EPICA

Strategic Partnership for the Co-Design of an Innovative and Scalable ePortfolio

Co-funded by the Horizon 2020 programme
of the European Union

EPICA Newsletter - 9th Edition – June 2020

EPICA – INTERVIEW OF THE MONTH

Mr. Albert Nsengiyumva,
Executive Secretary
Association for the Development of Education in Africa
African Development Bank
Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

We hear a lot about the skills gap between university graduates and the labour market. What would you say are the main contributing factors that lead to this disparity?

The demand of new skills in the labour market change much faster than the capacity of universities to quickly adapt its programmes to respond to the labour market demands. And this is particularly true with the digitalisation as part of the so-called 4IR. Some of the key contributing factors to these skills gap are:

1. Limited capacity at the skills supply side to adapt to new demand
2. Weak Public – Private Partnerships to inform and support the supply side in order to meet the demand in the labour market
3. Resource constraints for universities to attract qualified professors and introduce new technologies to enhance hands-on training in order to respond to the labour market requirements

From your point of view, which academic fields, businesses or industries suffer the most because of this?

In the African context, I would say that the academic fields that are most suffering are:

- Agriculture (introduction of modern technologies in farming to increase productivity and quality of produces)
- Engineering and IT (lack of adequate equipment and competent professors as well as exposure to the industry environment)
- Construction and civil work
- New fields like oil and gas, mining…

What is an ePortfolio and how is it different from a CV or a graduate certificate?

An ePortfolio is an online platform (enabler) that facilitates to market the skills and competences of students/graduates in the labour market. It is indeed different from a CV or graduate certificate as it allows to provide more details including the possibility to interact with professors and to provide background information so that the potential employer can get confidence and more insight into the acquired skills and competences of the candidate. It also allows the university to review its programmes based on the feedback it receives from the ePortfolio.

How, in your opinion, does having an ePortfolio benefit a student and graduate?

It indeed gives the ability for a student and graduate to gain visibility in the labour market and to upgrade his/her skills based on the labour market demands.

Who stands to benefit from receiving access to an ePortfolio, i.e. how will this be useful to employers?

With access to an ePortfolio, the employers will have a single point of access when they need to hire new employees and also the opportunity to follow the study path of a potential future employee.

How has this idea been received by those who stand to benefit from it?

Very highly appreciated as long as employers and universities can be mobilised and sensitised to use it.

What do you think are the most crucial coming steps that need to be negotiated for a successful implementation of EPICA's strategy, such as overcoming technological requirements, increasing the visibility of the initiative, improving funding, etc.?

In my view, the next crucial step is to pilot the ePortfolio in a few African countries that are well prepared to adopt it and then scale it up with a monitoring tool in place to assess its performance over time.

THE RELEASE OF EPICA EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS KIT

*By: Marcelo Maina, Lourdes Guàrdia,
Federica Mancini, Sandrine Albert,
Hind Naaman (UOC, Spain)*

EPICA, a strategic partnership for the co-design of an innovative and scalable ePortfolio ecosystem to improve the quality and visibility of employability skills, aims to connect universities and businesses in Europe and in Africa for the purpose of decreasing the gap between what education offers and what the market demands.

Ensuring a successful transition between higher education and work in addition to providing career-ending students opportunities to showcase their employability skills to prospective employers are the main pedagogical innovations that EPICA project brings to the educational system.

To assist in the execution of these innovations, the EPICA team is pleased to announce the launching of the EPICA Employability Skills Kit; a set of resources to support and guide different stakeholders participating in the EPICA pilot or new institutions aiming to implement the suggested methodological approach and integrating EPICA ePortfolio. The kit includes:

- EPICA handbook
- EPICA Teacher Guide
- EPICA Student Guide
- EPICA Employer Guide
- Employability Skills Rubrics
- Teacher Process Simulation
- Student Process Simulation
- Student Appraisal Scale
- Employer Process Simulation
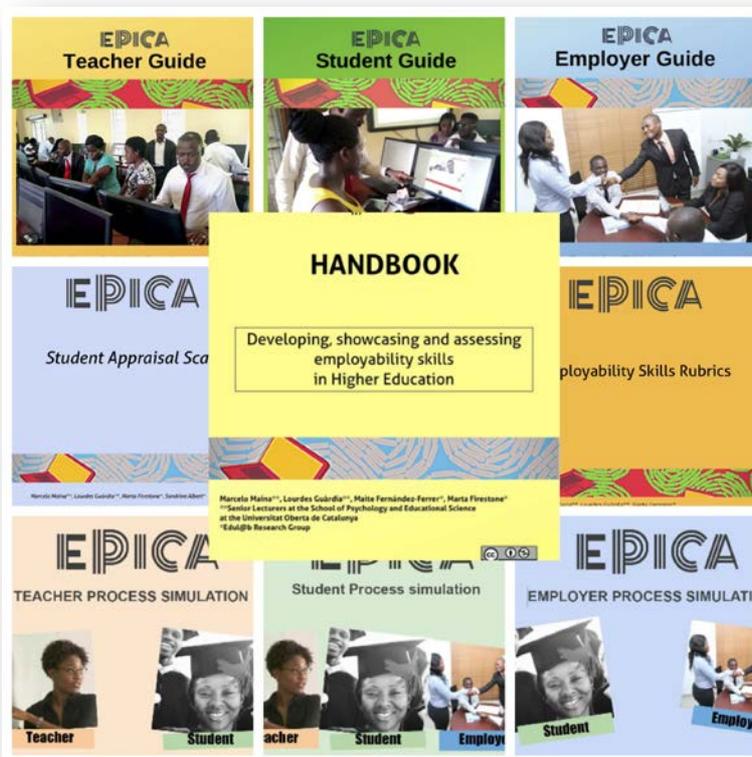
EPICA handbook discusses the concept of employability, introduces the most valued skills by employers, and focuses on how to put them in practice. The handbook provides institutions and teachers with different strategies to develop and monitor students´ employability skills, to implement these skills effectively in the educational system, and to use the ePortfolio as an innovative educational tool.

EPICA Teacher Guide clarifies the role of teachers in the implementation process. The guide provides the different steps teachers are expected to follow from start to end to help students in making their employability skills more visible.

EPICA Student Guide describes the phases students need to follow when assembling their ePortfolio by choosing the most suitable evidence which reflects their acquisition of employability skills. The guide details phase one which includes identifying, analysing, and justifying evidence to submit them for teacher´s assessment, and phase two to help students articulate their skills through a video testimony to be submitted to employers.

EPICA Employer Guide clarifies to employers the procedure of appraising student's work and the

different criteria in the appraisal scale that permit the assessment of the portfolio as a whole, the video testimony, the evidence, and the overall appraisal.

Employability Skills Rubrics allows teachers to measure a range of employability skills on a scale of 4, in which 1 stands for Beginner and 4 for Exemplary. 15 samples of rubrics were prepared for different employability skills to facilitate the assessment task.

Teacher Process Simulation, Student Process Simulation, and Employer Process Simulation are three resources that visualize the steps to be followed by teachers, students and employers respectively, thus guiding them throughout the ePortfolio journey and showing them the main technical features.

Student Appraisal Scale includes the different questions that employers should ask themselves when measuring the student's employability skills, in addition to the standard scale to be used when assessing these skills. The scale varies from insufficient to improvable, sufficient, and outstanding.

Furthermore, the purpose of the EPICA kit is to inspire the stakeholders' community in other higher education institutions through supporting the adoption of the methodological approach and competency-based ePortfolio, preferably using blended and online learning models. Indeed, this kit presents a flexible methodology that can be customised to different institutional contexts to ensure the implementation of an innovative ePortfolio-based assessment strategy, a reinforced curriculum aligned with employability skills, and a diploma supplement that includes student´s employability skills' micro-credentials.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EXTERNAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EPICA EPORTFOLIO PROJECT

By: Julie Schiering & Snorre Qveim-Leikanger
ICDE (Norway)

On average in Sub-Saharan areas, between 75 to 80% of HEI institutions (universities, colleges of commerce, technical colleges, and several specialised training institutes) are private. This fact alone brings a completely different approach to the

commercialisation compared with the same types of institutions in Europe. Due to their mainly private status, universities have a lot of autonomy in areas directly related to the principle goals of their education system. Nevertheless, new government and pan-African policies are putting even more pressure to align the universities to competency-based or skills-oriented programmes on a commercial scale.

With the aforementioned average of 75 to 80% of private HEIs, the commercialisation of eLearning products and services is done by means of direct sales. In the case of public institutions, estimated at 20% of the market, the procedures involve Public Procurement procedures (public administration). This, in most cases, involves participating in tenders on a state-by-state basis.

Besides the revenue streams obtained from student tuition fees, an important part of the HEIs' income reportedly derives from foreign aid agencies, NGOs, and technology suppliers that often subsidise their academic expenditures. Support is often provided through a carried interest, i.e. that the expenses of procuring a certain product or service is covered by a party or in full by an external entity.

Sub-Saharan universities base their sustainability model in revenues from international and African donors and public procurement from their governments. With that in mind the EPICA project includes a subtask to elaborate a set of guidelines for a strong and stable demand through public and donors' procurement of innovation (PDPI) for public and private HEI institutions aiming to purchase innovative learning implementation pack services promoting high quality skills and their visibility.

While scoping and analysing the demand side of PDPI, the subtask increased awareness of EPICA through knowledge exchange with relevant parties, and this way broadened the liaising with the public sector and relevant external entities, such as private donors, while attempting to identify and/or create a framework that would facilitate the adoption of the ePortfolio system in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This furthermore comes in the wake of African governments closing in on spending an average of almost 5% of their gross domestic production [GDP] on education, close to European and American averages: 5.12% in Switzerland, 6.1% in the USA, 6.2% in the United Kingdom and 6.3% in New Zealand.

The guidelines set forth suggested and implied that finding external funders would best be accomplished by contacting foundations, agencies, and commercial entities worldwide, while also utilising partner chain referrals and marketing opportunities at various conferences. Some examples of organisations contacted include, but were not limited to:

- The "Tech Giants" Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon
- Government initiated aid organizations, i.e. Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), the European Union (EU), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), etc.
- Foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Ford Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, etc.

These are just several organisations listed as potential donors to the EPICA project. All organisations were contacted regardless of their active funding calls or available tenders, which resulted in contacting over 65 organisations, a majority of which were foundations.
A key finding was that all reviewed private and public donors base their funding schemes on publishing project calls and applicants for funding thus have to compete. Ad-hoc funding was not identified as a viable option for securing funding for a smaller system like the EPICA ePortfolio and received no positive responses.

At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 Pandemic has furthermore taken precedence in the funding scheme available from both private and public funding bodies and institutions. Since the time of market closure in many European markets, around the middle of March 2020, a majority of relevant organisations and calls experienced a shift in focus and became primarily aligned with dealing with the crises at hand.

The combination of the results therefore contributed to a regrettable negative response. These results and responses are not final and conclusive, as the task of finding external donors will be continuous throughout the remainder of the year. Given the opportunity for more time to create relationships and to prove relevance to the market in these pandemic times, the EPICA ePortfolio could indeed become a successful tool for individuals, institutions, and organisations alike.
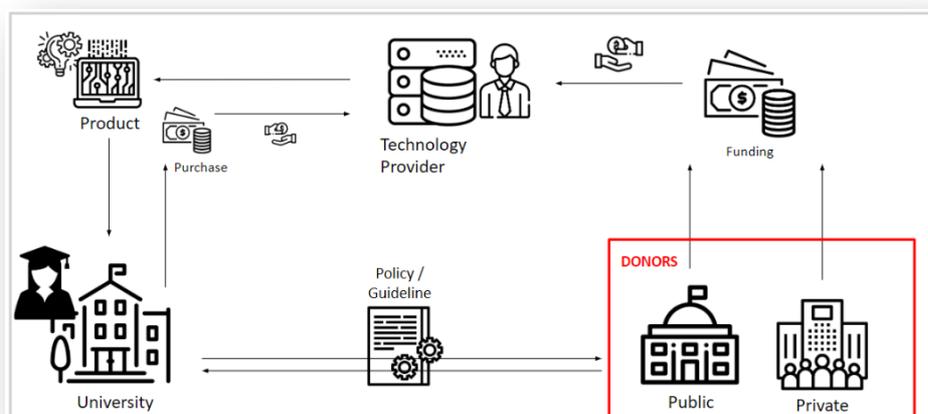
Overview of procurement framework, public and private donors. (EPICA, 2020)

MY EXPERIENCE AS A STUDENT WITH THE EPICA EPORTFOLIO

By: Sebastian Misiko
Maseno University student, Kenya

As we all know, there are pros and cons to everything including the web portals we use. Firstly, the EPICA ePortfolio was designed for various purposes. These include accessibility to notes, to act as an assignment platform, for discussions and also forums. On a scale of one to five I would rate it at four in terms of how effortlessly the ePortfolio works, because it is easy to navigate and has no complicated procedures.

Also, it is user friendly for those who use it do not have to pay to access it and assignments are easily accessible as one can access them from the to do tasks.

Depending on the school, some units are purely online which is a good thing as students can access notes and read ahead of the lecturer. It impacts students positively as they work on the given deadlines.

Another good thing about this ePortfolio is that one can easily communicate with the lecturer by just sending a text to him or her with the possibility for an immediate reply.

Also, the ePortfolio has timeout sessions which is a merit as one may not use it for adverse means if not logged out. The platform accommodates each one's perspective as the students get to give their views on different topics. From my experience with the EPICA ePortfolio, it encourages you as you get reports directly and even have a performance ladder which runs from the best.

The application works only under the condition of access to the internet. This is one of the negative aspects as it will limit the use to people who are not in a position to access good internet connectivity. Another unfavorable factor is the fact that the platform gets overloaded when most students are trying to submit their assignments to meet the deadlines.

In my conclusion, the EPICA ePortfolio is a great platform and I believe that anyone who tries will like it.

EPICA Initiative Consortium Members

To learn more about **EPICA Initiative co-funded by the** H2020 Programme of the European Union, and the purposes that underpin it, please browse our website: http://epica-initiative.africa.

Do you know friends or colleagues who might be interested in receiving information about **EPICA Initiative**? Feel free to direct them to the subscription form: http://newsletter.epica-initiative.africa.