

ePortfolios at Dublin City University: The experiences of students and staff

Dr Rob Lowney, Noeleen O'Keeffe, Seamus Campau

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Introduction

> As students enter college, most do not imagine being responsible for their own learning. They believe that, somehow, teachers make them learn or, in some cases, prevent them from learning. Many even see assignments, required courses, and exams as obstacles to get around on the way to their ticket to the future—the degree. While there has been talk for many years about professors moving from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side,” e-portfolios are developing as a teaching/learning context where this is likely to happen. (Miller & Morgaine, 2009, p. 12)

ePortfolios (electronic portfolios) have become quite commonplace in contemporary higher education. They first developed in the 1990s as digital technology started to become more mainstream at all levels of education, and their adoption accelerated after the year 2000 (Farrell, 2020). Whilst eportfolios may be a relatively modern technology arising from the 20th century, portfolios themselves are not a new concept (Brown et al., 2007). Farrell (2020) charts the origins of portfolios from the Renaissance to today, originating in the Italian worlds of art and architecture, before moving into the world of higher education in the 1970s.

ePortfolios – much like analogue portfolios – can be a collection of evidence or artefacts to showcase one’s work, learning or achievements, to document one’s process of learning, and/or to assess a learner (Scully et al., 2018). These different purposes have led to a range of similar but different definitions of eportfolio, such as:

> a purposeful aggregation of digital items [related to learning] which ‘presents’ a selected audience with evidence of a person’s learning and/or ability (Sutherland & Powell, 2007)

> an electronic collection of evidence that shows your learning journey over time. Portfolios can relate to specific academic fields or your lifelong learning. Evidence may include writing samples, photos, videos, research projects, observations by mentors and peers, and/or reflective thinking. The key aspect of an eportfolio is your reflection on the evidence, such as why it was chosen and what you learned from the process of developing your eportfolio. (Barrett, 2010, p. 6)

> a vehicle for bringing together judiciously selected samples of students' work and achievements inside and outside the classroom for authentic assessment over time. A typical learning portfolio may include both academic materials and personal profiles and may designate some of its contents as public or private. The learning portfolio, then, becomes more than a product, a simple repository of artefacts; it becomes a process of reflection, of organizing, prioritizing, analysing, and communicating one's work and its value, which may prompt insights and goals (Corley & Zubizarreta, 2012, p. 65)

Whether treated as a 'product' or a 'process', eportfolios are inherently a student-centred activity, in which students choose which artefacts to include to best represent their learning; and this provision of choice facilitates student engagement, promotes agency and increases motivation (Tosh et al., 2005). Therefore, an eportfolio can provide an opportunity for a student to engage deeply with their learning, and for a teacher to assume a role as a guide or mentor as the student creates their eportfolio (Barrett, 2007).

ePortfolios are lauded for their many benefits, such as: aiding students' employability prospects by capturing their skills and abilities for a potential employer (Woodley & Sims, 2011); helping students to integrate their learning across modules and across time (Miller & Morgaine, 2009); supporting the development of student writing and critical reflection skills (Jenson, 2011); enabling formative assessment and feedback (Gün-Tosik, Atasoy, and Yüksel 2023) and acting as an alternative to traditional summative assessment (Marinho et al., 2021); fostering community, collaboration and universal design for learning (Cloonan, 2022), and much more.

However, eportfolios are not without their challenges, and they have not enjoyed as widespread an adoption as other educational technology tools such as virtual learning environments (VLEs). Some students may be resistant to the workload that an ongoing eportfolio requires (Lombardi, 2008), and staff similarly may resist the workload involved in facilitating and assessing eportfolio activities (Nagle et al., 2019). When eportfolio activities are not clearly aligned to learning outcomes they can also be resisted by students (Light et al., 2011), and if the underlying technology is perceived as unreliable or lacking features, this can be compounded (Tosh et al., 2005).

When an institution provides leadership, financing, direction, and fosters student and staff digital competences for eportfolio, it can lay the

foundation for successful embedding throughout (Blevins & Brill, 2017; Nagle et al., 2019).

This is the approach which Dublin City University (DCU) has taken. In September 2016, in fulfilment of an objective in the university's then-strategic plan *Transforming Lives and Societies,* an institutional eportfolio platform was launched. With support of senior management, a cross-institutional team led by the centre for teaching and learning – the Teaching Enhancement Unit (TEU) – evaluated, selected, and deployed an eportfolio platform in partnership with a hosting provider. User groups and a collaborative community of staff were fostered by a learning technologist with responsibility for championing eportfolios and supporting their effective pedagogical integration. Supports were also provided to students in helping them to make the most of their eportfolios. (Donaldson & Glynn, 2018). This championing and provision of support has continued ever since.

The platform chosen for the institutional eportfolio was Mahara, open-source software maintained by Catalyst IT, based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mahara itself was first launched in 2006:

> A fully featured open source electronic portfolio, weblog, résume builder and social networking system, connecting users and creating online communities. Consistent with the literature, Mahara was designed to provide users with the tools to create a personal and professional learning, development and showcasing environment. Meaning 'think' or 'thought' in Te Reo Maori, the name Mahara reflects the intention to create a user-centred lifelong learning and development application, as well as the belief that ICT must be used to promote more collaborative, interactive, media rich and personalised learning. (Brown et al., 2007)

DCU was already committed to open-source learning technologies, having adopted the popular Moodle VLE in 2003 because of the potential to develop and customise it to meet the university's needs (Costello, 2013). Now branded as 'Loop', it was important for this VLE to integrate with the selected eportfolio platform. Mahara at DCU was therefore branded 'Loop Reflect', underscoring the centrality of reflection in eportfolio practice.

At its launch, the then-President of DCU, Prof. Brian MacCraith, remarked:

> DCU is committed to providing its students with a transformative learning experience, that will enable them to flourish in the

> workplace and society. The world of work requires citizens with transferable skills who are resilient and adaptable, and capable of reflective and critical thinking. The Reflect portfolio challenges traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, capturing all facets of student learning and providing our students with an opportunity reflect on their personal and professional as well as learning development. (Brown, 2017)

Over the years, DCU has partnered with Catalyst IT, in both Aotearoa New Zealand and Europe, as well as members of the Mahara community, to develop the eportfolio platform. For example, in 2017, DCU and others contributed to analytics and reports development (Donaldson & Glynn, 2018); in 2019, DCU commissioned a 'placeholder block' to allow users greater flexibility in adding content to their eportfolio pages (Hoeppner, 2019); in 2022, DCU funded an enhancement to allow Mahara eportfolios submitted to Moodle assignments to be text-matched by the Ouriginal similarity service (Lowney & O'Keeffe, 2022); and most recently in 2026, through its *DCU Futures* initiative, the university funded enhancements to Mahara group portfolios to enable submission to Moodle assignments (Hoeppner, 2026).

These ongoing enhancements, the ongoing support and championing of eportfolios across the university, and the celebration of student work through the annual Loop Reflect Awards have helped to make eportfolios a key part of learning and assessment at DCU. Over 8,000 students are active users of Loop Reflect, across each of the five faculties of the university.

A pilot evaluation was conducted in 2017, and revealed positive sentiments towards Loop Reflect (Donaldson & Glynn, 2018).However a student evaluation in 2021 had a limited response. As 2026 marks a decade of eportfolios at DCU, the TEU felt it timely to engage once more with the student and staff communities to ascertain their experiences and the impact of Loop Reflect.

The emerging findings from this study are presented in this publication.

Methodology

In early 2026, the authors received ethical approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC) to conduct research with students and teaching staff on their experiences of eportfolios with Loop Reflect (DCUREC2025/230). As 2026 marks ten years of the institutional eportfolio platform being embedded at DCU, the objective of the research was to ascertain the experiences of students and teaching staff to gauge the impact of eportfolios and to in turn inform the TEU's continued work in this area. As the authors work in the TEU and support Loop Reflect, they can be considered insider researchers (Fleming, 2018). This can be advantageous, as they bring a wealth of knowledge to the research, but an acute awareness of potential bias in conducting the research is required. This was mitigated through discussions with critical friends, and ongoing incorporation of their feedback.

The research methodology employed mixed methods. Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods can ensure complementarity, as "each of the two can inform the other and guide the other" (Salomon, 1991, p. 16). Additionally, a mix of methods can support triangulation of findings and provide a fuller understanding of the phenomenon – in this case, the experience of eportfolios – under research (Johnson et al., 2007). This 'pragmatic' methodology also aligned with the authors' intention to make practical use of the research findings (Rahi, 2017; Saunders & Tosey, 2013) in furthering the university's eportfolio initiative.

The data collection methods comprised two anonymous online surveys, one for students and one for staff who use Loop Reflect, along with online focus groups with students and staff to explore their experiences in more detail. The surveys contained mostly Likert-scale questions in which respondents indicated their level of agreement with statements. The statements were inspired by the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003), a theoretical model which can help explain whether individuals will adopt, use or continue to use a technological tool. The surveys also contained closed questions around the features of Loop Reflect, their frequency of use, available supports, some demographic questions, as well as some open-ended questions.

Both student and staff surveys were hosted through a DCU-licensed Qualtrics instance. A Participant Information Sheet was presented at the front of the survey, and after respondents read it and gave informed consent, they proceeded to answer the survey questions.

The student survey was distributed in mid-March 2026 to an email distribution list of all active student users on Loop Reflect (approximately 8,100). Two reminder emails were also issued. Students were incentivised to complete the survey with a raffle for one of two €50 vouchers which could be spent at a large number of retail outlets.

The staff survey was distributed in early May 2026 to an email distribution list comprising all staff users who had logged into Loop Reflect in the previous four years, as well as the coordinators of modules where Loop Reflect assignment submissions had been configured on the Loop VLE (approximately 1,100).

There were 412 eligible responses collected in the student survey, a response rate of approximately 5%. There were 42 eligible responses collected in the staff survey, a response rate of approximately 4%. Student survey respondents represented all five faculties of the university, and the staff represented four (excluding the Faculty of Engineering & Computing).

Having completed a survey, the student or staff respondent was invited to supply their contact details on a separate and unconnected Qualtrics survey for the purpose of arranging an online focus group. Focus groups were held with students in April 2026 (three in total) and with staff in June 2026 (two in total), after each of their respective surveys were closed. Student focus group participants received a €15 voucher as small token of gratitude for giving their time.

The focus groups were held using the DCU-licensed Zoom video conferencing platform and lasted one hour each. They were recorded and auto-transcribed on Zoom, and the transcripts were cleaned afterwards up by the researchers. During this cleaning, the participants were assigned unique pseudonymised identifiers in line with DCU research ethics guidelines. These identifiers are presented in the following two tables; participants' quotes presented in the Findings section will be labelled accordingly.

Student focus group identifier	Participated in	Faculty
S1	Focus group 1	Science & Health
S2	Focus group 1	Business School
S3	Focus group 1	Business School
S4	Focus group 1	Engineering & Computing
S5	Focus group 2	Institute of Education
S6	Focus group 2	Business School
S7	Focus group 2	Humanities & Social Sciences
S8	Focus group 2	Business School
S9	Focus group 2	Institute of Education
S10	Focus group 3	Business School
S11	Focus group 3	Institute of Education
S12	Focus group 3	Business School
S13	Focus group 3	Science & Health
S14	Focus group 3	Humanities & Social Sciences
S15	Focus group 3	Engineering & Computing
S16	Focus group 3	Business School

Table 1: Student focus group participants

Staff focus group identifier	Participated in	Faculty
L1	Focus group 1	Humanities & Social Sciences
L2	Focus group 1	Business School
L3	Focus group 1	Science & Health
L4	Focus group 1	Business School
L5	Focus group 1	Institute of Education
L6	Focus group 2	Institute of Education
L7	Focus group 2	Humanities & Social Sciences
L8	Focus group 2	Humanities & Social Sciences
L9	Focus group 2	Science & Health
L10	Focus group 2	Science & Health
L11	Focus group 2	Humanities & Social Sciences
L12	Focus group 2	Business School

Table 2: Staff focus group participants

Quantitative data from the surveys were exported from Qualtrics and imported into the IBM SPSS statistical software for cleaning and analysis. Unnecessary metadata, such as submission dates and times, were deleted, as were incomplete or blank responses. This data was then visualised using SPSS Chart Builder and exported as PDF files.

The focus group transcripts were all coded using NVivo software in the summer of 2026, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis framework. The three researchers met regularly, either in person or online, to code collaboratively, discussing and reflecting on their ideas and assumptions to arrive at final agreed codes. During these discussions, the researchers consulted the personal notes they took during the focus groups, as well as the analysed survey data visualisations, to interpret and construct meaning from the qualitative data. Over 180 individual codes were generated. From these an initial 13 themes were developed. These themes were then refined into eight, which are presented in the next section, alongside the quantitative data.

Findings

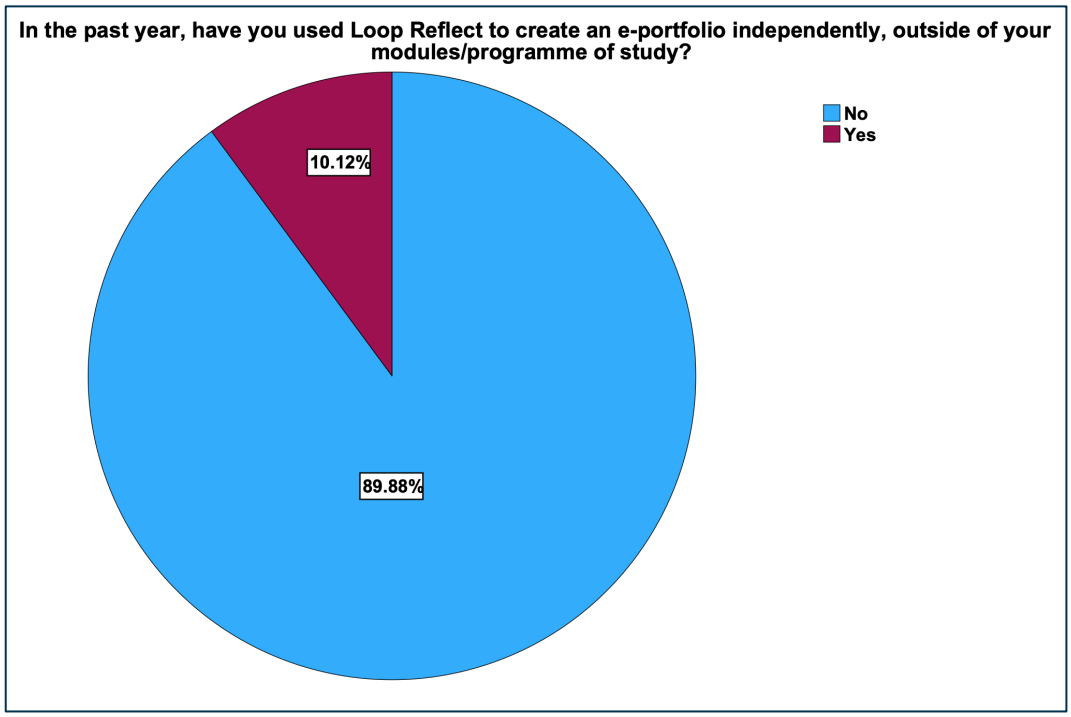
Quantitative data

The following data visualisations detail student and staff responses to the Likert-scale questions in the surveys. Questions were posed around how they use Loop Reflect and some of its features, as well as the supports available. Other questions were oriented around technology acceptance and were inspired by some of the constructs of UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), as follows:

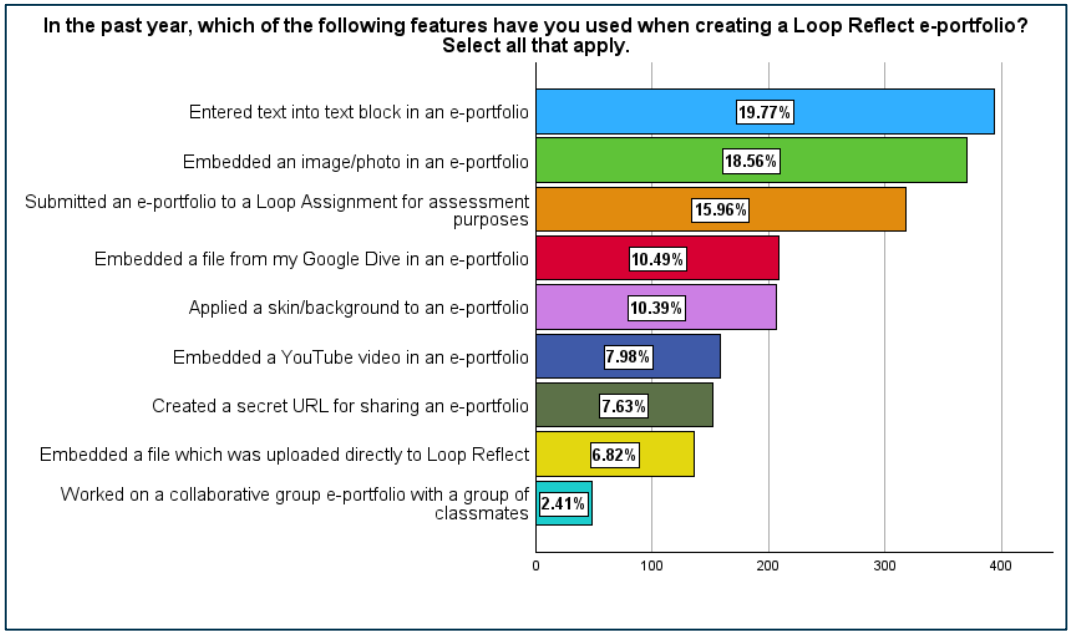
- Performance expectancy (PE): does Loop Reflect help the user in their performance of tasks?
- Effort expectancy (EE): is Loop Reflect easy to use?
- Social influence (SI): do others influence the use of Loop Reflect?
- Facilitating Conditions (FC): do supports exist to help the user use Loop Reflect?
- Behavioural intention (BI): overall, does the user intend to continue using Loop Reflect?

Questions are posed slightly differently to each of the populations as their use of and interaction with Loop Reflect is different given their different roles. The visualisations are presented in sequence. The first few relate to usage and features of Loop Reflect, and the remainder relate to the UTAUT-inspired questions.

Student data visualisations

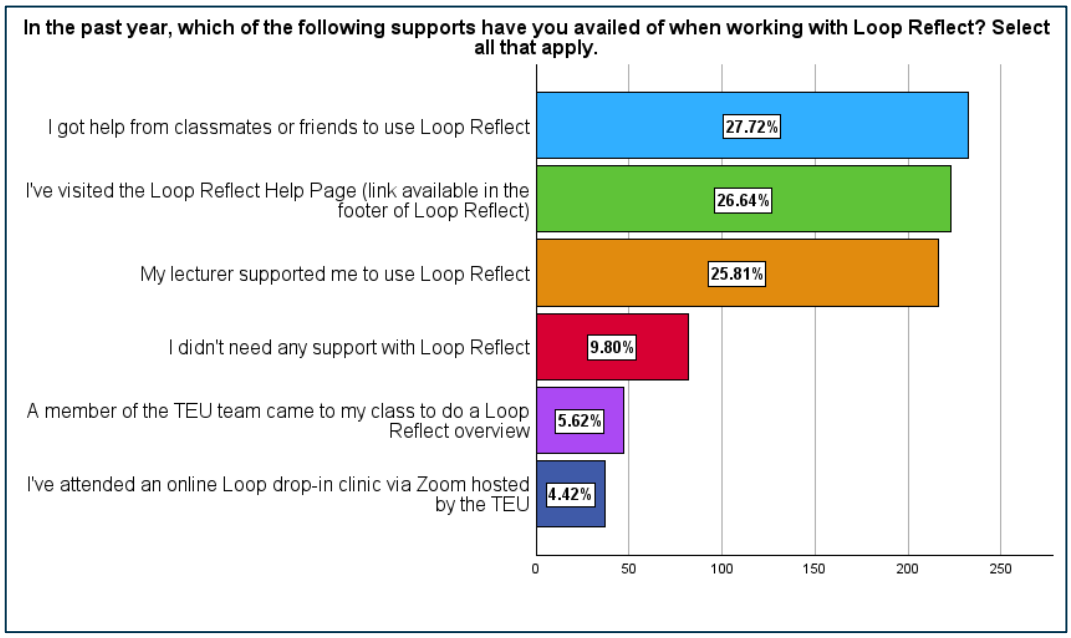


The overwhelming number of student respondents – nearly 90% – used Loop Reflect in the past year (2025-2026) because it was required of them to create an eportfolio with the platform as part of their studies.

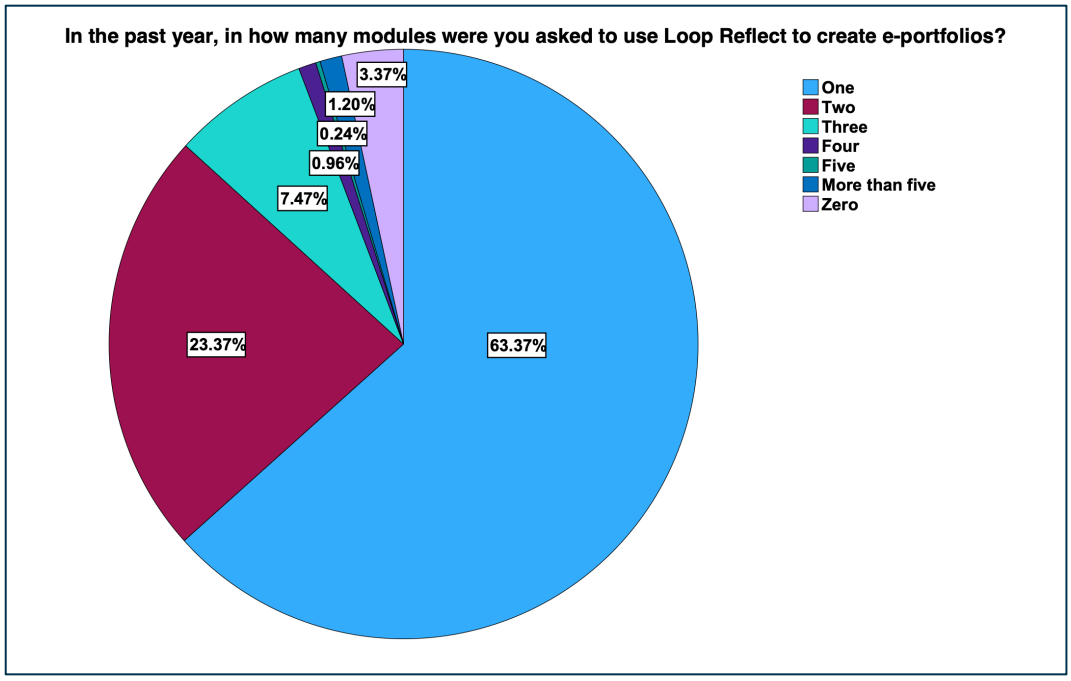


Of the eportfolios that students had created in the past year, text content was the most popular type of content contained therein, with almost all respondents (nearly 400) indicating this. Close behind that was image or photo content. A large majority – over 300 – shared that they had

submitted their eportfolio to a Loop Assignment for assessment and feedback. The least used feature of Loop Reflect was collaborative group portfolios.

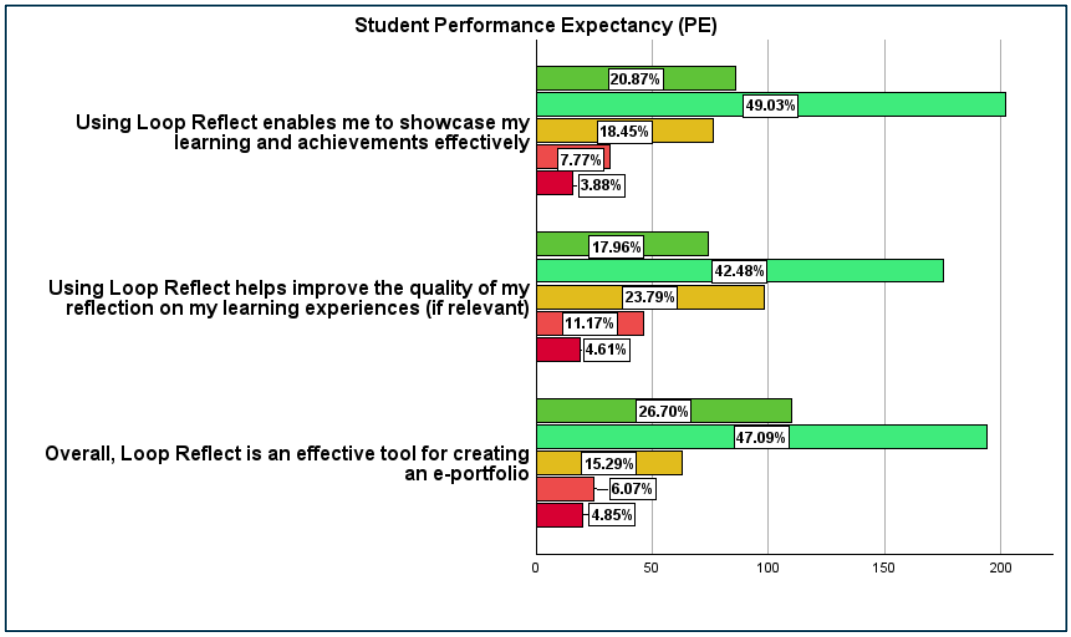


Peer support was the most dominant form of Loop Reflect support which students sought, with over 225 respondents indicating that they had availed of this. Over 200 also consulted the official support documentation (Help Page), and a similar number received support from their lecturer. The lowest form of support sought was the online drop-in clinics, offered by the TEU team.



In 2025-2026, the vast majority of student respondents – around 63% – were tasked with creating eportfolios in just one module on their programme of study, and for approximately 23% of respondents it was two. The remaining respondents indicated more than two modules.

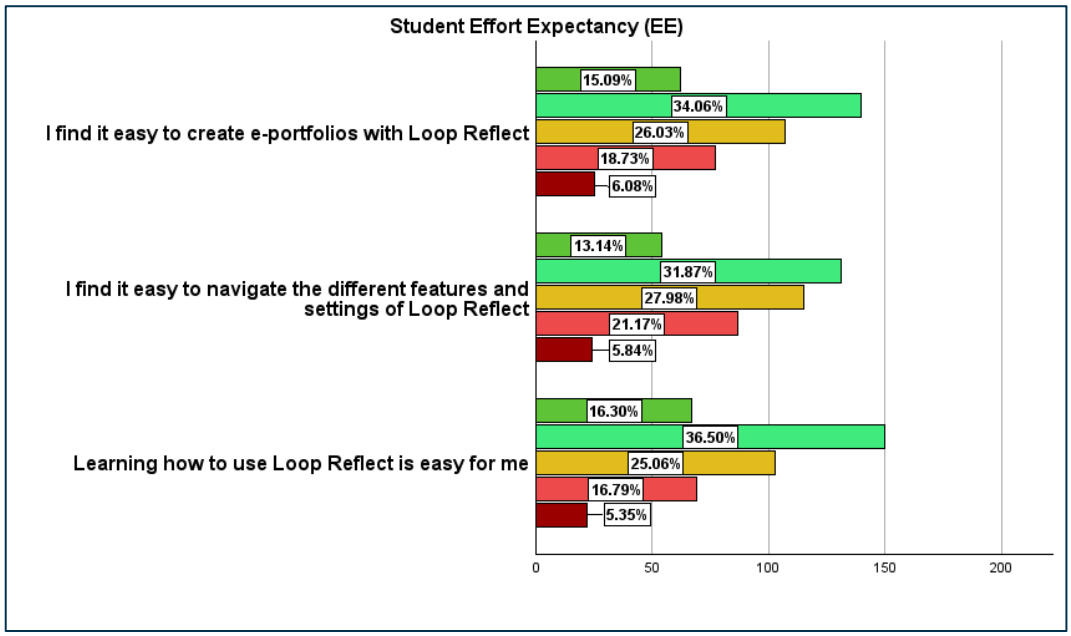
In the following visualisations, student respondents' level of agreement to statements are represented from 'Strongly Agree' (dark green) to 'Strongly Disagree' (dark red). Some statements included an 'N/A' option, which is represented in blue.



Student respondents agreed that Loop Reflect enables them to effectively showcase their learning and achievements, with nearly 21% strongly agreeing, and 49% agreeing. Around 11% disagreed entirely.

Somewhat similar levels of agreement are expressed around Loop Reflect helping to improve the quality of reflection, with almost 18% strongly agreeing, and 42% agreeing. A noticeable portion, almost 24%, neither agreed nor disagreed, perhaps because reflection was not a task asked of them in their eportfolios. Over 15% disagreed entirely.

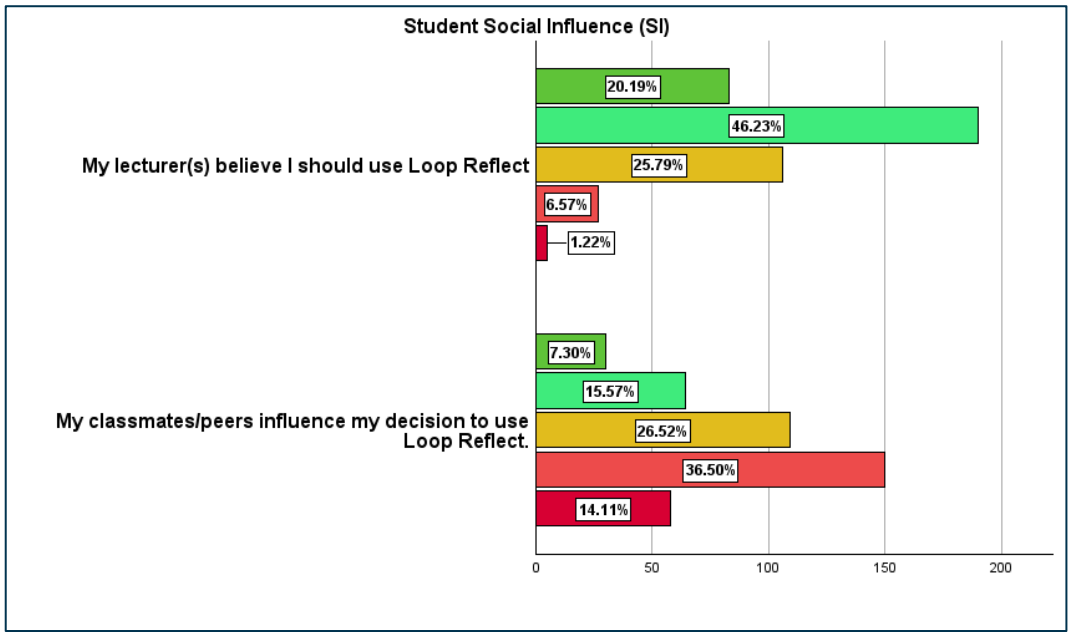
A sizeable majority agreed that Loop Reflect is an effective tool for creating an eportfolio (almost 27% strongly agreeing with this), with just over 10% disagreeing (nearly 5% strongly disagreeing).



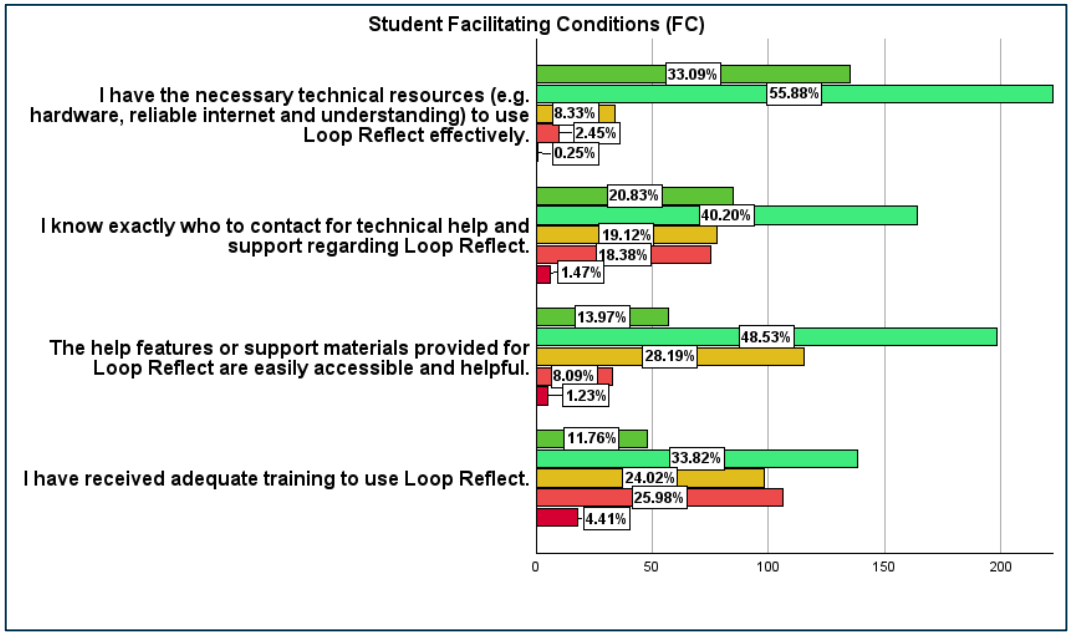
Responses to statements around the effort involved in using Loop Reflect are more mixed. Approximately 15% strongly agreed that it is easy to create eportfolios, and 34% agreed. However, nearly 19% disagreed and over 6% strongly disagreed.

A similar distribution can be seen when respondents are asked about how easy it is to navigate Loop Reflect. Approximately 13% strongly agreed that it is easy, and 32% agreed. However, over 21% disagreed and nearly 6% strongly disagreed.

Furthermore, a similar distribution can again be seen in responses to the statement ‘Learning how to use Loop Reflect is easy’, with over 16% strongly agreeing and nearly 37% agreeing. However, approximately 17% disagreed and over 5% strongly disagreed.



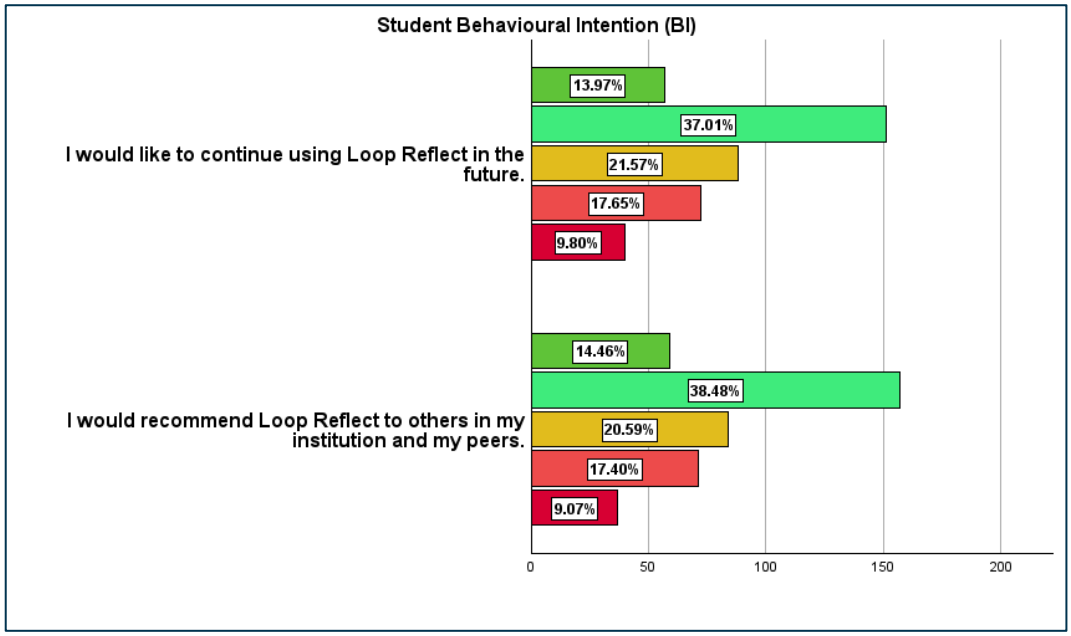
Not surprisingly, when asked about who influences them to use Loop Reflect, the vast majority (over 66%) strongly agreed or agreed that it was their lecturer. In contrast, over 50% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their peers or classmates influenced them.



When asked about the conditions which facilitate their use of Loop Reflect, most students responded positively. For example, nearly 89% strongly agreed or agreed that they had the necessary technical resources to use the eportfolio platform. Around 61% strongly agreed or agreed that they knew who to contact for support, but almost 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.

When asked about support documentation and training, over 62% strongly agreed or agreed that they are accessible and helpful; however over 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.

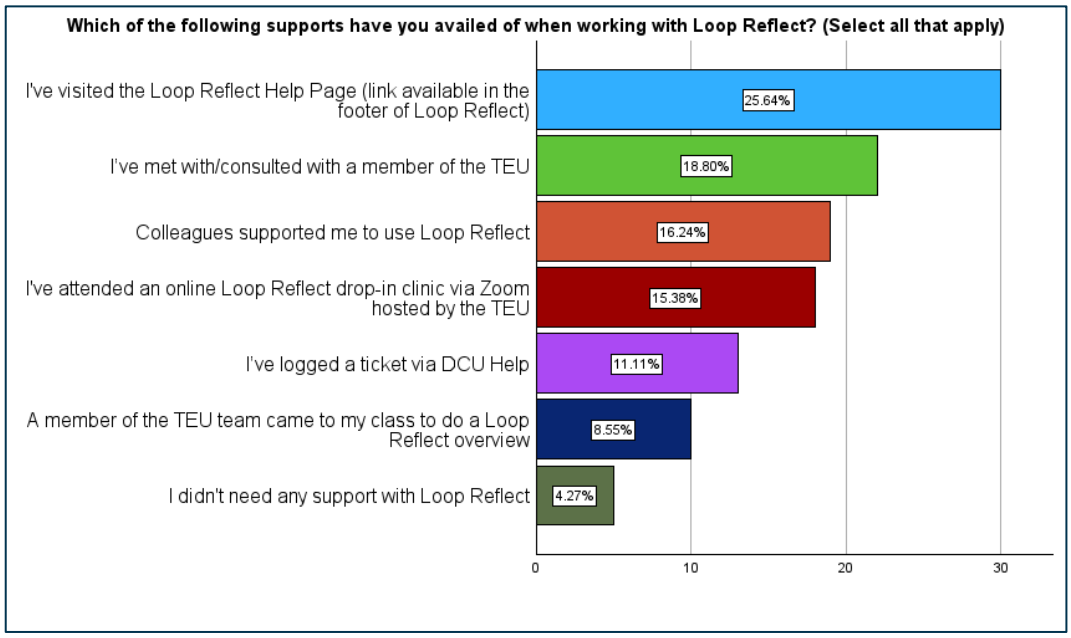
A notably different range of responses were received when students were asked whether they had received sufficient training to use Loop Reflect. Whilst nearly 46% strongly agreed or agreed with this, over 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed.



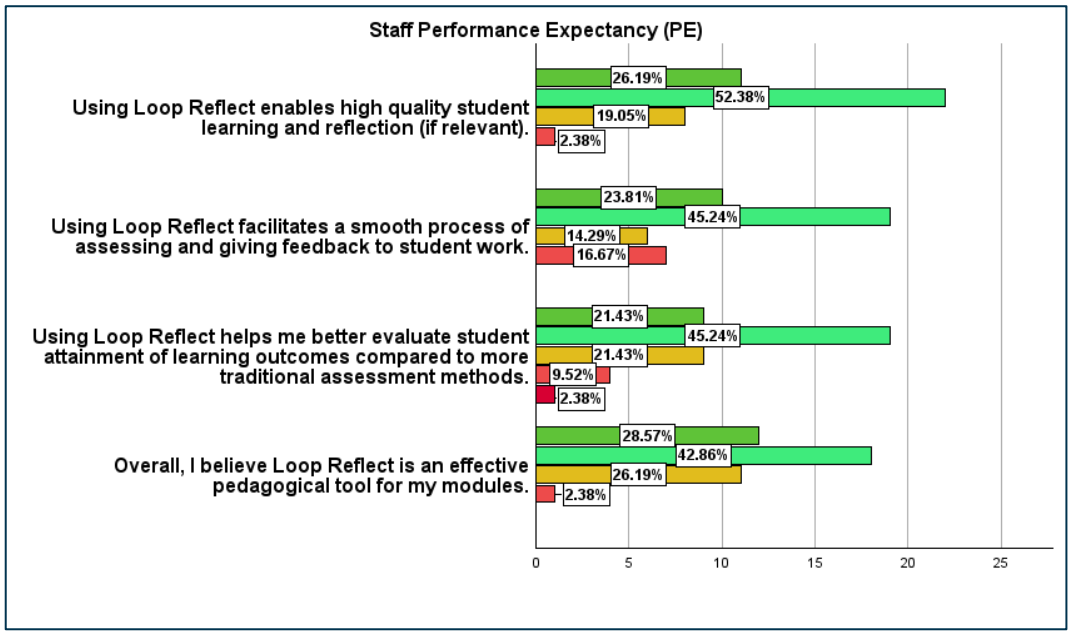
Student respondents revealed mixed responses when asked about their intention towards Loop Reflect. Whilst almost 51% strongly agreed or agreed that they would like to continue using it, around 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 22% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Similar distributions can be seen when students are asked if they would recommend Loop Reflect to others: nearly 53% strongly agreeing or agreeing, but nearly 27% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and around 21% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Staff data visualisations



Staff can avail of the same Loop Reflect supports as students, however there are additional options available to them, such as consultations with the TEU team around pedagogical integration of eportfolios. The Loop Reflect Help Page is the most popular form of support, with 30 respondents indicating that they use it – this contrasts with the student respondents, whose most dominant form of support is peers/classmates. The next most popular is a consultation with the TEU team, followed by support from fellow staff colleagues. Attending a drop-in clinic is the third most popular form of support, again contrasting with the student respondents, for whom this was the least popular.

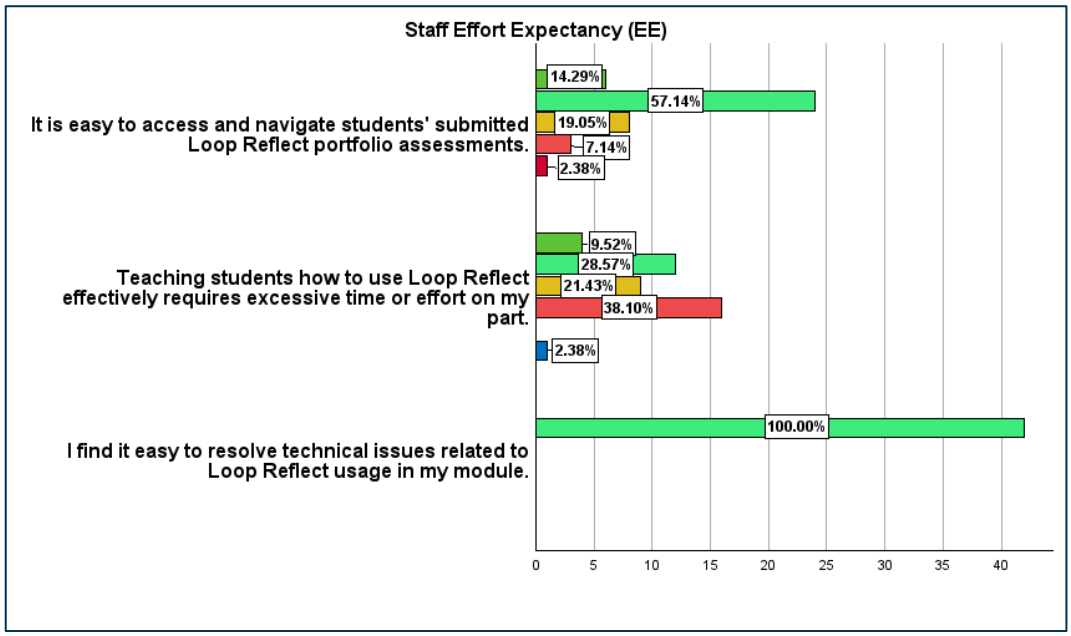


When asked about how Loop Reflect helps them in the performance of their actions, staff respondents showed high levels of agreement. Over 80% strongly agreed or agreed that that it enables high-quality learning and reflection, with around 2% disagreeing.

Approximately 69% strongly agreed or agreed that Loop Reflect facilitates a smooth processing of assessing and providing feedback on student work, but nearly 17% disagreed with this.

Two-thirds of staff respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Loop Reflect helps them to better evaluate students' attainment of learning outcomes compared to traditional assessment. However, nearly 10% disagreed with this, and over 2% strongly disagreed.

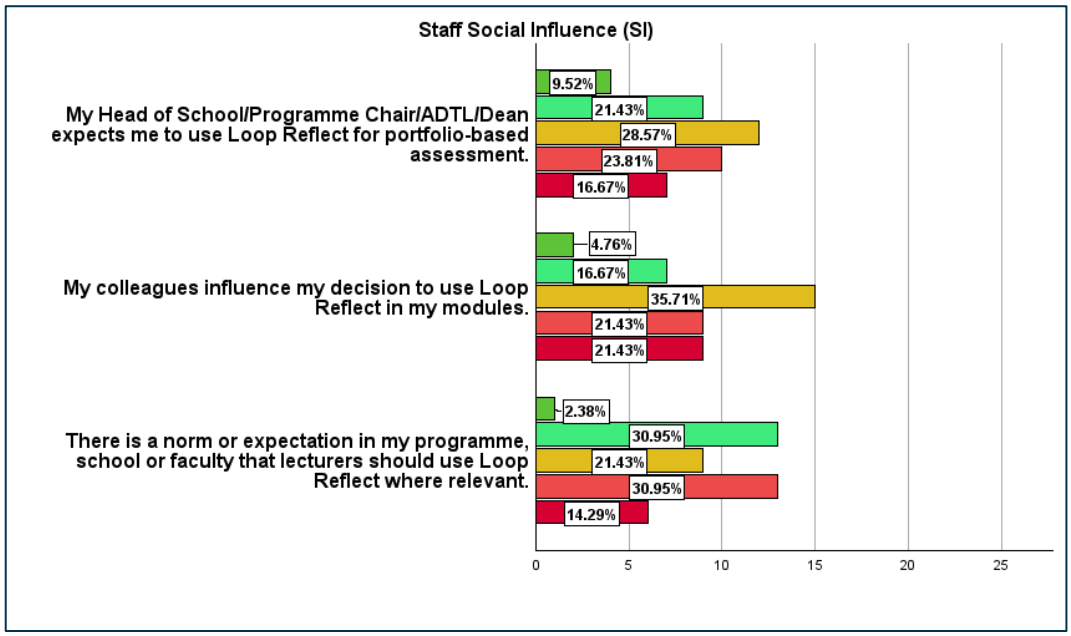
Overall, a large majority – approximately 71% – strongly agreed or agreed that Loop Reflect is an effective pedagogical tool, and over 2% disagreed. Although over 26% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this.



Likewise, staff show good levels of agreement with statements around the effort involved in using Loop Reflect. Over 71% strongly agreed or agreed that it is easy for them to access and navigate students' eportfolios which are submitted for assessment, although nearly 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.

A roughly equal number of staff respondents disagreed and strongly agreed/agreed that teaching their students about using Loop Reflect requires excessive time on their part – 38%. For over 2% of respondents, this was not applicable.

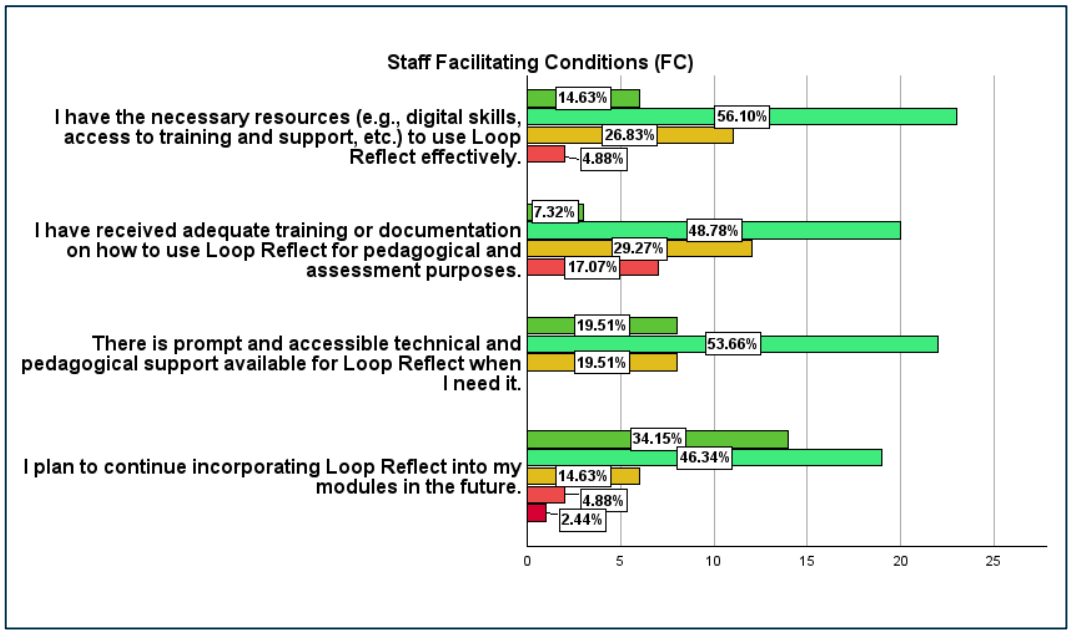
Notably, all staff respondents agreed that they found it easy to resolve technical issues related to the use of Loop Reflect in their module.



When asked about who or what influences them to use Loop Reflect, staff (perhaps unsurprisingly) indicate that they themselves drive the choice to use it. Over 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed that management expected them to use Loop Reflect, and nearly 29% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. Only 21% agreed, and nearly 10% strongly agreed with this.

Similarly, nearly 43% of staff respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their colleagues were an influence on them; nearly 36% neither agreed nor disagreed. Around 21% strongly agreed or agreed with this.

Furthermore, over 45% disagreed or strongly disagreed that there was a norm or expectation to use Loop Reflect, and over 21% neither agreed nor disagreed. Around 21% agreed with this, with 2% strongly agreeing.

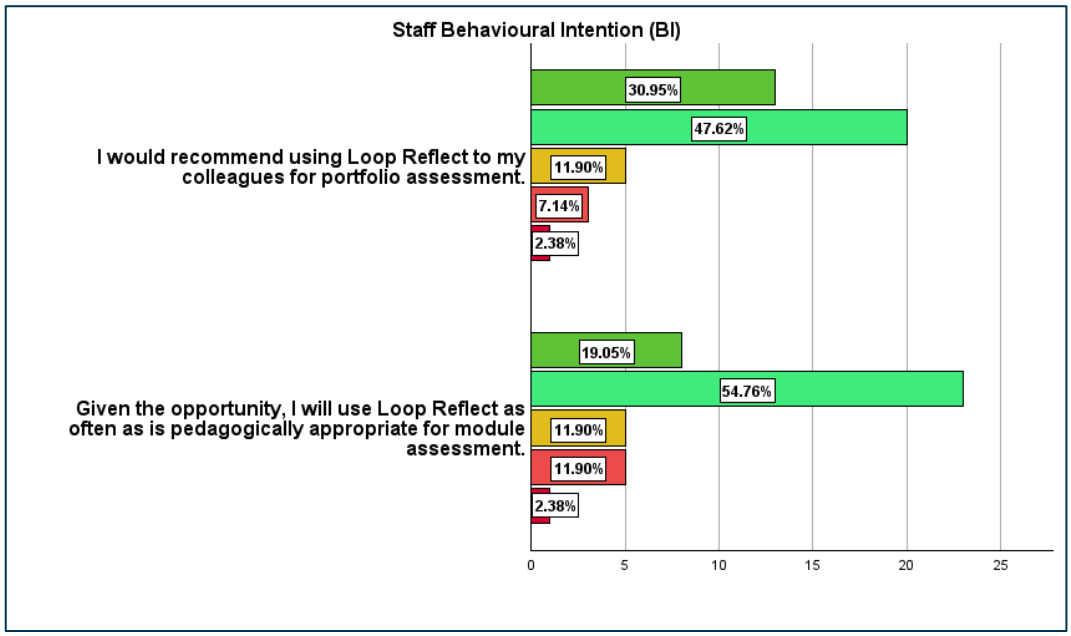


Staff respondents showed high levels of agreement when asked about the conditions that facilitate the use of Loop Reflect. Approximately 5% indicated they did not have the necessary resources (skills, access, etc.) to use Loop Reflect. Conversely, nearly 71% strongly agreed or agreed with this.

Around 17% revealed they have not received adequate training or documentation on using Loop Reflect, but approximately 56% strongly agreed or agreed with this.

Many staff respondents – over 73% strongly agreed or agreed that there is prompt and accessible support for Loop Reflect, and interestingly none disagreed with this.

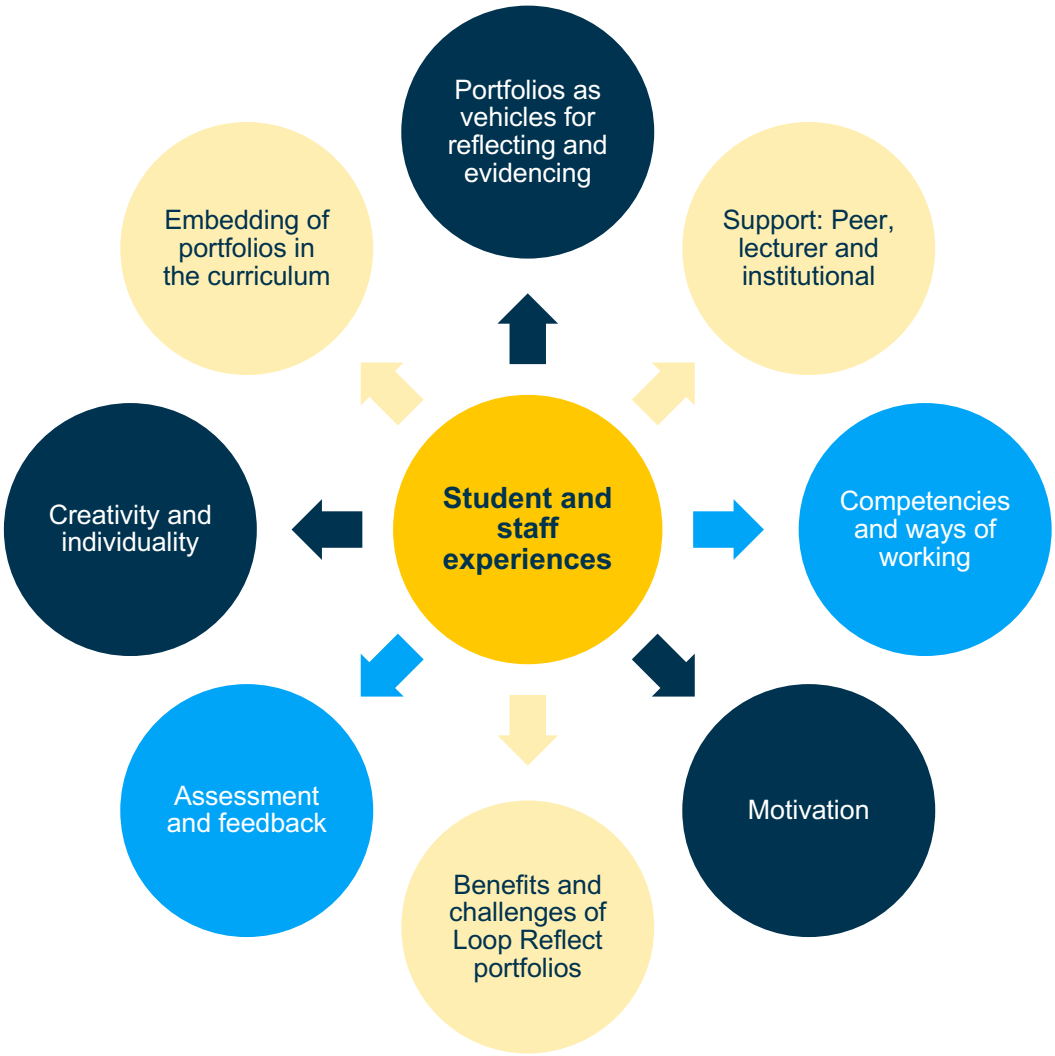
Similarly, a large amount also strongly agreed or agreed that they plan to continue incorporating Loop Reflect into their modules – a combined 80%. By contrast, approximately 5% disagreed with this, and 2% strongly disagreed.



Furthermore, staff indicated high levels of agreement with statements around their intentions towards Loop Reflect. Over 78% strongly agreed or agreed that they would recommend Loop Reflect to others for eportfolio assessment, with nearly 10% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this. Likewise, nearly 74% strongly agreed or agreed that they would use Loop Reflect as often as is pedagogically appropriate for assessment in their module, with over 14% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this.

Qualitative data

Having analysed the qualitative data from student and staff focus groups, the researchers constructed eight themes, which are:



Each of these themes will be presented in turn, drawing on participants' quotes to illustrate the experiences which lie within each one. Each quote is labelled with the participant's identifier, which can be cross-checked against Tables 1 and 2 in the Methodology section.

Theme 1: Portfolios as vehicles for reflecting and evidencing

Across the focus groups, both staff and students described eportfolios as valuable spaces for documenting, demonstrating, and making sense of learning. Participants viewed portfolios as more than collections of artefacts or assessment outputs; rather, they were seen as vehicles through which students could evidence their learning, reflect on their experiences, and articulate their personal and academic development. One staff participant illustrates this: "…for me, the artefacts are the evidence, right? … that idea of having to prove the contentions that you're making is really, really useful, and I think Reflect supports that really well." (L2).

ePortfolios enable students to capture their learning journeys over time, bringing together evidence, experiences, and reflections in ways that made learning visible. Staff participants noted that this process often provided richer insights into students' development than more traditional assessment modes, whilst students described eportfolios as opportunities to showcase growth, achievement, and understanding in a more holistic way.

> For me, it was a real, really strong tool in their reflective practice, because I ask them to think about the module learning outcomes – one each month. And obviously, at the early stage, they're not really demonstrating outcomes, they're demonstrating how they're going to get there, and so you can get in and you can kind of prompt them and say 'what about this, or could you try this?' And when they come then to submit the final week portfolio, they have those monthly reflections, and so they're looking back at themselves in October, and they can really see the journey that they've travelled in the year in a way that I don't think anything else would make possible. (L2)

Reflection was highlighted as a core element of the eportfolio process. Participants frequently spoke about reflective practice as a valuable means for students to make sense of their learning experiences and connect these experiences to broader personal, academic, or professional development. Reflection was considered beneficial because it encouraged students to pause, critically consider their experiences, and identify what they had learned from them. As one student participant remarked: "…it was good to, like, actually analyse, like, why I was doing what I was doing, or what my thinking was" (S3).

Participants described reflective practice as a way of evidencing learning that may otherwise remain invisible, allowing students to express changes in their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and perspectives.

> I think, because unlike L4, where, you know, if you're teaching accounting, you're very clear about what students are learning. I think sometimes with marketing, it's not always as explicit to the student. I understand what they're learning – they don't necessarily – and I think the same thing is true of the year abroad, that they don't necessarily understand what it is they're getting from it, and they don't really know how to talk about it. So it [the eportfolio] makes it very explicit to them what they have gotten from the year, as well as demonstrating it to us as achieving a learning outcome. (L2)

Participants also highlighted the broader relevance of reflective practice beyond higher education, viewing it as a lifelong skill that can support continued personal and professional development.

> I framed it in that it's not just now – you're final years – you can use this process to think about other things that come up, you know, 'what happened? What did you do? How might this be something that you could use again, if something's similar? How might you react differently?' So, kind of just… set it for them that it wasn't just for this one assignment, even though, from my perspective it was just for that one assignment, but to show that it was a tool for life, if they felt it was something they were benefiting from. (L3)

At the same time, participants recognised that reflection is not always straightforward. Both staff and student participants acknowledged that meaningful reflection requires effort and can be challenging, particularly for students who are unfamiliar with reflective writing or who are encountering eportfolio assessment for the first time. They believed reflection is a skill that develops over time. Similarly, some staff participants noted that students can initially struggle to move beyond description of events towards deeper consideration of their significance and impact.

> Consistently over classes and consistently over time students struggle hugely with the 'now what' piece. And that doesn't matter whether you're doing it in a straight-up, you know, 600 words, academic text, or whether you're doing it in a more creative setting. So, I haven't found that the… that Loop Reflect has changed their capacity to internalise the concept of reflection. Some people get it very well, some… a lot of people struggle, and we have to coach them through that. And I would

> say it's a third, a third, a third. A third of them get it from day one. A third of them get it with the coaching, and a third of them are still there at the end of the semester – despite two contributions of formative feedback on the way – they still submit a final journal without completely getting the 'now what' piece. (L11)

Despite these challenges, many viewed the effort involved in reflection as worthwhile, believing that the process can lead to deeper, applied learning and greater self-awareness: "I find reflection is better than academic based assignments as it shows the knowledge I gained from the module and how I can apply it into real world scenarios rather than collecting and gathering information." (S12)

> I find it difficult sometimes to… I like the idea of reflecting, but I find it difficult when I'm actually doing the assignments to, I suppose, not just storytell, not just say what happened, and I know a lot of lecturers kind of, talk about the importance of… and they don't like when students just say what happened, they want us to actually critically reflect, which I suppose when it happens, it's nice, but sometimes I find it hard to, I guess, meet word counts when I don't really know what happened, but I think when I do … reflect on myself and what are my actions and how I felt, it is kind of rewarding, then. It's difficult sometimes. (S10)

Participants also highlighted the importance of support in enabling meaningful engagement with reflective practice. There was a strong sense that students benefited from explicit guidance, opportunities to practise reflection, and clear expectations regarding what was required.

> Yeah, it was really useful, and actually, we were given three reflection practices, and we analysed them, and then I used just the one that I liked the most. We were given Gibbs Reflective Cycle, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, and another one is… I just used Gibbs because it's the most, descriptive one for me. (S11)

Staff participants discussed the role of teaching and scaffolding reflection rather than assuming students already possess the necessary skills. Reflective models were frequently identified as useful tools for supporting students to structure their thinking and move beyond descriptive accounts towards deeper levels of analysis.

> Yeah, so they have their introduction piece, and then they've a certain amount of artefacts that they have to put up, they have to use Rolfe's reflection model, and then there's, like, a kind of a meta-reflection piece at the end, and that's done in each semester, so it's… yeah, it's… it's quite prescriptive in that regard. (L5)

However, some participants observed that engagement with reflective models was often driven by assessment requirements, raising questions about the extent to which reflection was experienced as an authentic process rather than a prescribed activity.

> Models are definitely useful because they help you structure your thinking, but I always find that I will never go back to those models unless I'm required to, so I have to remember that the models are there, but if I am given one, I'll use it. That is making it harder for myself, to be honest because I do find models very easy, but sometimes they don't always cover the necessary information you might want to speak about. (S5)

Overall, participants viewed support as most effective when it balanced structure with flexibility, providing guidance while still allowing students to engage with reflection in personally meaningful ways.

> In the module I was involved, the students had to do a total of three reflections, and after the first reflection, we realised that, we, like, most of the students didn't… they had done a summary of the hackathon experience, rather than a reflection, like, picking an aspect and then reflect on that. So, we decided to provide individualised feedback for all the students after the first reflection, and we did that the same after the second, and we could see the progress of it, like, going forward, and… at the end, like, a lot more students had understood the concept, which is not easy to understand, but I think, thanks to our feedback, that probably helped. (L9)

Both staff and student participants described Loop Reflect as a useful tool for gathering evidence, organising learning artefacts, and bringing reflections together in a single space. Its value was seen in facilitating the eportfolio process over time.

> They're constantly being asked to reflect, and then think ahead, reflect, and then think ahead. So, it's supported through the face-to-face… it's not just once off and then they report. It's continued throughout the module, over the course of the whole academic year. And then the beauty of Loop Reflect is then that

> it's all pulled… all of that is pulled together into this final portfolio at the end. So, they do start off with these individual reflections, but those reflections are then integrated into the final portfolio, and it's at that point then that they're encouraged to really look back and try to bring all of these different activities and things that they've done over the year together. (L8)

However, participants consistently emphasised that meaningful reflection does not emerge solely from the technology itself; the pedagogical purpose of the eportfolio was considered more important than the technological platform used to create it.

> Where I try and bring them in their headspace is to recognise that while it may be just the particular mechanic we use, that they've got to see the big picture behind it, which is that I's a way of thinking, not just a mechanic. (L11)

Participants also reflected on how eportfolio design influenced students' engagement with the assessment. While some valued templates as useful structures, particularly for students new to eportfolios, others suggested that fewer constraints encouraged more purposeful decision-making and greater ownership of the eportfolio.

> Because we're a very visual discipline, I… I deliberately don't give them a template, because I want them to think through what might work well. And then, of course, sometimes it won't do it for them, or whatever. But I also… they are final year students... I do kind of leave them a little bit hanging insofar as they're in a practical . (L1)

There was a shared view that the quality of reflection and evidence presented was ultimately more important than the visual appearance of the portfolio itself.

> For the BEd, it's… it is very much they have to have a certain amount of artefacts, and it's not really around the… you know, they're not really being assessed on their creativity of presentation, to be honest. They have to present an artefact and then the accompanying reflective piece. (L5)

Overall, these findings suggest that participants viewed eportfolios as important vehicles for both evidencing and reflecting on learning. While Loop Reflect was generally perceived as a useful platform for supporting these activities, the value of eportfolio assessment was understood to lie not in the technology itself but in its capacity to create space for reflection,

meaning-making, and the documentation of learning and personal growth over time.

> I had a lovely example last year where somebody had forgotten to submit, and I got back in touch with them kind of around this time of year [end of semester], and said, you know, 'you don't submit, you don't pass'. They'd done the monthly, but just not the overall [reflection]. And I got an email from her afterwards saying, 'do you know what, that's the nicest thing I've done. It was such a lovely thing to do, to look back on the year, and to see all the things I did, and to think about all the stuff I learned. Thanks so much for asking me to do it', which has never happened before when I gave out to students for a late assignment. (L2)

Theme 2: Support: Peer, lecturer and institutional

Support is an important influence on participants' experiences of using Loop Reflect, with staff and students describing a range of formal and informal sources of assistance. These included lecturer guidance, peer support, demonstrations, exemplar eportfolios, online documentation, drop-in clinics and more. While participants generally recognised that support was available, their experiences also highlighted differences in how accessible, timely and useful particular forms of support were. For some, knowing that help was available provided reassurance and enabled them to overcome difficulties with the platform, while others remained uncertain about where to seek assistance or did not engage with the supports provided. For example, one student remarked: "Personally, I am aware of the Loop Reflect support on the DCU website, so that'd probably be the first place I'd look" (S9) whereas one staff participant remarked: "I wasn't really aware of the supports" (L5).

Lecturer support was particularly important in students' accounts of learning to use Loop Reflect. Students described lecturers as a key source of guidance when navigating the platform, particularly when they encountered difficulties or were unsure about what was expected of them.

> I asked one of my LIFE teachers as well (the LIFE's a module I have in first year) and they kind of helped me. Yeah, for images and text, it's fairly straightforward, but maybe for videos and all that other stuff, I definitely need to ask… and if I needed to, I'd probably go to one of the lecturers in LIFE, it's the module where I do a lot of Loop Reflect. (S16)

Demonstrations of Loop Reflect were generally considered useful in introducing the platform and showing students how to complete key tasks. Participants appeared to value demonstrations that were practical and interactive, allowing them to see how the platform worked and, where possible, follow the process themselves: "I do recall there was someone who came in and did a demo session where we kind of followed along and did all the steps ourselves, as well. I found that very helpful." (S9)

However, demonstrations were not considered sufficient in all cases. Participants noted that a single demonstration could only go so far, particularly as students encountered more advanced features or difficulties later in the eportfolio process.

> Since it's such an important part of the module, and it's the core module, we were kind of all sat down in a lecture hall, and we were made open up our laptops and create a page as the lecturer was doing it on screen, but that was more the extent of it. We were shown how to add blocks of text and told this is what this does, but if you wanted to make it look in any way good, you had to kind of mess around with it yourself at home. But I do think the live demo and students actually having the laptops in front of them is really good, because I think it's proven, if you're physically doing something, it sticks in your head better. (S5)

While interactive demonstrations were generally viewed positively, one student participant highlighted the challenges associated with delivering this type of support in a remote learning context: "There were no in-person modules for it [the student's programme], which meant that we didn't have any support with Loop Reflect. There were no demos, because it was a completely remote module". (S7)

Peer support represented another important, although uneven, source of assistance. Some students described checking in with classmates, discussing how particular aspects of Loop Reflect worked, or seeking help from peers when they encountered difficulties: "For me, I just discussed with, like, a few classmates, like… I'm not good at designing, so I did discuss that part with a few other classmates who are creative." (S2)

Such exchanges provided an informal and readily accessible form of support alongside that offered by lecturers and centrally from the TEU. However, this experience was not universal, with some student participants reporting that they did not discuss Loop Reflect with classmates: "We used it [Loop Reflect] in first year mostly, and we didn't really talk about it. No one really discussed Loop Reflect with each other, we just went and did it by ourselves" (S6)

There was also evidence of hesitation among some students to seek help when experiencing difficulties. These accounts suggest that the availability of support did not necessarily translate into students making use of it, and that informal peer networks could play an important role for some students but not for others. For example, one student shared: "Other than that [the Loop Reflect Help Page], myself and a lot of others in my course, we mostly rely on each other for mutual support and guidance." (S9). Similarly, another remarked: "That would be the exact same as us, as well. It's very much relying on each other, you know, how do you do this? How do you change a skin, or upload something?" (S5)

Participants also identified exemplars as a potentially valuable form of support. The opportunity to browse shared eportfolios enabled students to develop a clearer sense of what an eportfolio might look like and how others had approached the task.

> "One of the types of resources you haven't mentioned, which you have, is the kind of sample, or, you know, of good practice that are up there that people can look at, and I think they're very useful… I think that impacts on the student's perception of what they can achieve, and giving them a sense of comfort that they can do this" (L7)

Exemplars could therefore provide support that extended beyond the technical use of Loop Reflect by helping students understand how an eportfolio might be structured and presented.

> I wouldn't say I got, like, directly supported by any of my colleagues, but… I think, I don't know how I was able, but I was able to access one time, another student who was on Erasmus, a guy I knew from school, about his reflection from his time in Lyon, France. And I gave it a quick read, and I suppose just looking at his kind of gave me an idea of what you can do with a reflection. He had lots of cool photos, and kind of very detailed writing, and even some videos, I think, too. So, I never went to anyone, or my colleagues for any direct help. (S10)

Participants nevertheless highlighted the importance of ensuring that exemplars were relevant to different student cohorts, including the need for examples of postgraduate eportfolios. This suggests that the usefulness of exemplars depended not simply on their availability but also on the extent to which students could recognise their relevance to their own context and level of study.

> The examples, I suppose, in terms of the postgraduate… many of them are maybe at the undergraduate level. I think maybe for next year, it might be more helpful for us to have some of the students' [eportfolios] who completed it this year… (L7)

Formal institutional supports, including help documentation, online resources and Loop Reflect drop-in clinics, were generally viewed positively by those who used them.

> Yes, I have used everything, on offer. Like that, we've embedded as many scaffolds and links to… to the resources

> that you have within, say, our own Loop Books. That's kind of how we work things, is have your assignment book, so nothing is left to chance around, you know, encouraging students to engage with the videos and signposts. You have frequently asked questions, as far as I remember, so we have that link, and then other kind of bits and pieces that have arose as… kind of like what L12 was saying there, the rubrics are obviously pulled on the resources as well from the TEU. That initial setup, the first session that the students have is from the Loop Reflect team, so it's really just embedding it from the outset to get stuck in, get going, you know, because, as I said, time is of the essence with our particular module. (L6)

Participants described clinics as useful opportunities to receive more targeted assistance, while support documentation provided an additional resource that students could consult independently. At the same time, experiences of these resources were mixed. While some participants considered the available documentation to be helpful, others felt that resources were lacking or that the Loop Reflect Help Page could be more interactive.

> I know everything is on the help [page], but I actually struggle a bit to navigate my way around the help, and one of the things that's difficult on it is that you can't send a link to a particular thing. So when a student says I can… ''oh, I've run out of space, the one I hear all the time. I say, 'well, have you read the help on that?', but I can't send them to that section, I can only send them to the general help. So, they think I'm sending them back something that's saying, feck you, but I'm actually… I've actually spent the time to find the thing, but I can't send them the direct link in. So I do find that a little bit difficult. (L2)

Participants also expressed a desire for more frequent support opportunities, particularly where difficulties emerged over the course of developing an eportfolio rather than at the point of initial introduction to the platform.

> Because of the timing of my particular assignment, which is very much at the, like, right at the very end of the academic semester in semester two, so kind of in the exam period, what tends to happen is the students aren't really working on it until, kind of, the end, and actually, some of those drop-in clinics, they've all finished. (L10)

Importantly, participants' accounts revealed a distinction between support being available and support being accessed. Some students did not

engage with the supports provided, while others were unsure where to seek help or were hesitant to ask for assistance. In some cases, students continued to experience confusion about aspects of Loop Reflect over time, suggesting that the provision of initial guidance did not always resolve difficulties as they emerged.

> And I think that's one of my problems with it, I guess, that I had always assumed that once I had gotten used to it, and the students were using it across multiple modules, there would be a lot less hand-holding required, because they're third-year students. But actually, every year, even though they say they've used it in multiple modules, they seem confused and lost. (L2)

Participants consequently highlighted the potential value of more regular and visible support opportunities throughout the portfolio process. Encouraging greater engagement with clinics and other support mechanisms was seen as one way of helping students address difficulties before these became barriers to engagement: "I probably don't enough encourage the students to drop in… do the drop-in clinics. It's mentioned, but probably on reflection… it's something that I probably could do a better job of encouraging the students to do that." (L8)

From the staff perspective, institutional support for incorporating Loop Reflect within teaching and assessment was generally viewed positively, and influenced the decision to incorporate eportfolios in a module or platform.

> I definitely would see the value of the portfolios, but I just think that support and scaffolding and the videos and just being able to set up, the, you know, even, like, the little task analysis kind of signposts and the drop-in clinics… you guys coming in and speaking to the students directly, yeah, I think that's certainly a deciding factor around why… why would you… you would engage with Loop Reflect specifically. (L6)

Across these accounts, the importance of multiple forms of support was evident, with lecturer guidance, peer interaction and institutional resources each contributing to participants' experiences of using Loop Reflect. While support was generally available and valued, participants' experiences indicate that its effectiveness depended on students and staff knowing where to find it, feeling comfortable seeking help, and being able to access appropriate support at the point at which difficulties arose.

Theme 3: Competencies and ways of working

Participants' accounts highlighted the range of competencies and ways of working involved in creating a portfolio using Loop Reflect. Experiences varied considerably, with some students expressing confidence in using the platform and others reporting uncertainty about its features and functionality. For example:

> For me, when I was using Loop Reflect, it was… it was… it was different to Word, so I was a bit confused on how to put stuff in and how to add audios. That's why I was just, like, playing on the safer side and just used text then, and images. (S12)

Familiarity appeared to play an important role in shaping these experiences, with previous use of Loop Reflect making subsequent engagement easier for some students. One staff participant remarked: "So I'm teaching the third year module where they're reflective, that reflective module. By the time I get them, they're so familiar with Loop Reflect, it's just not an issue" (L8). Similarly, one student participant commented:

> For me, when we first got an assignment to make a portfolio Loop Reflect, everyone was kind of annoyed because we didn't know how to use it, but I feel like now that we're more comfortable with it, we don't really mind as much. (S13)

Conversely, those with less knowledge or experience described a learning curve associated with the platform: "I was using it back in first year, but some of the geography people were using it for the very first time. So, it kind of, like, the skill difference was very clear." (S14)

Sometimes, students need to experiment with features or teach themselves how particular eportfolio functions worked: "When I was doing it [an eportfolio], I did, like, for the most part, figure it out myself" (S3)

These accounts suggest that competency in using Loop Reflect developed through engagement and experience rather than being something students necessarily possessed at the outset.

Participants described different approaches to learning how to use Loop Reflect. Some students reported teaching themselves how to navigate the platform, while others drew on existing digital skills or knowledge developed through using other technologies.

> I kind of think, I use a lot of skills that I probably already have from doing other things, because I'm kind of… I do a lot of stuff on my computer, because I'm always trying to, like, transfer stuff over, and I have everything like that, so I don't really think much of it. but I think I just use the same skills I usually do. (S14)

Students also described working across multiple tools, creating or preparing content elsewhere before importing it into Loop Reflect. For some, particularly when working with text, this represented an efficient way of approaching portfolio creation.

> Yeah, so for me, I made a lot of things on Canva and put them onto Loop Reflect, so I kind of wanted to make mine very visual and design-focused, so I use a lot of pictures that technically aren't pictures, it's, like, a picture with text or something in it, because every year in our portfolios, we're given a range of questions to answer, and each page has to be about a different thing, so it could be the location of the school, and how that feeds into the school's culture, or something like that. So, it would be difficult just to be putting text in there. You need to use a lot of pictures and make things. (S5)

These practices demonstrate that students did not necessarily engage with Loop Reflect as a standalone environment, but incorporated it within broader digital ways of working that involved moving between different platforms and applications.

The development and transferability of digital skills was viewed less consistently. While engagement with Loop Reflect involved students using and developing digital competencies, some participants questioned how transferable these skills were beyond the platform itself.

> Mostly what I hear is students don't like Loop Reflect. And the biggest criticism, I think, that I get from students is that they don't want to learn a proprietary tool that's just used in DCU. They want to use tools that are used beyond DCU, and they'll take into their working life. And they tell me there's all sorts of tools out there". (L12)

There was a sense among some that digital skills were already being developed across many areas of students' lives and studies, whilst particular skills associated with Loop Reflect were perceived as specific to that platform alone.

> I'm coming at it from a primary school sort of perspective, and that's what the students are being trained to do. They are constantly going to have to be creating engaging materials to keep 30 children engaged. So that is definitely a skill that's required of them. I'm not sure if Loop Reflect at the moment, the usability of it is the tool that's going to help them do that. (L5)

The increasing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) also prompted questions for some participants about the longer-term relevance of particular skills involved in eportfolio creation. While eportfolio creation provided opportunities to develop digital skills, participants differed in how valuable and transferable they considered these skills beyond their use of Loop Reflect: "A lot of the skills that maybe we thought were really necessary and transversal and part of digital literacy are becoming redundant really quickly" (L2).e

Ways of planning and organising portfolio work also differed across participants. Some students described planning the structure and content of their eportfolios in advance, while others adopted a more organic approach, allowing the eportfolio to develop as they worked through the task.

> So the Loop Reflect portal is really user-friendly, but usually, like, personally, I always like to plan out my work. So I would, like, on pen and paper, I would just, like, draw how I would… maybe just write on rough sheets, or maybe on Google Doc. And then just copy-paste. Like, it helps me, like, save time and just copy-paste, like, whatever I have online, I can directly do it. (S2)

> I tend to just kind of jump in, to be honest. I… but I don't think… I think that's more a reflection of the way I work, as opposed to a reflection of the platform itself. Yeah, I, like, I normally don't plan everything out, I just kind of, go with the flow. (S4)

Participants recognised that producing a good eportfolio required time, both to develop the content and to make decisions about how it should be organised and presented. Participants' accounts suggested that engaging with the eportfolio close to a submission deadline could limit opportunities to become familiar with the platform, experiment with its features, and develop and refine it.

> The assignments I did in Loop Reflect… I hadn't really… I left them a bit last minute, and I never really dedicated time into learning how to actually use with the platform, so that's why

> they ended up kind of just being very text-heavy, whereas, the [demonstration] tutorial kind of showed how to implement photos and make it more, I suppose, visually appealing. So that was kind of… it was useful to me, I think. (S10)

ePortfolio creation therefore involved not only technological competency but also approaches to planning, organisation and time management: "I think the biggest thing that shines through for them is, yeah, just that time to actually navigate the tools and resources itself, and kind of the time there, especially when they're part-time [students] and the timing of the module" (L6)

Participants also identified broader competencies that could be exercised through eportfolio assessment. ePortfolio creation was seen as providing opportunities for students to draw on a range of skills, including communication, organisation and the ability to think deeply about how learning should be represented. The process of selecting, organising and communicating material required students to make decisions about what to include and how best to convey its significance.

> And I think part of that is… like, they're doing it for me, but actually, the form allows them to think about communicating with audiences beyond me, right? If that makes sense. So, they can imagine… how they would present, you know, a web page or something to the world, even though they're just presenting it to me. And I think that changes their relationship with the piece of assessment, even when you change the imagined audience, I think. (L7)

At the same time, participants acknowledged differences in students' abilities and preferences. As one staff participant succinctly put it: "Some students can do a great job with it; some students do a very poor job with it" (L3).

Interestingly, some accounts suggested that the effort required to work with Loop Reflect was not necessarily viewed entirely negatively. While learning how to use the platform could involve uncertainty and a degree of friction, one perspective was that having to work through these challenges could itself contribute to learning.

> I have a kind of a completely different take on it, because I actually think the friction in the use is actually a benefit to the students. They're used to getting everything, like, instantly,

> boom, boom, actually having to go through the pain of it not working, and trying to figure it out. (L1)

ePortfolio creation did not always offer immediate rewards and could require students to invest time and effort before seeing the portfolio take shape. This sense of 'delayed gratification' highlights how the process of constructing an eportfolio, including working through challenges and making decisions along the way, could form part of the learning experience rather than simply acting as a barrier to completing the assessment: "Yeah, do this, suffer through, but then they feel a much greater sense of satisfaction and pride in their final product." (L1)

Participants' accounts also demonstrated considerable variation in how extensively the affordances of Loop Reflect were used. Some approaches relied predominantly on text or a single-page structure, while others involved greater use of the platform's features and the incorporation of content created using other tools. For example, one student commented: "Mine are usually, like, kind of basically essays that I just put into…Loop Reflect, and then I did one actual, like, class reflection before, but the others… the most of them are just basically essays thrown in." (S14)

Overall, participants' accounts indicate that creating a portfolio through Loop Reflect involved more than acquiring the technical skills required to operate the platform. It also required students to develop ways of working that encompassed planning, organisation, communication, time management and decisions about how best to represent their learning. These competencies developed differently across students, with familiarity and continued engagement supporting confidence, while limited experience or late engagement could contribute to uncertainty. At the same time, participants offered differing perspectives on the extent to which the skills developed through Loop Reflect were transferable beyond the immediate portfolio task. Overall, the findings suggest that eportfolio creation involves both a product and a process, with students' experiences shaped not only by what they ultimately produced, but also by the competencies and ways of working they developed and employed throughout its creation.

Theme 4: Motivation

Motivation also emerged as an important influence on students' engagement with both eportfolio assessment and Loop Reflect. Participants described different reasons for engaging with the platform, ranging from assignment requirements and lecturer encouragement to curiosity, personal interest and a desire to showcase their practice. For most students, the requirement to complete an eportfolio was the primary reason for using Loop Reflect, with participants indicating that they would be unlikely to engage with the platform outside the context of an assignment. For example: "I honestly don't think I would've used Loop Reflect if my lecturer hadn't required it" (S3)

Others, however, expressed an interest in continuing to use Loop Reflect even where its use was not required. These differing accounts highlight the extent to which engagement with the platform was shaped by both external requirements and students' own motivations.

> I use it only for assignments, but maybe next year I'll use… I'll use it to create some outside-of-modules, portfolio for, for example, the Reflect awards ceremony. Because for this year, I used my assignments, but I think it would be great to create a new one. (S11)

The nature and design of the assignment also appeared to influence how students engaged with Loop Reflect. Participants' accounts suggested that students' engagement with the platform was closely tied to the requirements and purpose of the eportfolio task, which influenced how they approached Loop Reflect and the features they used.

> Yeah, for myself, it [their eportfolio] was mostly just text, but, and obviously links as well to readings, and also images, for sure. Images were the two instances where I used it where it was required was for the same module, for Enterprise, which really involved, showing the evidence of you going to different places, and there was an emphasis on making it look good as well that was I was being graded on that aspect as well, so that was so there's an incentive for me to play around with that stuff. (S6)

> For me, it has been required that we have a mixture of different medias in it, because I've been doing it for a course, not for my own personal use, but mine required that I had my own handwritten notes, my own diagrams, which was easy to put into it. I just take a picture and upload them. Then typed up

> notes based on whatever week's content for the module, and then videos that we found interesting, like links to them, and then sections for references. So, by the time it was done, it nearly looked like an interactive website. (S7)

> …I'm very clear with them about what's being asked from an eportfolio and what's expected, and it's… it's built into the marking rubric as well, because it is in an eportfolio style, and it's not just a straight-up report, that, the expectation of what is needed from an eportfolio in terms of its visual, creative, the integration of multimedia. They could just produce a straightforward report, written report, you know, and a few graphs, but they're losing marks because it's actually in the rubric. (L8)

In some cases, there was uncertainty about whether using a wider range of Loop Reflect features would have any bearing on assessment or grading.

> "I think for myself, it was just, like, the nature of the assignment. It was … I wasn't sure, like, if I put in audio or, like, a video or something, would I be graded differently? Like, I think my lecturer just kind of wanted it to be text." (S3)

Where students were not explicitly encouraged to explore different features, there could be less incentive to move beyond the functionality required to complete the assignment. This points to the role of assessment expectations in shaping students' motivation to explore and make fuller use of the platform: "For my course, it's almost entirely document uploads, whether that be, like, Word documents or whatever, but, there's been a little bit of text and image upload, but fairly insignificant and mostly optional." (S9)

Lecturers could also play an important role in encouraging engagement with Loop Reflect. Participants described how lecturers' decisions to incorporate the platform into modules and assignments created opportunities for students to encounter and become familiar with it. Encouragement from lecturers could influence students' willingness to engage with particular features or approaches to portfolio creation, while a lack of encouragement could result in more limited use. Familiarity gained through these experiences could, in turn, influence subsequent engagement, with previous experience of Loop Reflect providing a basis for using it again.

> When I look back at the nature of the assignments that I completed during last year, most of them could have been done on Loop Reflect, instead of us going to any third-party website or web page, but yeah, again, like, our lecturers didn't, like, mandate us to use Loop Reflect. (S2)

> "Probably, for the first time, like, if in September they gave us a chance… the choice to… to do it in Loop Reflect or something else, I wouldn't do it, but now I feel like… if there's a choice to do some type of portfolio, I might choose a Loop Reflect, because it's easy to upload, and also later I can use it for Loop Reflect ceremony, award ceremony. Yeah, so, yeah, like, I think I would use it now. (S11)

From a staff perspective, the availability of institutional support was also relevant to decisions about adopting Loop Reflect, suggesting that engagement with the platform was influenced by motivation at both student and lecturer levels. When asked about using another platform for eportfolio assessment, one staff participant commented: "Oh I want to go with the DCU [tool], no, I don't want to go with something separate. I wouldn't know how to use it anyway." (L12)

At the same time, engagement was not driven solely by assessment requirements or external encouragement. Students' own interests and sense of personal connection to the portfolio also influenced their motivation to engage.

> For me, once I submit it, I'm not really going to look at it again, except for the case of where it is something more personal, like my Erasmus reflections. I probably will go back and look at them in, like, a year or two's time. I won't edit them, you know what I mean? I'll keep them as they are, I think. (S10)

Participants nevertheless expressed mixed feelings towards Loop Reflect, reinforcing the distinction between motivation to engage with eportfolio assessment and motivation to engage with a particular platform.

> So… we haven't had amazing feedback from the students, huge amount of hand-holding, videos have been made, screenshots, click here, put that there, link this, and still, at the end, you're, you know, can you share that document with us, please, because we can't access it. (L5)

For some participants, the value of the eportfolio approach appeared to lie in the eportfolio process itself rather than in the use of Loop Reflect

specifically. Indeed, there were indications that eportfolio assignments might continue to be used even if Loop Reflect were not available as a platform. This suggests that, for some participants, motivation was connected more strongly to the pedagogical value or purpose of eportfolio assessment than to the technology through which the eportfolio was created.

> And I did have students kind of building web pages using Weebly back in the day, and it worked, but it's much better, you know, having the supported, you know, the supported environment of Loop Reflect, which is obviously more sophisticated and so on, anyway. But… so I'd probably be thinking about doing it [eportfolio assessment] anyway, but… but the support, the institutional support is kind of a positive factor for you. It's absolutely fantastic. (L7)

Participants also recognised that students' motivation could influence the extent to which the possibilities offered by Loop Reflect were explored. While completing the required assignment could provide sufficient motivation to engage with the platform at a basic level, making fuller use of its features could require greater personal investment: "The buy-in from the students is essential there, I feel. You know, that they do need to, yeah, have that motivation and buy-in to actually, engage with it and utilise it, as I said, to its potential." (L6)

Curiosity, choice and interest could encourage students to experiment with different approaches, whereas those focused primarily on fulfilling assessment requirements might have less reason to do so.

> I did one where it, like, wasn't required to do Loop Reflect, it was, like, any, creative outlet. I just found that it was an easy tool that I'd used before, because Loop Reflect is used in all four years of the secondary teaching programme, and it's a very core component of our professional placement module, so I'm kind of familiar with it. So I kind of just used it, because we were also doing something creative, and I was like, this seems like a good outlet to use, and I already kind of know how to use it. (S5)

Participants' accounts also indicated that disciplinary context could shape engagement with eportfolio approaches, with their perceived relevance and value varying across areas of study. For example, a staff participant commented: "It's just interesting, because I don't think ours – and maybe this is just because they're accounting and finance students – they didn't

care about that kind of stuff [visual presentation], so they didn't care about how it looked" (L4). Conversely, a student participant shared: "Obviously there's lots of diagrams in engineering, so I did find myself using a lot of images, just screenshots of different stuff from presentations and stuff like that" (S4)

Positive recognition of eportfolio work could provide a further source of motivation. For example, positive feedback from an external examiner can validate the eportfolio assessment approach and encourage continued use.

> We got really great feedback from the external examiner, who thought the eportfolios were really great, authentic evidence, documenting the process, rather than the AI-generated bits… and honestly, last year I contemplated that we wouldn't use it as a group platform. It's not necessarily the go-to group thing, but the external examiner's feedback was so good, we said we could hardly throw it away after that. (L3)

Across these accounts, motivation emerged as an important factor in both initiating and sustaining engagement with Loop Reflect and eportfolio assessment. While assignment requirements and lecturer expectations provided strong external drivers for engagement, participants also identified personal interest, choice, curiosity, familiarity and opportunities to showcase practice as factors that could encourage greater investment in the portfolio process. The findings therefore suggest a distinction between using Loop Reflect to fulfil an assessment requirement and engaging more meaningfully with the eportfolio process when students see relevance, purpose or personal value in the activity.

Theme 5: Benefits and challenges of Loop Reflect technology

Participants expressed a range of views about the benefits and challenges associated with using Loop Reflect for eportfolio creation and assessment. For some, the platform was viewed as useful and user-friendly, providing a flexible space in which students could bring together different forms of content and create a portfolio that felt distinct from a conventional written assignment. One staff participant shared: “Why I decided to use the Loop Reflect was really because I wanted students to make the link between what we were seeing, and their practice, and embedding and kind of applying the knowledge within their practice.” (L6)

Additionally, others shared similar sentiments:

> I found it… what sort of surprised me, I didn’t really think about the visual element of Loop Reflect, or the way it allows them to bring in lots of different links and resources, and that was kind of a pleasant… surprise for me to see all the stuff the students put in there, that they would just not have put in another… another assignment, so that bit was kind of a, yeah, a surprise to me, a good surprise. (L4)

Participants noted that a Loop Reflect eportfolio could have a different feel to a conventional written document, providing opportunities to combine text with other forms of content and to make choices about how learning was represented. For example: “it just enables the students to see things and deal with material in a way that they couldn’t from, say, a Google Doc” (L1).

The flexibility offered by Loop Reflect was viewed positively, particularly in enabling students to make choices about how they represented and communicated their learning within their portfolios.

> I think, I suppose, the multimedia formats like that, that you’re really being led by the student preferences, whether that’s links to a web page, a peer-reviewed article, you know, a resource they’ve come across, or another… or a photo of something they do in their classroom, or something they’ve come across in their school. I think, yeah, the… the multiple mediums of representation and engagement are really what drive the creativity for me, because you know, it really allows some to flourish and thrive, you know, in that particular area, and others may not choose to, you know, use as many diverse mediums, I suppose, but that the option and flexibility is there. (L6)

> I found at an early stage that students' capacity to bring in, say, video or audio or other media forms allowed them to express their understanding in a kind of a more multifaceted and broader sense. It also allowed people who had different skill sets, perhaps, who might have found themselves a little limited by their capacity to render something in a formal text… but might have been able to express it better in voice, or in the use of visuals. So it just facilitated people in demonstrating how they had managed to internalise some of the academic thinking that we'd been doing through discussions. (L11)

In addition to enabling students to apply what they had learned in different formats, this flexibility could provide opportunities for them to develop digital skills through the process of creating and presenting their work. For example, students commented: "I also think that it's more useful for assessments, but you can write in your CV, or, if you're…trying to present yourself, you can say that you have some digital skills by showing your loop reflect portfolio." (S11), and "It definitely helps to become familiar with the different sharing options and file storage options of other platforms" (S9).

At the same time, experiences of the technology were mixed, with participants identifying limitations and usability issues that could make aspects of eportfolio creation more difficult. Staff members shared comments such as: "the students do find it very tricky to use" (L3), "the students, the BEd1s anyway, didn't seem to take to it intuitively" (L5), and "I want to say it's not as intuitive as the others [other tools], but that might just be because I'm biased, because I've been using the others for years, and I've only had very little experience with Loop Reflect." (S13)

Participants also identified benefits that extended beyond the immediate assessment task. ePortfolios were seen as having potential value as revision tools, allowing students to return to and revisit learning, and as resources that could potentially support employability by providing a means of showcasing skills, experiences and achievements.

> When I had that second year module, I told the students at the start, and I set it up, that their eportfolio… would help them, because they would be recording material from week by week by week, and I had a couple of check-in points during the semester… but there was also an exam component, and they all… the feedback was universal, that they really felt that supported their learning because of that incremental thing, and that they used it then as a revision tool, because they could go

> back and say, oh yeah, I remember I was writing about that in week one or week two. (L1)
>
> I can also use it when studying. It's usually when you write an essay, the essay is just going to be written, handed in, and then you probably won't look back at it, while the Loop Reflect assignments, because it's reflecting on the module and relevant information to it I'm more inclined to put a lot of effort into it, make it a bit more creative, and then once it's handed in and exams are coming up, I can look back through it, and because it's very organised with the weeks, I'm able to see what content I need to look over. (S7)
>
> I've actually had feedback from students, not that recently, but in the past, where students did show it to prospective employers. So, it actually fulfilled the, you know, the thing that we tell. We claim that they'll be able to use it, and some of them actually did, you know. (L1)

Staff participants also recognised that engaging with eportfolios could model practices relevant to students' future professional work, extending their value beyond the immediate assessment task.

> As I said, it's inclusive and special education… there's an element of, like, practice what you preach as well, in terms of, you know, as students are engaging in the content of inclusive and special education, that, you know, we also want to model what good practice and pedagogy looks like as well, so that was kind of another motivation. (L6)

There were also benefits associated specifically with Loop Reflect being an institutional and educational tool. For lecturers, the availability of Loop Reflect as a DCU-supported platform provided a convenient option for incorporating portfolio activity into their teaching.

> I found it fairly easy to use as a first-time user, so I liked that it was all designed for me, kind of. I didn't have to… yeah, whereas if it was something that I had to…figure out how they would do a joint Google Doc, or how… or, like, yeah, it was useful that it was, you know, hosted by DCU, and you have the… there's all the… the information on how to use it, it's very clear. (L4)
>
> I have… I have to say that the way in which I use Loop Reflect in one of the modules, the third year module, where, the Department of Geography, it's a geography Final Year, optional

> module, they're actually not… they don't… they aren't asked necessarily to use Loop Reflect. They are given other options. So it's open to them, as long as it's in an eportfolio style, but I do find that the students, the support that's there with regards to Reflect makes the technical issues a lot easier to deal with. (L8)

Staff participants also valued Loop Reflect's association with DCU, both in terms of trust in the platform and the institutional identity it provided. For example: "It certainly makes it a lot… you know, even bringing it into the design of an assessment is… you're much more confident to do that, because you know that the support is there, that the system is in place." (L8)

Student participants echoed this:

> I just wanted to, I suppose, give it a go and see how it looks better on there compared to platforms like Padlet, and another thing is, some information on there might be a little bit sensitive, so I think compared, like, Loop Reflect feels a bit more official compared to a third party like Padlet. (S6)

> I think the value is that it's DCU's own kind of platform. So it's one that, it's kind of… so for my word [to describe Loop Reflect], I'd say 'community', because we all kind of… if everybody, if everybody starts using it in DCU, it becomes our, like, kind of own, unique platform, and nobody else has it, so that could be our own unique advantage, over again, Canva or PowerPoint, which is more broad. (S4)

Participants valued Loop Reflect for its educational focus, while acknowledging that the processes of reflection and portfolio creation were not dependent on the platform itself: "Loop Reflect is designed in an academic context, which is probably why I think people will purely use it for that, and if they want to organise their thoughts elsewhere, they will use other platforms, like Padlet, for example." (S6)

Alongside these benefits, participants identified a number of technical and usability challenges. Experiences of the interface varied, with some finding Loop Reflect straightforward to use and others describing it as challenging or difficult to work with. For example, one student participant commented: "So the Loop Reflect portal is really user-friendly" (S2), whereas another spoke of specific issues when working with the platform:

> I think I remember when I was doing my first portfolio a bit, when I was doing my second, trying to move images around your template can be very, very tricky to get them where you want to be, and, like, you end up just moving stuff all over, and it can make a mess out your portfolio. Like, I don't really want that there, but I don't know how to get it up here. (S16)

Specific limitations included concerns about the lack of autosaving, restrictions associated with file quotas, difficulties browsing skins, limited options for presentation, and challenges with functions such as footnoting. Regarding file quota limits, one staff participant remarked: "The other thing is… the amount of space [lacking]. So, they're uploading photographs and videos.. and that is a constant issue, where they haven't updated the permissions, so it doesn't come in." (L5)

Student participants also shared issues with working with Loop Reflect:

You need to use a lot of pictures and make things, but I have actually found, and this is just my one gripe with it, I actually have run out of space completely, because I use so many pictures, and if I delete them, it erases all my work. (S5)

I just, with Word, and even Google Docs, I find what I like is that I can work directly from it. With Loop Reflect, it doesn't save automatically, so I'm scared my work will get lost, so I tend to write it in a different… somewhere else, and copy-paste it over later. (S14)

There are, like, hundreds of skins, and they're quite… it's quite tedious to go through them all, so I was lucky that I found the one I wanted on, like, the first or second page. I remember I was gonna go through more and more, but it just took too long, and I went for that one, so I will say that could probably be improved, to be fair. (S10)

A staff member also shared that footnoting is less easy to do in Loop Reflect, which can be a concern as academic integrity and proper citing and referencing is vital at university.

> And I think one of the things that students struggle a bit… even though they're very positive about it, one of the things is, is properly footnoting or annotating in a Loop Reflect submission. So, that sometimes leads to a bit of bother in terms of, you know, increasingly, I think I have to be aware of that in the GenAI world. So, the thing that, for me, helps me guard against the kind of problems you might have in this is, you know, is that

> the footnotes are there, and that they're done properly, and they just struggle a bit with that in Loop Reflect, I think. (L7)

Using Loop Reflect on a mobile device could also be difficult. Participants further noted that collaboration within a group eportfolio was not always seamless and that templates needed to be configured correctly to function as intended. The extent to which these issues affected participants varied, but they could present additional challenges during the eportfolio creation process.

> "The few things that are common, and I spoke to the other tutors that do the reflection module, and we have all the same feedback. So, some of the students are working off iPads, and it is not compatible with an iPad. So, we all have to say to them, okay, now that you've got everything. Take yourself off up to the library [to a computer], fix all of your formatting, save it there. (L5)

> Sometimes, when we're doing group projects, one of the years I had to do a classroom-based assessment, that third years would normally do, and we were doing it in groups, and I found when putting multiple collaborators on a page gets very confusing, and it got to a point where everyone had a Word doc or a Google Doc that they just put all the work in, and one person edited it, so that's what I was doing, the one person who knew how to manoeuvre Loop Reflect a bit better." (S5)

> Another thing that I had, actually, one of them was a block for a website to add a link in. But the lecturer had made it so, instead of a text block, it was a file block, and obviously you can't upload a link as a file, so every single time for all ten weeks, this block had to be deleted and re-put in as a text one. So, I think with templates, another issue is if they're not made properly, it has a knock-on effect that they can't be used properly. (S7)

Importantly, participants' concerns about technical issues were not limited to the inconvenience they caused. Some participants noted that difficulties with the platform could shift attention away from the learning and assessment task itself, and take up time. This was particularly relevant where the purpose of the activity was to support reflection, demonstrate learning, or enable students to express their understanding, rather than to assess their ability to navigate the platform.

> The actual content of what we're asking them to do is what we're interested in. But that becomes secondary, because the whole thing about getting their Taisce ready and published in

> time for the date of submission is all around the formatting, and making sure that the window that you have your artefact in is the same size as the window that you have the reflection piece in, otherwise they jump around, and then whoever's correcting it can't find what relates to what. So it's… yeah, the issues in using it are just the technological piece, that UX piece. (L5)

Comparisons with commercially available platforms also featured in participants' accounts. Some regarded alternative products as easier to use, more familiar or offering a wider range of features than Loop Reflect. For example, "I usually work with PowerPoint and others, because it's easy accessible, to design things…" (S1) and "I personally find Google Suite and Microsoft Office much easier to use from the perspective of creating things." (S9)

Participants also questioned whether Loop Reflect offered a distinctive feature or function that could not be achieved through other tools: "What I would say is there's nothing that, there's nothing unique to Loop Reflect that would make you, maybe switch from another platform if you're used to another platform." (S4)

These comparisons were accompanied by calls for additional functionality, particularly in relation to presentation and the overall experience of creating a eportfolio.

> So, from a non-programmer perspective, like, the drag-and-drop part is usually the best thing. But again, like, it could have been more interactive, like, you could have provided some more options for designing the layouts or importing the layouts would have been better if, we can just directly paste some CSS, and design that accordingly. (S2)

However, such criticisms existed alongside recognition of Loop Reflect's potential and the practical advantages of having an institutionally supported tool available for portfolio work. One student participant simply remarked: "I think it'll have a lot of potential." (S1)

Overall, participants' accounts indicate that experiences of Loop Reflect were shaped by a balance between the possibilities afforded by the platform and the practical challenges encountered in using it. Its flexibility, capacity to accommodate different forms of expression, institutional reputation and support, and potential to support student learning were valued, while limitations in functionality and usability could detract from these benefits. The findings suggest that the value of Loop Reflect lies in

its capacity to facilitate the eportfolio process without detracting from the learning and assessment at its core.

Theme 6: Assessment and feedback

Participants highlighted both opportunities and challenges associated with the assessment of eportfolios created using Loop Reflect and the provision of feedback. ePortfolio assessment was seen as offering possibilities that differed from more traditional forms of assessment, including opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways and for stronger students to extend their work beyond minimum requirements. One staff participant remarked: “And the strong students, I think, have a sense that they’re stretching themselves, and they’re doing something not just…novel, but purposeful.” (L7)

At the same time, participants reflected on the importance of ensuring that eportfolio assessment was appropriate to the particular context, rather than adopting Loop Reflect simply because the technology was available.

> So out of the three assignments, I think we’ve done on it only one of them have actually it’s been suited to using Loop Reflect, because using pictures and videos and links makes sense, but the other two times, it’s just kind of using it to use it. (S8)

Participants also highlighted the potential for eportfolios to support assessment that draws together learning from across a module or programme. By bringing together different elements of learning within a single eportfolio, students could demonstrate connections across experiences, activities or areas of study rather than demonstrating learning through separate assessment activities.

> The idea is that they’re integrating everything they’ve learned into the programme… I would have one or two points along the way, which I asked them to start even doing out plans, you know, to actually show where each of their modules link together and where the thinking behind some of the topics that we raise… where they can draw those thinkings from different modules. (L8)

Formative eportfolio work could also provide lecturers with insight into students’ progress and reveal areas in which they were experiencing difficulty, creating opportunities for feedback or intervention during the learning process rather than only at the point of final submission. In this sense, eportfolios could provide lecturers with a broader view of students’ learning as it developed over time.

> I asked them to kind of pick a thing from the… that week, where they could say, you know, this… I understood this bit, or this was where I got stuck, I didn't get to finish the thing. Just, I have it for dual purpose. I make them do it to practice. And I use it to catch if there's anybody got stuck on something, and I love it. (L3)

Staff participants generally indicated that grading a Loop Reflect eportfolio via an assignment submission to the Loop VLE was straightforward, although aspects of the process could be made more seamless. For example, one staff participant commented: "I find that piece easy to… yeah, it's… everything's done then, and it's just much like the rest of Loop. It's familiar, so it works." (L5)

However, another shared insight into the difficulties encountered when looking at both Loop and Loop Reflect

> When I'm in the office and I have two screens, I'm happy out. If I'm working at home on the laptop, it's a bit of a nuisance, but…Because I'd have the rubric on the Loop page that I'm grading into, and then to actually see the eportfolio. (L5)

The practical demands associated with assessment became more apparent when eportfolios were used frequently or with larger student cohorts. Issues that may have been relatively minor when encountered in individual submissions could become more significant when repeated across a large class, adding to the workload associated with grading and managing portfolio submissions.

> I suppose, because they're submitting monthly, as well as the overall [reflection], I'm doing it a lot and it's only an extra couple of clicks, but an extra couple of clicks for 120 students once a month, it's actually a lot of extra time, even with two screens, waiting for it to load. So… and it doesn't always load properly, and then you don't know, is that a Reflect issue? Is that a broadband issue? Is that a… student issue, so you kind of have to go back to it again. I… I absolutely hate it. (L2)

Despite these practical challenges, eportfolio assessment could also offer a different grading experience for lecturers. One staff participant described less monotony when grading Loop Reflect portfolios compared with more traditional assignments, reflecting the greater variation that could be present across students' submissions: "As a grader, it's a little bit more

interesting to be grading different portfolios than to be grading the same essay for maybe 100 students." (L10)

Templates were also viewed as useful in supporting the assessment process by providing some structure to students' eportfolios.

> I would have been happy to work on it myself, but I thought that the template was very handy to give guidance, and a starting point from where you need to start, and then you have the freedom to add extra onto it if you want. (S7)

Participants also referred to the use of group portfolios, highlighting another way in which Loop Reflect could be used within assessment.

> With the submission of the portfolio, as well, they were able to work as a group, as well individually, for the reflections, but also as a group. For, so they've, they, they've used the, they've used Loop Reflect individually and also as a group (L9)

Variation was also evident in how students experienced and engaged with eportfolio assessment. While some students were able to use the flexibility of the eportfolio format to explore and demonstrate their learning in greater depth, there was a perception that some students might regard portfolio assignments as less academically serious than more traditional forms of assessment.

> One thing I said at the beginning that it stretches the strong student, but I have a slight fear that the weaker students can tend to think that… to take it slightly less academically seriously than types of assessment that they perceive as traditional, that signal this is an academic assessment. (L7)

This points to differing understandings of what constitutes academic work and suggests that students may not necessarily attach the same value or expectations to eportfolio assessment as they do to more established assessment formats.

Generative AI also featured in discussions of eportfolio assessment, with some staff participants reflecting on how its increasing use was shaping their approaches to assessment. For example, one staff participant shared: "it obviously aligns so well with the principles of UDL [universal design for learning], and, you know, designing out the Gen AI, and all of those things that are going on at the top level." (L6)

Other staff participants commented:

> It's different, and it's applicable in the situation that I'm applying it to, and it does make it… it is allowing me to do an assessment in a slightly different way, and it's helping me to avoid certain issues that might be there with… with AI, or just using the general reporting style that you might do in written format. So it is… it's different and applicable. (L8)

> I definitely would stick with the eportfolio aspect and reflection, because I think… as AI gets more invasive and everything… It's a good defence against it, you know? To do challenge-based learning, and they have to talk about their own experience, and even if they use AI to help them articulate it, that's okay, as long as they've done… done the things, you know? (L12)

Within this discussion, concern was expressed about students using GenAI to generate reflections, particularly where the intention of the task was for students to engage personally and critically with their own experiences and learning.

> Yeah, some of them are using AI to produce their reflections. It's been very easy to detect until now, but it's getting harder, you know? I mean, I can't prove they use AI, but I can certainly tell them their reflection is very generic and bland and lacking details and not in reasonable language, therefore you are failing. But it's getting… harder to detect, and we're changing our rules every year to try and keep up with it. (L12)

The alignment between learning outcomes, and the choice of Loop Reflect eportfolio to demonstrate that alignment, was also underscored.

> From my personal experience using it, doing assignments on it, it's not really the platform that's the problem. Doing a business course, the pictures are more put in because they have to be on Loop Reflect, rather than that they actually need to be there. The general sentiment when it's used in a module it's just a bit annoying to use it if it doesn't actually fit what you're doing in the module. (S8)

Similarly, some staff participants shared that they had taken over coordinating a module where a Loop Reflect eportfolio assignment was used, rather than consciously designing it in themselves: "I've inherited it, because it's something that's used, before I was in the role." (L5)

Overall, the findings suggest that eportfolio assessment can offer opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in varied and more holistic ways, while also providing lecturers with insights into the development of learning over time. However, participants' accounts also highlighted practical considerations around grading, feedback, class size and assessment design, alongside emerging questions about the use of AI in reflective work. The value of Loop Reflect within assessment therefore appeared to depend on its suitability for the particular context and the extent to which the eportfolio task, assessment processes and intended learning outcomes were aligned.

Theme 7: Creativity and individuality

Creativity and individuality emerged as important features of the eportfolio experience, with participants highlighting how assessment task design and Loop Reflect technology can foster these. Compared with more structured assessment formats, eportfolios could provide students with greater choice in expressing their own points of view in a creative manner, and encourage them to draw on their particular strengths when developing their eportfolios.

> While we wanted to get them to do a kind of a deep dive in innovation or technology in psychology, like, you know, some people might use like, pictures, and that would be the extent of it, whereas it just… it allows this creativity… not only just to have pictures, or you can have links, you can have… I mean, some people use presentations, they actually record themselves, do it, and I really kind of encourage any of those sorts of things. Some people did, like, little podcasts and stuff that they added to the page, and it just… I suppose… it…it a creative way of putting across the content, which, like, really of benefit to them. (L10)

> One thing I think that's important to me, at least in this subject of history, is to, to give the students a sense that it's a creative process. And I think the eportfolio pages allow the students to exercise creativity in the way they construct their, you know, their submissions and so on, so that's very important. (L7)

One student participant captured this succinctly, when asked for a word to describe Loop Reflect: "For the word, kind of going off S16's 'freedom' idea, I'd probably just say, like, 'canvas', because you can kind of make it what you want it to be." (S10)

The flexibility of eportfolio assessment was also seen as creating opportunities for students to approach the task in ways that reflected their individual abilities and preferences. Participants noted that students could play to their strengths, rather than being restricted to demonstrating their learning through a single format or mode of expression.

> You know, all the prompt questions are there, but they're very flexible in terms of, you know, getting them to interrogate what stood out for me, or what would I take to apply, or what would I communicate with colleagues, and again, encouraging them to do that in a really accessible means, which is what we want them to do going forward as well, that, you know, being able to

> actually communicate and, take on board those core messages and, disseminate them to within their settings as kind of, like, that leaders for inclusion and going forward. So I suppose, really, yeah, it was the flexibility, the agency, being able to work, work for and with a diverse cohort. (L11)

Student participants discussed how the use of skins can make their eportfolios stand out, and to use them "…would be nice, because otherwise it… honestly, it just looks like any other document, and that's boring, so if you're gonna make some creative, make it look nice." (S13)

For some students, this provided scope to engage creatively with the eportfolio and make it more personally meaningful. Individuality was therefore evident not only in the appearance of portfolios, but also in the choices students made about how they represented themselves, their experiences and their learning.

> Yeah, I think just, like, the nature of it, because it's, like different from, like, say, an essay or a PowerPoint, no matter… like, it doesn't have such a rigid structure, that no matter what, like, everyone's is gonna look a little bit different, so, like, I would say it does promote uniqueness in that sense. (S3)

Multimodality was an important factor in supporting creativity and individuality. Loop Reflect allowed students to incorporate different forms of content within their portfolios, rather than relying exclusively on written text.

> I think for mine, it's mostly visual, like, say, for the third year one, it's, like, capturing screenshots or things like that of structures, but they could also capture videos. I had two students from 15 [students] actually capture a little animation that they had on their screen, so they were able to embed the animation. And then I do get students, on occasion, I would say to them about putting their videos into YouTube, and then putting the link in. So I've had a couple of students that have managed to do that, you know? (L3)

> The very fact that you use a completely different media format, or offer the option, in a kind of a blunt way, brings to life for people, something that they may not have thought of… introducing something that they might not have previously considered. Now, that's creativity. (L11)

Alongside the opportunities for creativity and personalisation, participants highlighted a tension between the use of exemplar eportfolios as a source of guidance and the desire to encourage students to develop their own individual approach. While exemplar portfolios could offer useful guidance, concern was expressed that students might reproduce the approaches they had seen rather than developing their own ideas. One staff participant chose not to provide exemplar portfolios due to concerns about copying and a desire to encourage students to develop their own individual approach.

> My one issue is I would like to give them sample… sample portfolios, but I don't, because they're somewhat personal, you know? And also, like, I give free… kind of the same assignment every year, so I feel if I gave them a good portfolio, they'd just copy it. (L12)

Related to this was a perceived risk of homogeneity across eportfolios. Where students were provided with similar structures, examples or expectations, there was potential for eportfolios to become increasingly alike, reducing some of the individuality that participants valued within this form of assessment. This highlights a tension between providing sufficient structure to help students understand the task and maintaining the openness that enables creativity and individual expression. The degree of guidance provided could therefore have implications for the extent to which students felt able to make their portfolio their own: "If there was more, say… like, guidance… then people's would start looking the same, which, I don't know if that's a good thing, but yeah." (S3)

Overall, the findings suggest that creativity and individuality were closely connected to the flexibility of eportfolio assessment, enabling students to express themselves in their own unique ways. Loop Reflect could provide opportunities for personalisation, multimodal expression and creative approaches to presenting learning and reflection, while allowing students to draw on their individual strengths. However, there is a tension between providing students with guidance and maintaining the flexibility that allowed them to develop creative and individual approaches to their eportfolios.

Theme 8: Embedding of portfolios in the curriculum

Participants described different ways in which eportfolios and Loop Reflect were embedded within the curriculum, ranging from use within individual modules to more extensive adoption across a programme. In many contexts, eportfolio activity was confined to a particular module or assessment, while in others, students engaged with Loop Reflect repeatedly across their programme of study.

> Myself, sometimes in… within modules, I'll use it as part of… an assessment. You know, in a way of assessing a module, and various module coordinators will do the same thing. But, yeah, it is… it is that one kind of module, which is a reflective module, and it is, yeah, that… It's one, year on year. There's a link from year to year with the different modules, and it is… it is Loop Reflect, which is the way in which that that is developed and designed, yeah. (L8)

> I can speak to my course where we take a placement module every year. So every year there's a different theme we're given for Loop Reflect, so our first year it was teacher as a communicator, and then the second year would be teacher as involved with parents, or something like that. (S5)

Speaking in particular about a large undergraduate teacher education programme, on staff participant commented on whether students use Loop Reflect: "They all do. …rely on it quite heavily" (L5)

Programme-based use of eportfolios was viewed as offering opportunities to connect learning and deepen reflection across a programme. Where eportfolios are used throughout a programme, however, questions about how these activities were coordinated were raised. In particular, one concern related to the potential for students to be asked to engage repeatedly in similar reflective activities. Where eportfolio and reflective tasks were designed independently at module level, without consideration of students' experiences elsewhere in the programme, this could result in repetition or what one participant characterised as 'over-reflection.' This suggests that increasing the use of eportfolios across a programme does not necessarily result in a more coherent portfolio experience unless consideration is also given to how individual activities relate to one another.

> The students told me they're really sick of reflections, like they're doing reflections and everything, and they had used

> Loop Reflect a good bit as well, or they seemed… yeah, they said they'd used it a good bit, and… they didn't really have problems with using it, so they seemed fairly au fait with it. So that made me really conscious of… Not asking them to reflect, again. I think it is being used, obviously, for… for our students in the Business School. It's obviously being used a lot, but we don't actually talk about it as a school, talk about it. So, I don't know who's using it in the program unless I hear it anecdotally. (L4)

The findings therefore highlight a distinction between the extensive use of eportfolios across a programme and a genuinely programme-based approach to eportfolio assessment. While students may encounter Loop Reflect in multiple modules, this does not in itself mean that those eportfolio activities have been designed as connected elements of the programme. A programme focus would involve consideration of how eportfolio activities complement one another and how students' engagement with reflection and portfolio creation develops across their studies.

Overall, the findings indicate that embedding portfolios across a programme involves more than their use within multiple modules. Consideration of how portfolio activities relate to one another at programme level may help to create a more connected experience for students and minimise repeated engagement with similar reflective tasks.

Conclusion

Overall, there appear to be mixed experiences of eportfolios and Loop Reflect among students and staff. This is perhaps not surprising, given the large number of users across the five faculties of the university, the different disciplines involved, and the variety in how eportfolio tasks are designed and actualised.

It is clear that teaching staff are key determinants of how students experience Loop Reflect eportfolios. Where there is clear constructive alignment between learning outcomes, the eportfolio task, and how it is assessed, students are likely to have a more positive experience. Conversely, where the use of a Loop Reflect eportfolio doesn't 'fit' the particular context, students can have a negative experience. Similarly, it is important to ensure there is a clear focus on the eportfolio task, rather than on the technology surrounding it.

The structuring and scaffolding of eportfolio tasks are also very important. Templates, guidance, Loop Reflect demonstrations, reflective practice models, formative feedback and more can help students succeed with the eportfolio task at hand.

Similarly, providing and accessing support is vital. Students receive support from one another, from their lecturers, and also from the TEU team. However, there can be issues in navigating help documentation, and the frequency of synchronous support like drop-in clinics may not align with the point in time at which students need it. Additionally, not engaging with the eportfolio task or with the supports in good time can compound issues. Staff welcome the institutional support they receive for Loop Reflect eportfolios and it is a major factor in encouraging them to incorporate eportfolios in their practice.

ePortfolios, with their flexible and multimodal affordances, can enable students to showcase their individuality, personality, creativity and more. However, the reliability of the underlying technology is key here. Whilst some students found the Loop Reflect platform easy to use, others reported difficulties engaging with the interface, laying out eportfolio pages, managing the limited file quota, and sharing links to Google Drive artefacts. There is certainly a learning curve with using Loop Reflect – and once students complete one eportfolio task they find it fine to complete subsequent ones, are more likely to choose to use Loop Reflect again if they have a choice to. Nonetheless, it is imperative to address the

technological challenges faced by users so that time and energy is not drained from the substantive learning or assessment task at hand.

The integration between Loop Reflect and the Moodle-based Loop VLE works well for assessment submission and grading, but in large class cohorts, issues can scale up and increase workload for staff. Nevertheless, both staff and students feel that students can shine in an eportfolio assessment, and this can make the grading of their submissions enjoyable for staff. Furthermore, where students engage with an eportfolio over a period of time, it can serve as a helpful revision tool for them, as it has captured their learning journey.

The majority of Loop Reflect eportfolio use lies in single modules, driven by individual lecturers. There are limited examples of a true programme-focused approach to eportfolio. Although in some programmes there can be widespread use of Loop Reflect eportfolios, they are not necessarily connected and coherent. Arguably, embedding a true programme-focussed approach to eportfolios will help to ensure a consistent positive experience for students, build their reflective and digital skills over time, and help them to integrate their learning across their programme.

The authors embarked on this research study to explore the experiences of students and staff with Loop Reflect eportfolios to further the eportfolio initiative at DCU. Acting on these emerging findings, the TEU team took the following steps to address issues raised, ahead of the 2026-2027 academic year:

- Upgraded Loop Reflect to the latest version of Mahara software, which included a re-architected interface that is more modern, consistent and responsive
- Increased the limited file quota for users
- Scheduled more frequent drop-in clinics, including into the university's exam period
- Redesigned the Loop Reflect Help Page to improve navigation and sharing of direct links to help articles
- Proactively reached out to staff who use Loop Reflect eportfolios for assessment to offer demonstrations and support for their students

It is hoped these initial steps will help enhance student and staff experiences of Loop Reflect eportfolio, but it is important to recognise that they are not an end point in and of themselves. The DCU eportfolio initiative requires ongoing engagement with students and staff, listening to them, acting on their feedback, and collaborating with them to ensure the technology and the support provided continually meets their needs.

In doing so, we hope the next decade of eportfolios at DCU can be as fruitful – if not more – as the last.

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