Using Mahara at Norland
By Elspeth Pitman

With the growing number of students studying at Norland it became apparent that a new system for collating portfolios, a collection of evidence of students learning, was required. Marking and storing over 60 students' paper portfolios was no longer going to be a practical option.

Maraha was introduced to one of the lecturers through a post-graduate course and so it was decided Mahara would be trialled for one of the BA modules which required a portfolio as part of the assessment. Mahara is an internet based programme in which students can collect, create and then share a portfolio electronically. It has many functions that also allow the student to be creative by including files such as photos and video clips.

The e-portfolio was introduced to one set of students over the period of an academic year at the end of which they submitted a Mahara e-portfolio of their reflections on their first year at Norland and included evidence of their learning. 60 students successfully compiled and submitting a Mahara e-portfolio.

Based on student feedback and the marking of the e-portfolios, the effectiveness of the e-portfolios varied from student to student and quite likely was to some extent dependent on their interest and skill in using an electronic system. However, Mahara's design allows the student to create their e-portfolio in a simple format or more advanced format dependant on their electronic skills and interest.

The lecturers who marked the e-portfolios found the system to work well as they could be accessed online from any location and feedback can either be inserted into the page or uploaded as a separate document.

There were some difficulties with the system being slow at opening attached files, however, these technical issues should be resolved with a newer version of Mahara. Overall, the implementation of Mahara appears to be something that the college will continue to explore and some ideas have already been discussed. Although some careful consideration needs to be made in relation to the amount of time it requires to teach the students how to use Mahara and also disadvantaging students who find computer based work challenging. Mahara will be used again for the same module in the new academic year with a new set of students.

In conclusion, the wider implementation of Mahara throughout Norland will depend on individual interest and evaluation of its effectiveness as a learning tool. However, with the growing number of students studying at Norland its value as a learning tool will quite likely force the exploration of its use more widely throughout Norland.

July 2014