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2009

SYLWER: O ganlyniad i newidiadau yng ngofynion portffolio’r TUAAU, nid oes gan bob cylch dysgu a lwythir i CADAIR yr un nodweddiwn. Mae’n bwysig bod y cyhoedd dysgu hyn yn cael eu defnyddio fel adnoddau yn unig, ac nid fel canllawiau i’r hyn sydd ei angen i fodloni gofynion y TUAAU. Os oes gennych ymholiadau, cysslwtwch â thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

Introducing Electronic Academic and Personal Progress Review

SYLWER: O ganlyniad i newidiadau yng ngofynion portffolio’r TUAAU, nid oes gan bob cylch dysgu a lwythir i CADAIR yr un nodweddiwn. Mae’n bwysig bod y cyhoedd dysgu hyn yn cael eu defnyddio fel adnoddau yn unig, ac nid fel canllawiau i’r hyn sydd ei angen i fodloni gofynion y TUAAU. Os oes gennych ymholiadau, cysslwtwch â thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of the Academic and Personal Progress Review at Aberystwyth University

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (The Dearing Report, 1997) recommended that British universities introduce a progress file which records students skills and personal development. The Quality Assurance Agency then worked with several other agencies to develop a standard for all British universities to follow (Guidelines for the HE Progress Files, 2000) which at Aberystwyth University is called the Academic and Personal Progress Review (APPR). There are five objectives for the APPR (p. 9):

- become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners
- understand how students are learning and relate learning to a wider context
- improve general skills for study and career management
- articulate personal goals and evaluate progress towards personal achievement
- encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life

At Aberystwyth University, students complete their APPR in consultation with their personal tutors from their home departments. The APPR will chronicle what and how they learn. The exact details, such as frequency and content, are set out by the departments, and at the end of the degree, students should have a portfolio from which they may draw upon during job applications and interviews. As competition grows for graduate-level jobs, employers are increasingly interested in seeing progress files of job applicants to better understand the skills the applicant will bring to the position. Aberystwyth University adopted the template from University College London and implemented the APPR starting in the 2004/2005 academic year.

1.2. Rationale for Change

Aberystwyth University formed a Personal Development Planning Implementation Group (PDPIG) to integrate the APPR throughout the campus. In 2007, the committee reported low levels of student engagement and a lack of understanding of the benefits (APPR/PDP Pilot Evaluation). Departments also reported that an easy to use, customisable APPR for their students would be desirable. PDPIG therefore recommended that an electronic, web-based APPR may fulfil these needs and meet the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency’s expectations. Before introducing the entire university to this electronic version, two departments were chosen to pilot it. The Psychology department having relatively small student cohorts and being a new department provided a good testing ground. As we were writing new departmental policies, there was no precedence for the
APPR. Therefore introducing an online version to the new cohort of students was relatively seamless.

Additionally, Aberystwyth University developed an e-Learning Strategy as part of their overall Learning and Teaching Strategy in 2005. AU is committed to bringing a rich and diverse learning environment to students, and incorporating more e-Learning into the curriculum would provide such an environment. In addition, today's graduates will be leaving the university into technologically-advanced jobs and environments, and students would benefit by starting that transition during their university experience. The current generation of students are very familiar with many forms of technology, and matching their expectations with AU's learning environment will benefit their learning. Using an online APPR would be aligned with those goals and therefore should increase student engagement. This teaching cycle was designed with this aim in mind. The intended outcomes for this teaching cycle were:

- To cater to student expectations and experience by encouraging use of the eAPPR
- To raise student awareness of the benefits of the eAPPR

1.3. Brief Review of the Literature

A comprehensive review of personal development planning in higher education found that most universities have found it to have positive effects on learning (Gough, Kiwan, Sutcliffe, Simpson, & Houghton, 2003). Encouraging reflective practices and chronicling it in a portfolio is beneficial both personally and professionally for students. Implementation of this at other British universities has proven difficult (East, 2005) with mixed results for how to increase participation.

As students and universities incorporate more online technology into their routine, universities have transitioned these reflective practices and portfolios into electronic formats. Many universities are using e-portfolios for a variety of purposes, from showcasing work already completed, to organizing work as it evolves (Greenberg, 2004). To meet these diverse demands, many software packages have been developed to accommodate students (Jafari, 2004). The benefits of e-portfolios exceed those of paper-based portfolios. The multimedia capabilities of an online portfolio combined with the ability to share the portfolio easily with future employers gives the online version advantages that a paper-based portfolio never can (Love, McKeon, & Gathercoal, 2004). In addition, there is an organised record of tutor interaction and the running cost is minimal.

Although no research has been done on the additional educational impact of electronic personal development planning, the previously established benefits of paper-based reflections and the
convenience factors of an online portfolio suggest that online reflections should be successful. Even if the biggest change is increased participation, then that simply means more students will benefit from the positive effects of reflective practices.

2. Teaching Cycle

2.1. Planning, Structuring, and Implementing

After initial meetings with the eAPPR team (Julie Keenan and Mary Jacob), the Psychology department agreed to pilot the eAPPR for incoming first year students. Because Psychology students entering in 2008 were all part of joint honours schemes, students would have to complete two APPR, one per home department. All students were assigned to one of three personal tutors in the department and tutors were briefed on the eAPPR pilot project. Tutees arrived for meetings with their personal tutors. During the meeting, the tutor explained the purpose and importance of the APPR and then provided guidance on how to create an electronic portfolio. There were step by step instructions provided (Appendix L) which demonstrated the different parts of the portfolio and how to edit the pages. After the portfolio was created, students were asked to complete an online questionnaire with several open-ended questions regarding the use of the eAPPR (Appendix M).

Throughout the academic year, students were reminded to complete sections of their portfolio. During the students' first semester, participation in the eAPPR was not compulsory. However, all students were asked to complete an Action Plan by the end of the academic year in order to pre-register for second year modules. This technique was recommended to us by the eAPPR team as a similar motivational tool in other departments. In early March, a questionnaire was distributed to students to gather feedback on the eAPPR. This questionnaire contained three short open-ended questions.

2.2. Gathering Evidence

The evidence gathered to evaluate the effectiveness of the eAPPR was of a qualitative nature, even though a few measures about previous experience were of a quantitative nature. The beginning and end survey was the basis of the evaluation. Reports from personal tutors on the use of the eAPPR by their students were gathered informally and also contributed to the evaluation.

3. Interpretation and Analysis of Evaluations

3.1. Student Expectations
After the initial set-up of the eAPPR, students were asked about their previous web experience and expectations for the eAPPR (Appendix N). Of the 28 students who completed the questionnaire, nearly half were inexperienced with this type of technology (Figure 7). However, most students had at least read blogs and wikis previously.

**Figure 7.** Previous experience with blogs and wikis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog/Wiki Experience</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very inexperienced: I have never heard of them.</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat inexperienced: I have never encountered them.</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately experienced: I have only read them.</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very experienced: I have used them often.</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely experienced: I have my own.</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of recording their own personal reflections, most students never made this a regular practice (Figure 8). A few students did make a recording of some form on a blog, diary, journal, or progress report.

**Figure 8.** Student experience with record of personal reflections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of recording personal reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least once a day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked how they planned to use the APPR, students most frequently mentioned keeping in touch with their personal tutor as well as tracking personal development (see Appendix N for full comments). From the comments, students seem to understand the purpose of the APPR.

When asked what they hope to gain from the APPR, students mention that they would like to assess their strengths and weaknesses, develop a relationship with their personal tutor, and see their own development.

The benefits of the online version of the APPR were very clear. Students saw that having the APPR online would make it widely accessible, convenient, easier to edit, and having a permanent record. Students believed both they and the tutors would experience these benefits.

From these initial comments, students seem well-informed and saw the benefits of not only the APPR but also the online version of it. The way that students expected to interact with the eAPPR would involve commitment from the personal tutors as well.

3.2. Student Evaluation of eAPPR

At the end of the academic year, students were queried using similar questions (Appendix O). 19 students responded with their opinions about what was good and what needed improvement.

The benefits that they listed were very similar to what they initially stated in October. ‘Can do it in own time’ and ‘Seeing own personal progress’ echoed the benefits they listed previously. After some interaction with the tool, several also said that it was easy to use and that it improved communication with tutors. Despite this awareness of benefits, students often cited that they would be more encouraged to use it if they saw the benefits. Many students also stated that they have not been using it at all, found it quite vague, and dislike the lengthy format. There seemed to be a disconnect between understanding the benefit for their personal growth and understanding why the department and university is requiring that they do it. The underlying attitude is that if students were interested in keeping track of their personal progress, they would do it on their own and did not need or want the university to tell them how to do it. In response to our requirement that completing an action plan was compulsory to progress to the second year modules, one angry student wrote in an email to a tutor:

_I understand I need to make an appointment to see you regarding my progress, but need to fill in an APPR first. I would like to come and see you but I totally object to having to fill in this form. As I understand it, I have to fill in the form to continue next year. If this is the case then I will do so; however I feel that it is an infringement on my rights to be forced to do so, and I have to question is this ethical?_
In criminology I was given the choice whether or not I filled one in, as it was recognised that some people object to doing them, particularly mature students. I therefore can not understand why it is different in this department.

Other informal reports from students have revealed that doing two APPRs for two home departments is an irritation. Still others are very uncomfortable using online technology in general and find the task of editing a wiki extremely daunting.

Reports from psychology personal tutors revealed that about 50% of students completed the requirement of contributing to their eAPPR. It is quite difficult to compare this completion rate with students from other departments around campus. In some departments, the APPR is voluntary; in other departments, the APPR is a mandatory part of a personal development module. Therefore the student involvement in other departments range from below 25% to 100% (APPR/PDP Pilot Evaluation, 2007), although the norm seems to be a very low level of student engagement.

4. Conclusions and Reflection

Although 50% student participation in the eAPPR seems low, I believe it is higher than other departments at AU. There could be improvements made in the system to address some of the students’ concerns, such as more specific questions and concrete examples to help them complete the portfolio. Also, the customisation that departments had previously asked for could be beneficial for both tutors and tutees. Requiring that students complete the eAPPR may have lead to the resentful attitudes that students displayed. Research on PDP at other universities have suggested not making it mandatory as students should be able to take responsibility for their own learning (East, 2005). The Quality Assurance Agency only requires that universities have the opportunity available to students, not that students be required to participate.

Students seem to understand the institutional benefit of using the eAPPR but do not necessarily understand how these benefits extend outside of the department. None of the students mentioned how the eAPPR would help them in job preparation or for employability. Perhaps announcing more of these benefits in the induction would persuade the students.

5. Recommendations for Future Practice

The Psychology department may wish to revise whether or not the eAPPR is a compulsory requirement for students. Although some students may see the benefit and choose to use it, there does not seem to be any reason to force it on students who do not want to participate. Additionally, requiring it would be quite difficult for students who are studying joint honours degrees and their other home department does not require it of students. Love et al. believe that an essential criteria
for the success of e-portfolios is to have a culture that supports such initiatives (2004). Without having that supportive environment from all angles, students will not choose to participate.

However, if the department is committed to having students develop reflective practices and create a portfolio that will give them a competitive advantage, the eAPPR needs to be much richer, more regular, and integrated into a module. If a study skills module were required for students, they could learn about the portfolio and work on it with their tutor. Annual or semi-annual participation is not regular enough for students to see the value in keeping track of their progress. Under the current format, students should be given the option of not participating or the format should be revised so that the compulsory work is more beneficial for the students.