Case Study

Supporting recording and archiving of research student supervisory meetings with PebblePad

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The background context

The Research Graduate School (RGS) at the University leads student activity across eight Research Institutes. Currently there are around 150 postgraduate research students on research masters, MPhil, PhD and other doctoral programmes, roughly half of whom are part-time, and geographically dispersed, with some based overseas.

The current practice

Research students were expected to complete notes of formal supervisory meetings and maintain them as a record of supervision, including their action planning and engagement with Personal Development Planning (PDP). A Word template was provided for the required format.

Supervisors could not provide consistent, across-the-board records that such supervision had taken place either, as the template was not always in use, and where it was (or other recording styles were used) records might be captured in either paper or electronic formats, but without assurance that the records were in fact kept.

In practice, the RGS did not receive records of supervisory meetings, and so could neither monitor supervision as a regular practice, nor provide evidence in occasional claims that supervision had not taken place.

The challenge

Our aim is to develop and introduce a consistent process across all institutes for all students and all supervisors: for students to record their supervisory meetings, particularly key outcomes of meetings (rather than minutiae) in terms of action plans and progress towards these, and record PDP opportunities; for supervisors to comment on the records; and for the RGS to archive such records.

The University Research Strategy anticipates an increase between now and 2014 to 500 postgraduate students in total (on and off campus). Notwithstanding current issues, with this growth in mind, ad hoc processes are no longer effective or efficient, nor in line with quality assurance, in ensuring that supervision is being conducted on a regular basis, or leading to identifiable progress in research programmes and student development.

The approach

The RGS, with assistance from the Head of e-Learning, designed a custom PebblePad form. The e-PDP Development Officer (ePDP-DO, the author) was then put in charge of working out process issues, and rolling out the process to students, supervisors and the RGS administration. The development is emergent, partly because the roll-out plan changed direction strategically, and partly because the context of roll-out is not easily reducible to consistent conditions.

Four main stakeholders have been identified: students, supervisors, RGS administration, and the ePDP-DO. The RGS's aim is to have the process rolled out to all students by the end of the 2009-10 academic year.

The initial intention of the RGS and ePDP-DO had been to trial the process with a small number of supervisors and some of their students. However, the RGS then decided to move straight to implementation. As the Research Institutes have different backgrounds, the strategic implementation is now based around those who will engage actively first – both students and staff. Students are being trained to train their supervisors, as supervisors are not usually available to attend training in any numbers, and this leads to inefficient use of the ePDP-DO's time in training.

" The training sessions are being used to test the process, along with feedback afterwards. "

However, the training is not just "click here" to execute completion of the form, but includes holistic training on action planning, PDP, eportfolios and PebblePad, as without these, the form will be seen in isolation, and render the experience fragmented and unsatisfactory.

The issues

- Structurally, the CETL – where the ePDP-DO is based – does not have postgraduate student issues within its remit. However, the project will ultimately involve well over 100 academics as supervisors, and thus offers a route to staff uptake of PebblePad more generally. This is supported by the ePDP-DO as a recent PhD student at the University, who has an interest in research student PDP.
- Culturally, there is some resistance to the introduction of "another system", however, there is also some clear positive uptake. This mostly mirrors issues experienced with introducing other technologies, so does not have any direct implications for PebblePad itself.
- Pedagogically, there are issues with the extent to which research students, certainly many new ones, understand enough about issues such as student-supervisor relationships, action planning or PDP to be able to use the form effectively without an holistic view.

- Technically, there are issues with the trust involved in passing a form between different parties and the extent to which it can be considered authoritative. Additionally, there are issues with manual account provisioning from inadequate central records data.
- Politically, culturally and technically there are unaddressed issues about the long-term maintenance of "the form" (and the processes around it) and the provision of training.

The result

The ePDP-DO negotiated a real level of control over the roll-out process, which enables flexibility in development and delivery, and avoids micro-management.

Initial training for students is around 30% complete. However, the actual usage of the forms is currently less than this. There are signs of issues arising with staff questioning the utility of the process who may not have been involved in the decision to introduce it, although others welcome it. Such issues will need addressing at an appropriate level.

The ePDP-DO is about to move to tactics for reaching students and staff, to work with some of them in groups within institutes, and geographical locations. We also need to engage in evaluation and further development. There are however issues within the RGS around workload and staff availability for introducing new processes.

The use of PebblePad in the RGS is anticipated to expand, for both formal and informal purposes; indeed some other activities have begun since the start of this particular usage, so we are making reputational gains with cross-fertilisation.

The learning

Networks of contacts and influence are helpful to create positive uptake, rather than relying on formal policy statements as drivers to uptake. The rollout of this project is not independent of other developments with the platform rollout, and making them work together is valuable.

The success of this project in this context depends, at least to some extent, on the particular characteristics and prior experiences of the eP-DP-DO. However, the analytical aspects (e.g. stakeholders, form design, process structure, development) are shareable and repeatable. We look forward to sharing the process and the form with others in the community, for their use and feedback.

In brief

- Negotiating control – with line manager support – over aspects of the rollout enables more robustness in the developmental process.
- Working with all stakeholders to ensure they all find benefits they can own enables positive process embedding.
- Treating roll-out of projects within wider contexts may support better long-term roll-out, even if in the short-term it draws a particular project out.

Acknowledgements