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Ysgol Addysg a Dysgol Oes | School of Education and Lifelong Learning

2008

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSGU UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

Improving and Implementing Academic and Personal Progress Reviews

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http://www.aber.ac.uk/cy/directory/
5. Teaching Cycle 3

TEACHING CYCLE 3: IMPROVING AND IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL PROGRESS REVIEWS IN THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

A Report Illustrating How Institution Based Academic And Personal Progress Reviews (APPR) Can Be Used To Develop Subject Specific Academic And Personal Skills
Executive Summary

This report describes how personal development plans or academic and personal progress reviews can be successfully implemented in subject specific areas. The intervention was used with first, second and third year undergraduate students in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Wales Aberystwyth. Such an intervention was developed with the aim of identifying and developing skills required for the study of degree level Education. The findings suggest that a subject-specific form is particularly useful in helping students to identify strengths and weaknesses of personal and academic skills.

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to illustrate how the institution Academic and Personal Progress Review (APPR) form can be developed into a subject specific form and to provide students' perceptions of this adapted version. A subject-specific form will enable students to develop essential skills and is therefore directly related to teaching in higher education.

1.3 APPR at Aberystwyth University

The standard proforma adapted by UWA is based upon that used at the University College London. A copy of the standard review used for each year group can be found in appendix 10. It is apparent that the form includes both academic and personal skills but these are not subject specific. Departments are given the freedom to implement the form in ways that they see best.
1.4 Intended Outcomes

For undergraduate students in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, APPR works via the personal tutor system. Therefore, the students are contacted via email and asked to make an appointment with their personal tutor in order to discuss their APPR form and any other issues.

As mentioned previously, initially the UWA APPR form was utilised but the student uptake was very low indeed, despite the students being reminded on numerous occasions and the importance of the forms being emphasised. Furthermore, as Education is offered as a combination degree (joint honours or major/minor), undergraduates were expected to complete the same APPR from twice; once within the School of Education and Lifelong Learning and once within their other department.

In order to explore the reasons for the low uptake of APPR, the matter was raised at the Staff Student Consultative Committee on 18th November 2005. The students noted that the APPR form was over-complicated and that joint honours students had to complete the form twice making the process rather repetitive. The students suggested, and it was later agreed at an Undergraduate Committee meeting, that the form be adapted and made more subject specific.

1.5 Brief Review of the Literature

The literature relating to personal development planning appears to be wide ranging and East (2005) explains that the UK higher education system expects all higher education institutions to implement some system of personal development planning for students on all taught courses. The author progresses to suggest that most universities operate the personal development planning process through tutor systems.
and, in his opinion, the fact that, in most cases, a report is completed makes the process of providing advice more rewarding for staff and students (East, 2005).

East (2005) also describes the process of development planning and advises that it usually involves students auditing their skills and providing evidence to justify their strengths. Clegg and Bradley (2006) expand upon this by suggesting that there appear to be different types of personal development planning processes and they explain that the academic model focuses upon "student learning, the development of metacognitive skills and the attributes required within the subject discipline". They support this point by suggesting that this academic model may involve covering subject-specific key skills, including skills required for effective presentations and essay writing (Clegg et al., 2006). All of the sources, however, appear to agree with East (2005) when he suggests that the essential focus of personal development planning is on reflection, which allows students to identify skills and consider ways of improving upon these.

Monks, Conway and Dhuignneain (2006) explain that one of the most apparent problems with personal development plans is the method in which it can be assessed. The authors explain that this is due to the fact that the process is of a personal nature and often involves identifying strengths and weaknesses (Monks et al., 2006). It is likely, although not explicitly suggested in this source, that due to the fact the process is not assessed students' participation may be low.

Interestingly, Monks et al., (2006) also propose that the use of personal development planning can impact upon student retention as students can see the link between the skills they are developing in subjects and wider employment opportunities. The researchers do, however, point out that this proposition requires further research and is rather speculative. It therefore appears that that personal
development planning is used in a variety of forms across institutions, including the development of both academic and personal skills and in order to aid student retention and progression.

2. The Teaching Cycle

2.1 Designing and Implementing the 'New' APPR Form

During the summer of 2006, a new first draft APPR form was designed. This form consisted of an 'instructions' sheet outlining exactly what students were expected to do, followed by a key Education skills audit. This audit was drawn up by referring closely to the assessment criteria utilised for Education modules and by liasing closely with members of Undergraduate staff to determine the academic and personal skills Education students should have.

Following this key skills audit, the report divided into three sections; a semester I proforma, a semester 2 proforma and a final year proforma. These followed exactly the same format as the original institution form but were Education specific and some questions were simplified following consultation with staff and students. Undergraduate staff checked the first draft of the form and their suggestions were incorporated into the final version, which can be found in appendix 11. It should be noted at this stage that all full time undergraduate students are expected to undertake APPR, as outlined in the UWA guidelines. The end of year report for year 1 and 2 students asked about aims for the next academic year of study. For many final year students this question was inappropriate and therefore a different proforma was utilised (see appendix 11).

It is apparent that for the academic year 2006/07 first and second year students would complete the same APPR form and final year students would have a slightly
different version. As APPR is a continuous process throughout students' time at university, a schedule of how the forms would adapt to this was necessary. This schedule is as follows:

2006/07

All students in all years complete the same form (final year students complete a slightly different end of year proforma)

2007/08

New level 3 form for completion by year 2 and final year students
Year 1 students complete the same form used last year

2008/09

New final year form for completion by year 3 students
Same level 3 form for completion by year 2 students
Same level 1 form for completion by year 1 students

In order to ensure that the importance of APPR was emphasised to students, attendance was to be closely monitored. Therefore a spreadsheet was drawn up and the undergraduate secretary was asked to record if students had attended their meetings.

At the beginning of the academic session, all students were emailed and told about APPR. The new forms were then administered in lectures. The importance of APPR and the process was also introduced to first year students as part of a welcome to study skills talk (see teaching cycle 2). When APPR was to be completed the
students were reminded by email. Follow up emails were sent to those who did not make meetings or did not attend arranged meetings.

In summary, it can be seen that the actual process of APPR followed the institution process but the actual forms to be completed were adapted to become subject-specific.

2.2 Gathering Evidence as a Method of Evaluating the Intervention

- Agenda item at Staff Student Consultative Committee
- First Year Student Questionnaire
- Second and Final Year Student Questionnaire
- Undergraduate Committee Meeting

2.3 Limitations

- Increase in paperwork and administration
- Difficult to ensure attendance

3. Interpretation and Analysis of Feedback

3.1 Agenda item at Staff Student Consultative Committee

The new APPR form was raised as an agenda item at the Staff Student Consultative Committee meeting on 21st November 2006. One of the first year representatives explained that she had enjoyed the process with another first year representative explaining that a similar occurrence had taken place in her secondary school and so she was used to auditing her skills.

3.2 First Year Student Questionnaire

A questionnaire was administered to first year students asking for their views on APPR. The results can be seen in Table 1 below.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPR helps me to identify my strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPR helps me to organise and plan my studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPR helps me to identify areas I need to improve</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPR helps me consider methods to improve my weaknesses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPR helps me to set academic and personal aims</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPR allows me to seek guidance from my tutor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The meeting schedule for APPR is suitable</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these results it appears that most first year students see the benefits of the APPR system.

As far as suggesting improvements is concerned, one student did state that the form was quite complicated. Other than this the students were of the opinion that the proforma was appropriate and user-friendly.

3.3 Second and Final Year Questionnaire

A questionnaire comparing the institution proforma and the new form was distributed to second and final year students. The table of this data can be found in appendix 12. However, all of the students, apart from one, stated that the new form was most suitable and helped them develop personal and academic skills.

Furthermore, 75% (n=9) thought that guidance from personal tutors had improved with the use of the new form and 90% (n=9, 4 missing) thought the repetition between departments had been reduced.
64% (n=7) of the students said that the form had 'slightly improved' the APPR system with 27% (n=3) saying that it had 'much improved' the process. Finally all of the students stated that the new form should be used in future years.

3.4 Undergraduate Committee Meeting

APPR was raised as an item agenda at the Undergraduate Committee meeting on 8th May 2007. It was noted by staff that the new APPR forms appeared to be more suitable but that some issues had been raised. These were to be considered in more detail in readiness for the next academic session. A member of staff also indicated that in his opinion, all of the students, first year students had engaged in the process most actively. It was suggested that this may have been because of the emphasis given to APPR at the new welcome talk (teaching cycle 2).

4. Reflection

The subject-specific APPR form appeared to be beneficial to students. Perhaps the main reason for this was because the new form avoids repetition with other departments. From a personal point of view, I found it easier to provide guidance and detailed explanations to students about the subject-specific skills, as I am perhaps in a better position to do this than to advise on the skills included in the institutional form.

Furthermore, if APPR is to be considered important and necessary at higher education, both students and staff need to engage with the process and see its worth. In my opinion, a subject-specific form is more likely to allow staff to do this and this is likely to impede positively on students' views and consequent participation.

Despite these positive benefits, if the subject-specific form is to be utilised, a number of changes need to occur. First, the form needs to be made less complicated. This could be achieved by simple re-wording of questions. Perhaps what requires
more consideration is how to ensure that students partake in the process. The careful monitoring of attendance this year was more effective in ensuring participation than previous years but still a proportion of students do not complete the process. Consultation with other departments has led to a number of ideas to overcome this. These ideas include not allowing students to register online for modules if they have not completed APPR. Without this facility, students are 'forced' to come to the department where they would be 'encouraged' to complete the forms. Second, some departments attach an element of assessment to APPR. That is, completion of the process could account for 10-15% of a module mark.

Such strategies are likely to increase participation but one of the main aims of APPR is to promote independent, autonomous learners and therefore I question whether these strategies achieve this aim. Despite this, however, I do agree that such initiatives may be required until the development of skills is second nature to all students throughout all stages of education. With the increasing importance of developing skills being attached to education, it is likely that students will be more willing to engage in the process. Until this time, perhaps students do need some 'gentle encouragement' to complete the process.

5. Conclusions and Evaluations

In conclusion, it appears that a subject-specific APPR form is particularly useful to joint honours students. Guidance by tutors also appears to be more relevant and detailed when using a subject-specific form.

From next session onwards the form will be utilised, once minor amendments have been made. Furthermore, the ideas surrounding making the process compulsory will be further investigated within the School.
6. Recommendations for Future Practice

- Continue using a subject-specific form
- Explore methods of emphasising the importance of the process to staff and students
- Explore ideas of making APPR compulsory
- Share ideas and findings with other departments