

making the case

Keeping track of research students - and supervisors!

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Theme(s)

Organisation: Managing Organisational Process

The background context

A problem faced by the Higher Education sector is that the engagement of postgraduate researchers is difficult to gauge due to the nature of their postgraduate research programme. The Research Graduate School at the University of Bedfordshire is experiencing a sizable growth in research student numbers and required a way in which to monitor engagement, safeguard and aid the student and supervisory experience, and keep a centralised archive of records from 9 research institutes of mandatory monthly supervisory meetings. Therefore we used, in the main, PebblePad to resolve these issues.

Our process:

- The researcher writes up salient issues after the monthly supervisory meeting. This is done using a template form on PebblePad.
- The completed form is sent to the Research Graduate School Gateway by the researcher. This action generates an automated email notice for the supervisor. It also generates an automated record update in our student record system (SITS).
- The supervisor uses the validation option in PebblePad to verify that the record is/is not an accurate reflection of the meeting. Supervisors can also leave commentary about the record at this point. Researchers receive an automated email notifying them of validation.
- The Research Graduate School archive completed and validated records and copy them to a supervisor repository.
- SITS flags up to the Research Graduate School those students who are not engaging. This non-engagement can then be investigated.

We needed to effectively capture and record engagement of research students and supervisors with the research process and ensure that this was happening on a regular basis, both for the purposes of ensuring that students receive good, regular supervision, and for the purposes of reporting to the Border Agency to ensure that we could prove overseas research students were actively engaged with their commitment to UK study.

Why PebblePad?

PebblePad Forms and Gateways were the ideal solution for keeping a consistent record of supervisory meetings (structured around discussion, iteration and action-planning), agreeing the record, and storing it. Additional coding was developed with PebblePad that automatically pushes a record of that meeting to SITS. This additional data field is then queried monthly to provide a simple report of engagement, flagging students who have no record of supervision.

The purpose

We aimed to develop a way of providing an automated, formalised and consistent reporting of research student supervision which would also meet the requirements of external bodies, e.g. the UK Border Agency, in evidencing researcher engagement with the University.

The approach

The process allows a postgraduate researcher to place their record of a supervisory meeting in a virtual space where the

supervisor can confirm if the record is an accurate reflection of the meeting or not. The process works in such a way that the content created by the postgraduate cannot be edited by the supervisor. Likewise any comments left by a supervisor cannot be altered or deleted by the postgraduate. The supervisor can view records by all of their students but not the records from any postgraduate from other supervisory teams. All postgraduates can see only their own record and not the records of any other postgraduate.

The Research Graduate School also felt that it was important to have a section on the meeting form that showed training and/or PDP participated in by the researcher. This section is mandatory!

The Research Graduate School at the University of Bedfordshire archives all records on a regular basis once they have been approved by the supervisors. Supervisors have access to past records of their supervisory meetings with students. The student record system SITS is automatically informed of the occurrence of a supervisory meeting record being uploaded and this constitutes a principal metric for demonstrating engagement, or otherwise, of students.

This process was initially tested by members from the postgraduate researcher, postgraduate supervisor and Research Graduate School communities.

All incoming postgraduate research students are given training in this process as part of their mandatory induction. Researchers are also introduced to their online footprint and how PebblePad can aid them in improving/focussing their online footprint.

Stakeholders included: Postgraduate research students, research supervisors, the Research Graduate School, University senior management, the UK Border Agency, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

The result

- A systematic on-line process (using PebblePad) for documenting supervisory meetings in a consistent manner across 9 research institutes. Initial ownership is with the research student and oversight with the supervisor. Also, there is provision of an archive of records for students, supervisors and the Research Graduate School.
- An automated and consistent means of recording supervisory meetings as a principal tool for monitoring research student engagement, through establishing an encrypted link between the University's online documentation of supervisory meetings (using PebblePad) and the student record system (SITS).

The impact

This system impacts on all supervisors and their research students across the University.

Lessons learnt

This project addressed a very important issue which was considered highly significant by the main stakeholder, the Research Graduate School. However, once the system was in

place, maintaining the momentum has proved to be a challenge as some resistance by some staff has been seen.

The process relies on training both supervisors and their students on a system which looks very different from what most users have ever seen before and many supervisors expressed resistance to being asked to do what they perceived as a menial task with another challenging system. Clearly there is an issue here around how the management of research students is factored into the culture of a Research Graduate School.

The recording of the action plan, the requirement to refer back to this, and its use in planning the next stage of work as part of the monthly meeting cycle is an enormously valuable aspect of the process. This helps to keep the research student focused and on-track and, in this way, could be said to be contributing significantly to an increase in the quality and quantity of the University's research output.

The possibility of tying the process into the generation of online research portfolios was mooted but has not yet been pursued as a policy. Having a culture of using PebblePad in this way would be likely to better regularise the use of the supervisory meeting record. Student buy-in was not a problem, nor was buy-in from new staff.

A lesson learnt would be to run an introductory workshop with supervisors, allowing them to unpick some of the hazards and issues which can impact negatively on their responsibilities and which this recording process can address. They can then produce their own set of issues, which can be resolved by the introduction of this process. It is also reasonable to note that the new version of PebblePad, Pebble+, is likely to be more acceptable to research supervisors in terms of style and accessibility. A strong commitment to this approach from senior staff with a policy requirement for all supervisors is very important.

A particular issue revolved around logins to the system, since at the University of Bedfordshire postgraduate research students have two accounts, staff and student. There was some confusion regarding which account should be used for this particular purpose, since both automatically give access to PebblePad.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- Only PebblePad provides the necessary requirements – form, feedback, validation, e-mail alert, and archiving – in one integrated system.
- PebblePad provides the additional benefit of an archive of assets relating to the research process leading to creation of a research portfolio/diary which will support the viva process.