, on their responsibilities for their own learning and the liberating potential of portfolio work for assessment purposes. Judith Brown (2002) has suggested a more ancient inspiration for portfolios in Plato's maxim 'Know thyself' on the importance of self-knowledge as a lifelong activity. Her literature review on experiential portfolios indicates that these have been used in adult education since the 1970s (Brown, 2002).

More specifically, the theory on portfolios for educational purposes has described them as tools that offer learners an opportunity to gather, evaluate, select, inquire and reflect on the work they have done and share it with others as proof of effort and achievement for assessment and employment purposes. Johnson et al. have indicated three main benefits of a reflective inquiry in portfolio work: '*self-esteem*, resulting from recording and reflecting on achievements and successes, as well as *professional renewal* through the process of mapping new goals and planning for future growth. [...and] an *ongoing dialogue* between candidates and instructors' (2006, p. 55). Conclusions from different studies have pointed out additional specific benefits for students using portfolios, such as their potential to focus people's thinking (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996), to document progress over time (Challis, 2005), to

increase users 'self-knowledge, communication, organizational and reflective abilities,' and even to transform learner's perspectives (Brown, 2002, p. 231). In addition, research on e-portfolios has argued that they are not only valuable for developing learners' technology and web publishing skills but also for 'their ability to advance students' knowledge of how to apply those skills effectively in academic and professional contexts' (Lane, 2007, p. 15). Portfolios in electronic form have potentially many other benefits such as making progress and attainment more obvious, motivating and engaging learners, increasing self-esteem, and encouraging creativity (Becta, 2007).

In contrast, the concept of a portfolio tool only entered noticeably the field of language education in the 1990s and in connection with the concept of independent language learning and assessment. As we will now see, the theory and practice of educational portfolios had clearly a huge influence on the decision to create the European Language Portfolio (ELP), a portfolio with a focus on language learners in Europe.

### **The ELP: design and developments**

The ELP was originally designed as a paper-based collection of personal documents. An innovative characteristic of the ELP was to go beyond a collection of pieces of work demonstrating language learner's abilities. It gave language learners an officially recognised way for self-reflection on and recording of not only formal but also informal experiences and achievements, as well as for planning future linguistic and cultural learning aims. Vilko Kohonen highlighted another important aspect of the ELP: its potential to increase the visibility of learning outcomes otherwise hidden, 'of which the participants have a peripheral awareness' such as learner autonomy, intercultural communication and personal development (2000, p. 7).<sup>2</sup> David Little has indicated that the three main benefits of the ELP are: transparency by using a common framework of reference, transferability outside formal education, and awareness raising and reflection that lead to autonomous learning (2001, p. 6).

From the very beginning, some efforts were directed at producing an electronic version of the original paper-based ELP, probably as a reaction to the increasingly strong support for the

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<sup>2</sup> The importance of making learning visible through portfolio work has been subsequently echoed by (Stefanakis, 2002)

advantages that digital formats bring to education (Jafari & Kaufman, 2006; Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007), although e-models are still rare.

Despite the confined conception of the proposed ELP for the European context, it attracted attention outside Europe and was subsequently adapted beyond these borders. In North America, for instance, the principles and parts of the ELP have been recommended in Canada (MacFarlane, 2010). In addition, it was the model for an electronic language portfolio for teacher training and lifelong learner development, the *LinguaFolio* (LF) developed in 2003, and more recently for the *Global Language Portfolio* (GLP) in 2009. These portfolios use both the American and European rating scales.<sup>3</sup>

### **The ELP: an evolving personal linguistic and cultural history**

The literature on educational portfolios has tried to examine the different types of portfolio and their purposes or functions. Looking at existing portfolio paradigms can provide insights on the nature of the ELP and therefore get a greater understanding of what it offers to learners. A few of them will be considered here.

In an early discussion on portfolio typologies, Pearl and Leon Paulson (1996) distinguished two types of portfolio: positivist and constructivist, for assessment of learning outcomes, and for the presentation of a record of learning processes respectively. Similarly, in a discussion on the ELP, Vilko Kohonen (2000) explained the distinction between learning portfolios and reporting portfolios. Categories that are based on teaching goals, the former are ‘*process-oriented learning (“working”) portfolios*’ and the latter are ‘*product oriented reporting (“showcase”) portfolios*’ (Kohonen, 2000, p. 3).<sup>4</sup> Zeichner and Wray (2001) introduced a further distinction and suggested three categories: learning portfolios which reflect learning over time, credential portfolios which document certification, and showcase portfolios which show best work. Later, McAlpine (2005) noted a classification that distinguished between *portfolios as story* and *portfolios as assessment*. This distinction, on the one hand, reflects key references in the portfolio theory to the idea of telling a personal story of what a student knows, his or her believes about this knowledge and demonstrating it to others (see, for

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<sup>3</sup> In America language skills are assessed using the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) levels, while in Europe the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is used.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. (Greenberg, 2004)

instance, L. Paulson & Paulson, 1991). On the other hand, the distinction takes on the dominant idea of portfolios' role in self- and teacher assessment, i.e. formative and summative evaluation (Johnson, et al., 2006).

Defenders of portfolio assessment have pointed out that demonstrating your skills in a test situation is different from documenting and collecting the evidence in a portfolio. The argument is that each type of assessment activity provides a different angle to the competences of a learner, the former shows ability under pressure, while the latter displays a more elaborated product and/or process (Cummins & Davesne, 2009; Hirvela & Pierson, 2000). Moreover, it has been acknowledged that '[p]ortfolios offer to the world of assessment a view of student learning that is active, engaged, and dynamic' (White, 1994, p. 27). A detailed typology of portfolios has been provided by Ruth Johnson et al. (2006, pp. 6-7) who referred to nine different types: academic and educational, career advancement and employment, learning and teaching, developmental, showcase, presentation, working, comprehensive, and focus. Their purposes are multiple and varied: they aim at being useful for assessment and evaluation, information relevant to employment, reflection on the learning process, individual development, demonstration of achievement, display of competences, professional growth, storing and archiving.

The nature of the ELP does not fit neatly in a single paradigm. The ELP constitutes, in fact, a hybrid model where reporting, reflecting and learning are of equal value as specified in its two main functions: reporting function and pedagogical function. The ELP is a working showcase portfolio that captures a person's linguistic and cultural history and projects it into future formal and informal educational paths. We know that students value recognition of achievement and portfolios have the capacity to reveal for them a clear picture of someone's learning progress (Belgrad, Burke, & Fogarty, 2008). The ELP is an evolving product that can be used at any time by a learner to demonstrate his or her achievements. Using an external set of standards (The Common European Framework of Reference), the ELP encourages the processes of self-assessment and reflection which support the recording of a personal narrative. Therefore, the ELP offers a precise frame for the narration of actual language and culture achievements but also for an imagined future learning trajectory in this area. One aspect that has not been discussed is that, in the ELP, the arrangement of the selected collection of evidence and the processes of self-assessment and reflection are supported by

predetermined parts and forms, the user is not free to construct the portfolio as he or she wishes. This means that, as the ELP has been conceived, there is no creativity involved in the design by the learner; the narrative of a person's linguistic and cultural history needs to fit into a predetermined structure. There are clear benefits to such constraints but also some disadvantages. On the one hand, the ELP model helps standardisation of processes and resulting products, learners need to fit their records in a common format for external recognition; on the other hand, forms and scales limit learners' scope for documenting and reporting.

In sum, the ELP should be understood as a structured tool for the continuous documentation of an evolving personal linguistic and cultural history, a process that involves deep reflection and thorough projection from the part of the learner. Butler has suggested that portfolio work 'can help students to make connections between different aspects of their lives and help them to form their social identities, and their identity within their discipline of study' (Butler, 2006, p. 17). To this respect, it can be argued that the ELP activates a process of self-discovery that implies the realisation of an important part of the user's identity: a linguistic and cultural identity that is not fixed but malleable and adjustable.

The study of the complex and rich characteristics of the ELP is important in order to understand how these characteristics can be transferred to and be supported by different media. As Helen Barrett has pointed out,

A portfolio that closely emulates a paper version and just happens to be stored in an electronic container is a very different document from online database systems and systems that focus on portfolios as a means to conduct high stakes evaluations. [...] it will be important for education programs to maintain their focus on the original purposes for which paper portfolios have been successful, and carefully assess the impact that the conversion to an electronic format will have on those original goals.

(Barrett, 2005, p. 7)

We will now see in more detail further aspects of the conceptualisation and current use of the paper-based ELP and what could be done to enhance it and make it more relevant in today's technological world.



## THE DOMINANCE OF PAPER-BASED ELPS

The conception of the ELP can be described as a timely step forward in language education in Europe. It was indeed a much needed explicit framework for the promotion of linguistic and cultural skills within this context. As any other large-scale project, it took time to develop and test the ELP. Discussions around the early pilots brought up a number of recommendations about administrative contexts, teacher motivation, and design choices and challenges, but since then, very few studies have been available to educators (Little, 2001, p. 10).

In the past few years, the arguments in favour of electronic portfolios have grown. Some have emphasised that e-portfolios bring benefits to the assessment process as well as to the learning process (Barrett, 2005; McAlpine, 2005). Others have pointed out that they are more flexible, easy to use and adaptable to a range of applications (Stefani, et al., 2007, p. ix). In fact, the original documentation for ELP developers acknowledges the potential of online and electronic ELPs, but it is left mainly as an interesting idea (see Schneider & Lenz, 2001, p. 56). The ELP has a paper-based design that has yet to evolve into a digital format better suited for an increasingly global and mobile world.

To this date, only a handful of full e-ELPs are available in contrast with a majority of paper models. The strategic objectives for 2004-2007 for the ELP included ‘the development of electronic ELPs, especially for older learners’ (Little, 2004, p. 17). A recognition of the relevance of making the ELP available in an electronic format was subsequently evidenced in some of the validated models and, more importantly, in the Council of Europe and the European Union’s initiative to create the Europass, an electronic version of the Language Passport for adult learners who wanted to demonstrate qualifications and competences for education or employment across European borders.<sup>5</sup> After the creation of the Europass Language Passport, launched in 2004, other projects have been looking into the electronic development of parts of the ELP. The elp-DESK project is an example of an electronic model that aims at supporting the use of the Europass and is available as an iPhone App. Other more ambitious initiatives which have recreated the whole ELP electronically are, for instance, the web-based language learning platform EPOS (Elektronishches PORTfolio der Sprachen);<sup>6</sup> also

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<sup>5</sup> A dedicated webpage to the Europass can be found at: <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>

<sup>6</sup> See their webpage <http://www.eposweb.eu>

the blog like AIOLE (An Interactive Online Learning Environment) incorporates the CEFR scales and gives learners access to the Europass, an eBiography and eDossier, providing a web-supported digital platform for the ELP (Sánchez-Villalonn, Ortega, & Sánchez-Villalonn, 2009). But as we will see, the tendency has been mostly to replicate the paper design and format.

It seems that some key technological advantages that can enhance the portfolio processes have been overlooked by most language professionals developing ELP models. Helen Barrett (2005) has elaborated a table contrasting the characteristics of traditional portfolios with electronic ones according to the findings in the portfolio literature:

Traditional portfolio processes include:	Adding technology allows enhancement through:
• Collecting	• Archiving
• Selecting	• Linking/Thinking
• Reflecting	• Storytelling
• Projecting	• Collaborating
• Celebrating	• Publishing

(Barrett, 2005, p. 5)

Let's examine the implication of these features for the ELP.

Archiving: As it has been pointed out 'with a digital portfolio, *it is easy to rearrange, edit and combine materials*' (Stefani, et al., 2007, p. 17) The process of collecting files is a basic activity for any portfolio user, however this process tends to disappear in instances of the paper-based portfolio, as only the final selected items are included. A digital environment increases the capacity of storing a collection of artifacts. Users can archive a collection of files and make the relevant links between a selection of them and the skills they want to demonstrate. This becomes clear in the current conception of the ELP where the Dossier part only keeps examples of personal work that illustrate specific levels of language skills and intercultural experiences and not any other records that are not related to the levels suggested in the Biography. By placing the ELP in a more flexible environment, the user has the possibility to archive a bigger collection of examples and add to it as learning occurs. For

instance, relating a A2 piece of writing to the framework scales will not prevent the owner of the portfolio to add at a later point a piece of writing at B1 level. Links to each of them could be maintained in a digital form. The advantage of this is that it gives a more evident and visible sense of development, an explicit history of progress. Such a profile will clearly correspond better with the concept of a lifelong learning ELP.

Linking/Thinking: A digital format suits the “working” nature of the ELP as either a personal or professional lifelong learning record. It allows learners to revise and amend the forms and files in their portfolios in a more efficient manner. As it has been acknowledged in the literature, ‘[e]lectronic portfolios easily incorporate multidirectional links that solve complex navigational and organizational problems’ (Johnson, et al., 2006, p. 136). In a paper-based model, users need to re-enter in a new form the updated information about their skills and levels of competence, while the electronic format allows for partial updating of the relevant entries. For instance, after a work experience abroad, a learner might want to re-assess his or her speaking skills in the Biography, upload new evidence of this in the Dossier and update the relevant section in the Passport. An electronic portfolio enjoys the advantages of connectivity within the tool as prompts can be set up to guide learners on the process of creating their portfolios and it is also possible to interactively relate the different parts of the portfolio in a meaningful manner. The process of completion of an electronic portfolio can be designed to provide learner support (a major preoccupation of teachers), guidance at different stages as well as offer instant feedback to the user. An electronic portfolio can also facilitate the incorporation of digital social experiences as it has the capacity to integrate a diversity of media files and connect to other systems.

Storytelling: As it was previously mentioned, the ELP encapsulates the language learning history of an individual, which includes not only his or her learning past but also an imagined learning future. Following research on storytelling in education, Barrett has defended an understanding of portfolios ‘as a story of learning’ (2005, p. 22) and, at the same time, she has highlighted the learning power of including personal narratives in portfolios in whatever formats (written, oral, pictorial) as ‘objects of reflection’ (2005, p. 21). Her recommendation is to take advantage of an electronic environment to support digital storytelling. Technology offers attractive formats for narrations such as reflective journals, online discussions, wikis, digital storytelling, and blogs. Possibilities that can have an impact on language learning as it

is about demonstrating speaking, reading, writing, listening and interactive language skills. An important characteristic of the ELP is the space it grants to reflection on both language abilities and intercultural skills. In his discussion around e-portfolios, Simon Grant (2009, p. 198) describes the crucial connection and complementarities between values and abilities and argues for developing them side by side in portfolio work.

Collaborating and publishing: Although the ELP is fundamentally a personal collection of documents, the user could wish to share specific parts –for professional or private aims– with teachers, employers, friends or colleagues. An electronic portfolio is more portable and therefore more easily shared with distant others.

Despite the educational and practical gains of the electronic format, paper-based ELPs have been so far the preferred option by educators. An examination of the validated models reveals that teachers tend to adopt the original paper-based model. No research has been done to this date on why this is the case but a number of reasons could be ventured such as that teachers want a format that can be easily integrated in their classroom activities, also teachers might still be more confident handling real folders than virtual ones. We do know that using electronic formats has, of course, its own demands such as proper training for using the tool, compatibility, connection issues, managing different types of files and types of software, etc. Technical obstacles tend to demotivate users. It has been suggested that '[c]onfidence in the use of technologies within learning, in particular information literacy skills, will be key to the success of an e-portfolio project' (Stefani, et al., 2007, p. 33). Simon Grant (2009) has indicated that the lack of enthusiasm for e-portfolios is due not only to the lack of ability but also to the lack of motivation to use them. It is crucial for teachers and learners to understand the benefits of spending time in portfolio work.

Electronic approaches to the ELP should accommodate the recommendation by the Council of Europe to produce self-explanatory and accessible ELPs (Schneider & Lenz, 2001, p. 14), and work on one of the main benefits of a well developed tool: learner autonomy. The autonomous language learner has been described

as a self-directed, intentional person who can be guided to develop his or her competences in three inter-related areas of knowledge, skills and awareness: (1) personal identity and self-direction, (2) awareness of the language and communication, becoming skilled language learners and users who are also capable

of evaluating their own proficiency, and (3) monitoring and reflection of learning processes.

(Kohonen, 2000, p. 10)

Learner autonomy has been intimately related to teacher support, as the quote above shows: ‘a [...] person who can be guided’. Teachers have been given the responsibility of fostering learner autonomy by means of involving students in their learning objectives, in reflection including self-assessment and in appropriate language use (Sahinkarakas, Yumru, & Inozu, 2009, p. 65). Studies on the ELP have made two key suggestions that reflect an emphasis on teachers’ roles in portfolio work. Firstly, the advice is to use the ELP as ‘an integral part of foreign language teaching’ (Kohonen, 2000, p. 25). Findings from the Council of Europe original piloting of the ELP ‘emphasise the *teacher’s role as a significant resource for self-directed learning*’ (Kohonen, 2000, p. 16). They also establish a dependency between student and teacher motivation, awareness and competence in assessment (Little, 2001, p. 14). Secondly, it is recommended to give teachers a facilitating role for the completion of the portfolio, for which they need inservice training (Kohonen, 2001; Sahinkarakas, et al., 2009). Indeed the belief is that the development of portfolio work should bring a dynamic interaction among teachers and learners (Johnson, et al., 2006, p. 8).

Although the literature emphasises the important role teachers play in presenting the portfolio process (see, for instance, Butler, 2006), in fact, the spirit of the ELP is that learners develop the ability to reflect and assess themselves ‘enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning’ (Little, 2001, p. 6). Some have suggested a more explicit removal of the instructor and have indicated that there is a need to take the control of portfolios from teachers and hand it over to students and that this is best achieved through technology (Acosta & Liu, 2006; Kimball, 2005).

The next section provides an account of a pilot project that tried precisely to answer whether by creating an e-ELP for adult learners in distance higher education individuals can develop their linguistic and intercultural skills autonomously.

## **TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY: AN ELECTRONIC ELP FOR ADULTS STUDYING AT A DISTANCE**

In the past few years, the Open University in the United Kingdom has joined the trend of exploring the educational potential of portfolios. The university experimented with an online

internal e-portfolio platform called MyStuff, for generic use by students enrolled in any program of study. The Department of Languages took this university wide initiative as an opportunity to work with the well-defined ELP during the academic year 2007-2008. The project set to design and to pilot an electronic version of the ELP that could be used by any adult learner within the context of their formal studies or independently of them, a self-standing e-ELP that could be offered to anyone anywhere. The purposes of this project were to explore issues around the design of an electronic version of a paper-based portfolio for adult language learners studying at a distance, and to examine the attitudes and experiences of distance language students towards an e-ELP.

### Development stages and features

Drawing on the literature on multimedia development and portfolio development, Barrett (2000) emphasised the importance of considering these processes in any creation of an electronic portfolio. She summarised how these two developmental processes complement each other in the following table:

<i>Portfolio Development</i>	<b>Stages of Electronic Portfolio Development</b>	<i>Multimedia Development</i>
<i>Purpose &amp; Audience</i>	<b>1. Defining the Portfolio Context &amp; Goals</b>	<i>Decide, Assess</i>
<i>Collect, Interject</i>	<b>2. The Working Portfolio</b>	<i>Design, Plan</i>
<i>Select, Reflect, Direct</i>	<b>3. The Reflective Portfolio</b>	<i>Develop</i>
<i>Inspect, Perfect, Connect</i>	<b>4. The Connected Portfolio</b>	<i>Implement, Evaluate</i>
<i>Respect (Celebrate)</i>	<b>5. The Presentation Portfolio</b>	<i>Present, Publish</i>

**Table 1: Stages of Electronic Portfolio Development (Barrett, 2000)**

Using the ELP's parts, principles, purposes and standards meant that the focus of the Open University e-ELP was exclusively on the development of the medium. After analyzing and comparing different paper and electronic versions of the ELP, the concern was about taking the right decisions on how to transform it into a meaningful and useful digital tool. This meant rethinking the ELP's structure and adapting it to a digital medium. The main desirable characteristics identified and developed were:

- to provide overviews of each part of the ELP and of the whole, so that the purpose and use of the portfolio would be clear for the students;
- to be easy to navigate with user-friendly features, in a similar way to how learners use other technology through intuitive use of tools;
- to make the ELP visually attractive and stimulating;
- to replicate the templates and grids of the Passport, Biography and Dossier and allow different types of files to be uploaded and archived;
- to connect the three parts of the ELP so that information filled in one part of the document could feed others. The purpose of this was to avoid repetitions and overlapping of the different parts, which could be very demotivating for students;
- to add maximum flexibility in entry points, without dictating a particular path or sequence for its completion;<sup>7</sup>
- to be able to download and export the ELP to share it with others;
- to ensure privacy of ELP data;
- to incorporate a new section on learning styles as part of the students' reflective process of self-knowledge within the Biography;
- to integrate the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) developed by the Council of Europe in order to encourage and foster intercultural awareness<sup>8</sup>;
- to create a self-standing ELP model, that could be used independently of any teacher guidance and support.

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<sup>7</sup> A pedagogical approach already suggested by (Little & Perclová, 2001)

<sup>8</sup> The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) was developed for the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe in 2009. It is designed to support students' analysis of specific intercultural encounters but is not an integral part of the ELP. The AIE was included and piloted in the OU ELP. For a copy of the AIE go to: [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)

Actions taken to achieve such a model include a fully colored interactive design that made possible that information did not have to be filled in twice (e.g. completion of the *Summary of language learning and intercultural experiences* would automatically be fed onto the Passport and the *Language learning and socio- and intercultural experiences* section in the Biography), that allowed multiple entry points and instant feedback on completed sections.

Figure 1 shows the homepage of the Open University's e-ELP integrated in the portfolio system MyStuff. The page includes introductions, definitions and explanations to each part of the ELP. Students could access any part by clicking on the relevant link. Parts were also associated with specific images for alternative navigation preferences. The space allows on the right hand side to enter students personal details and to record as many languages as they would like in their portfolio.

**MyStuff**

Overview Items Compilations Sharing Community

Search Go Spaces Go

MyStuff / Spaces / European Language Portfolio [Help](#)

### My European Language Portfolio (ELP)

The European Language Portfolio consists of three parts:

- Language Passport**  
Review your current level of language proficiency and intercultural experience (in one or more languages, including your mother tongue). You will record your profile of language skills in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference, a summary of your language learning and intercultural experiences, and your certificates and diplomas.
- Language Biography**  
This helps you to document and reflect on previous language learning, intercultural experience, and learning processes, to assess your own language skills, to set learning goals, and to plan and monitor your future learning.
- Dossier**  
This illustrates the development and current level of your language proficiency and intercultural experience through examples of your personal work. It offers you the opportunity to document evidence and illustrate the achievements and experiences you have recorded in your Passport.

You can read more about the European Language Portfolio's definition, advantages and functions from the following links:

- [Definitions and overview](#)
- [Advantages](#)
- [Functions](#)

**Personal information**  
Enter your personal details if you haven't already done so.  
[Edit personal details](#)

**My language(s)**  
For every language you want to add:

- Enter the language's name;
- Click on "Add new language".

Enter a language:   
[Add new language](#)

**Figure 1: Open University's e-ELP homepage**

Figure 2 below illustrates some of the solutions towards an effective navigation through the different parts of the ELP. Once students entered a particular part of the ELP, they could go to any other part by clicking on the links displayed on the crumb at the top left of the page or clicking on any of the images related to each part visible at the top right part of the page. Exporting features were also available for parts of the biography for sharing purposes. Students could also easily access their records of any of the languages they wanted to work on



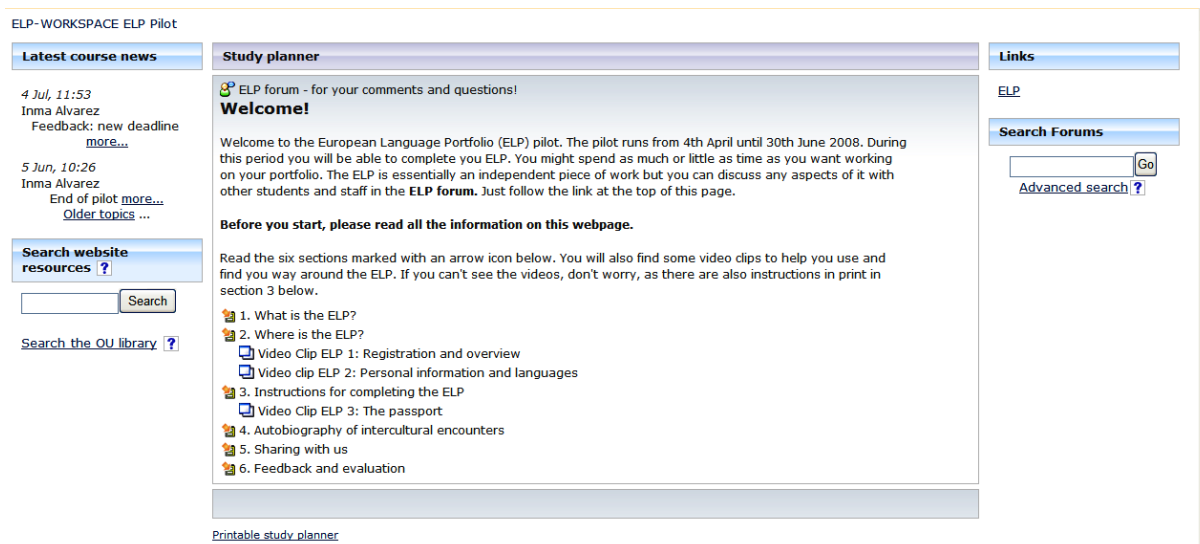
by just going to the 'My language(s)' section at the bottom and clicking on the relevant language.

The screenshot shows a web page titled "Language Biography" within the "MyStuff / Spaces / European Language Portfolio / Language Biography" navigation structure. The page includes a "Help" button in the top right corner. The main content area is divided into several sections: a header with a colorful abstract image, a "Personal information" section with a "Edit personal details" link, an "Export your language biography" section with radio buttons for "Me as language learner" and "My language and intercultural experiences", and a "My language(s)" section with a text input field, an "Add new language" button, and a list of languages to edit: English, Chinese, and Italian. On the left side, there is a list of links: "Me as a language learner", "My language and intercultural experiences", "My current and future language learning", and "Planning my language learning". Below this list, there is a note about exporting sections to a Microsoft Word document.

Figure 2: e-ELP navigation design

## Pilot and results

The e-ELP developed by The Open University was piloted with a small group of 20 volunteer adult learners studying at a distance. The concept of the ELP was introduced to them through a web portal (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Open University's web portal to e-ELP pilot study**

The website tried to encourage students' participation in the project. It included the following: a news section, a description of the electronic ELP and its parts using video clip demonstrations to support their understanding of the portfolio's features, a help button, and instructions for feedback and evaluation of the tool.

In order to find out about the efficiency of the model, a number of data collection methods were used. Students were asked to complete an online log while working through the different parts of the portfolio and comment on any positive or negative experiences about any aspect (8 participants logged their impressions); they were also requested to fill in an online questionnaire once they finished their portfolio work (17 responses were received); finally, telephone interviews were conducted with those who agreed to help with further research (5 students in total). All this feedback was quantitatively and qualitatively analysed.

Overall the feedback on the learning experience was very positive for most learners, as the following commentary by one of the students shows:

I loved every minute of what I was able to do on the ELP. I wasn't able to complete it to my satisfaction because my hard drive went. I had a good look around the whole thing. I thought it was beautifully laid out; it made me want to have a look. I loved it. It was so easy to navigate. Everything was beautifully explained. I didn't have any problems with it. The Help on it was fabulous. It explained step-by-step how to do your portfolio; how to get around it. You couldn't make a mistake. The Help was on the website. There was a whole load of relevant stuff and you could click on it from there and away you went. It was

fabulously explained and if you got stuck there was help all the way around, which I didn't need to use because I didn't get stuck. It was lovely; I liked it.

Despite such enthusiastic response, participants also expressed some technological obstacles completing it. Due to the complex structure of the ELP parts, a few commented that it was at times hard to find all of the different sections they needed to complete. In particular, a few mentioned that the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters included in this version of the portfolio was difficult to find, and others confirmed this difficulty by expressing that they discovered it by chance. It seems important, especially for an electronic ELP, to show very clearly to students, perhaps visually in a graph, the whole structure of the ELP. It might be useful as well to have some automatic means to indicate students how much of the portfolio has been completed and what areas have not been explored yet.

In addition, a number of issues should be acknowledged. Some of the difficulties found in this project echoed the ones reported by the developers of the Dutch electronic ELP, namely structural costs for hosting, server space and maintenance (Little, 2009, p. 12). This e-ELP model was embedded in an online internal virtual learning environment for reasons of convenience while running the pilot but it will be necessary to make some adjustments to a final publicly available version that is not dependent on such a preliminary site. Also, it is important that an electronic portfolio is transportable, that users can take it with them wherever they go (Grant, 2009, p. 60). The e-ELP described here was limited in another respect as it was a proprietary system created with university-design software. It was Moodle based and it was possible for learners to download their Passports but not the whole ELP. Unfortunately, the findings of this project with respect to possible further improvements to the conversion of the ELP in a digital format, have not been implemented.

As has been recommended for other e-portfolio types, the researchers of these pilot realised as well that it will be also worthwhile exploring the integration within this e-portfolio system of other frequently use tools, such as social networking tools (Grant, 2009, p. 201), weblogs (Love, McKean, & Gathercoal, 2004) and even recording tools. These and other new technological developments should be carefully considered in the adaptation of the ELP to the web environment.

## **CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

Accounts on the use of ELP models are rare and descriptions of the development processes of those models are inexistent. The traditional validation process for the ELP requested interesting information on the thinking behind each model but this information has not been properly shared beyond validating panels. There is a need for a better understanding of past experiences with the conception of the ELP and particularly of the institutional, individual and technical (in the case of electronic models) challenges, so there is a sharing of relevant learning in this area.

Technology has the potential to magnify the process of creating, organising and sharing portfolios but we still need a better understanding of the implications of digitising the ELP. Indeed, there are certainly some challenges to developing, using and sharing technology and these will need to be addressed by any developer but also by any user. Developers need to pay attention to functionality issues such as interoperability, i.e. that information can be reused in different contexts with different systems, issues of adaptability, storage, security and ownership, displaying of records including accessibility issues, integration of tools, navigation and interconnectivity between different parts. They are also concerned with other practical efficiency issues such as cost-effectiveness, maintenance and updating of the tool. Users face the challenges of using any new digital environment. Using an e-ELP, they will need to learn how to do a number of key actions such as how to handle non digital objects, convert files to appropriate formats, link evidence to self-assessment grids, edit and save information, upload and download files into the system, manage permissions in order to share the content with others, etc. An electronic portfolio needs to provide all the necessary technical support for its users.

Finally, technology can not only enhance the structure and content of the ELP, it can also help with the conception of ELP models and sharing them. The Council of Europe could take a number of actions to support information on the already available ELP models. As a first step, it could create an online database or repository with all the current validated models, ideally linked to developmental reports and any empirical studies related to each. It will be greatly beneficial to facilitate access to good ELP models. Another consideration that needs attention is the ways in which the ELP can become part of the widening participation agenda. The Council of Europe has already looked into some key aspects of this agenda and has

recognized that the ELP faces some challenges applying its principles more widely. In relation to this, it has reported, for instance, that '[t]he ELP has already played a role in helping migrants to learn the language of their host country, and this is something we may need to develop further in the future' (Little, 2009, p. 3). We need to ask: how can we make the ELP accessible? How can it be inclusive and reach further to all learners, e.g. disadvantage or disabled learners? To answer these questions teachers of special groups should investigate how current ELP models can be adapted to specific types of learners (e.g. sign languagers, visually impaired students, immobile students.) as well as how technology can make possible new suitable ELP models for them. A good example and first step in this direction has been the recent development of a digital ELP for blind and visually impaired adults. The project was funded by the European Commission under the SOCRATES LINGUA II programme and shows an appropriate adaptation for its users by incorporating screen reading, braille, and conversion of text to speech (Little, 2009, p. 18).

It can be ventured that the drive behind the creation of the ELP and followers can only be sustained in the future if it grows in a virtual form taking into account any technological developments, social factors as well as practical ones. The ELP should be transformed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century into a universal language e-portfolio that takes advantage of online connectivity and brings together forms, frameworks and tools for all language learners beyond European borders.

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