Case Study

Putting the 'e' into ethics – using PebblePad forms to submit and assess ethics applications.

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The background context

This pilot project took place within the School of Engineering and the Built Environment (SEBE), in conjunction with the Blended Learning Unit (BLU). Key members of the project team included Rachel Challen (BLU), Prof. Richard Hall, Kevin Garner, Graham Oakes, Kadda Yahiaoui and Patricia Osborne (SEBE).

A post 1992 Higher Education Institution, the University of Wolverhampton run a number of UK and International programmes of study throughout their 9 schools with an average of 22,000 students. The School of Engineering and the Build Environment (SEBE) in particular, have 34 UK based programmes and 6 overseas delivery programmes, levels 4 – 7, enrolling 2000 students across the whole school. SEBE itself is split into 3 departments.

This case study took place in the Architecture and Product Design (APD) department with level 6 students completing their final year dissertation projects. This core group of 20 students had previous experience of the Institutional ePortfolio system, PebblePad, having used it in level 4 and 5 modules.

The current practice

The existing process involved a complex paper trail which involved students contacting and sending a potential supervisor all relevant documents including any supporting evidence in a paper format.

Students went to the relevant departmental website and downloaded the ethics form. This was filled out digitally, printed and the paper form handed in to the module leader/supervisor. The supervisor then categorized the submissions to either an A or O grade. This submission then went to the Head of Department who confirmed the grade and then forwarded to the APD Ethics committee. The school produced a database with a list of students with the assigned grade. The database was then passed to the SEBE school committee to be amalgamated with the whole school submissions in the form of a manually inputted spreadsheet which was produced showing the statistics of research being carried out.

This process clearly involved a lot of paper transference between a number of different departments before the project was authorised and completed, and there was huge potential for the forms being mislaid or sent to the wrong person.

If problems arose with the submission and more information was needed, the paper form had to be returned to the proposer and created again and sent back to the module leader. This resulted in the process potentially having to be repeated a number of times. This clearly has a time implication for the submission and important deadlines. Furthermore, the process was segregated into the different transactions between proposer and marker and there was little relationship between the different processes and tutors involved.

Additionally, the information given to the students in the different schools regarding the submission requirements varied slightly in both content and format.

The challenge

The existing ethics application process was lengthy and unclear for both students and tutors, with little interaction between the stages of the application. The chair of the SEBE ethics committee approached the BLU to work in conjunction with them to create a process that could be implemented across all schools. This process needed to enable better monitoring of the ethics applications, create an easier application process and also build on the students' digital literacy. Digital Literacy is a recognized Wolverhampton University Graduate attribute.

In order to achieve a more seamless and interactive process the stages within the process had to be more accessible and transparent. Whilst the actual stages themselves couldn't be altered, there needed to be a holistic process which students and tutors found less complex, that could be integrated within the school and that would add value to the process, the projects, the results and the reporting.

In addition to the changes to the process, it was equally as important to ensure that all students, regardless of department, had equity of information and resources available in relation to the dissertation. In order to support this, a webfolio was created with all relevant documentation, questions and resources. This provided a central point for all students and was intended to make the application process much clearer for the student. It was also important that there was one Gateway (a designated virtual space in PebblePad) for each school to organise and view students' submissions, completing a more interconnected process.

The approach

An action research methodology was undertaken with the BLU working with the ethics committee and the SEBE tutors to provide, implement and assess a new working model enabling the School to improve the ethics application procedure. The initial meeting took place in July 2009 with the aim of the resource being ready to use for the commencement of the pilot in Semester 1 2009. The pilot stakeholders were all involved in a School Ethics meeting held in October. The tutors involved have been supported with a mentor model within their own department.

Project issues that needed to be addressed:

Equity of information

There were instances where students found it difficult to find the correct information and resources needed to enable them to complete their application. This could be a barrier to them

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completing their application correctly and on time. PebblePad was used to create a webfolio which wrapped all the relevant student information and placed it on a gateway, as a URL link sent to all tutors involved in the pilot. This enabled the information to be shown within lectures and/or sent as a personal asset to students.

Reducing workload

Tutors' administrative workload regarding the ethics submissions needed to be reduced. The current system was paper based with the responsibility on the module leader to follow up outstanding submissions. The solution to use one gateway highlighted any outstanding work and provided an easier way to contact students.

Tutor communication

The problem of the stages within the process being segregated and incohesive was a major one for ensuring the correct information was received by the student and approved by the tutor. Additional communication to agree the grading of the application needed to be more combined and accessible. The tool was used within PebblePad to attach a private tutor blog to each specific submission for all of the necessary stakeholders to communicate with each other and also with the students if adjustments needed to be made on the application.

Security

There was a large concern that the current process of paper based submissions which were posted around the departments held a confidentiality risk, especially in the case of projects that are based within companies and may use sensitive material. Holding the material in a password protected, virtual space, on a University server provides both security and safety of the submissions.

Transparent information

Viewing all submissions in one area allows the tutors to have a much clearer idea of the progress of applications and if any issues have arisen.

Amalgamation of results

A more comprehensive, consistent and reliable result process was required. Using the statistic

analysis tool within the Gateway allows an easy amalgamation of results at both departmental and school level.

Technical

Technically, not all tutors had the same experience of the software and needed support and training in order to access gateways and communicate using the blogs.

The result

Statistical results are in progress as the deadline for the first pilot submissions occurs after the submission of the case study and will be submitted at a later date when the full analysis is available. However, anecdotal evidence from the tutors involved suggests that the pilot has been a great success with the potential to build on the evolution of the PebblePad methodology in relation to the ethics submission process for a cohort of French MSc internship students in Biarritz studying the same module.

The particular needs of this group surround communication issues, equity of experience/ process/support and the sharing of potentially sensitive company material. The ethics form and the virtual discursive nature of the submission between the involved parties would aim to improve communication and would involve the student mentor in the process.

This will allow a more formative process to be implemented in the early days of the dissertation. This may lead to using a specific form or action plan within the system as an introductory and informative exercise. This process will very strongly emulate a business process that the graduates might be expected to engage with in employment.

The learning

Using a predefined form which is published to a specific virtual area, makes the submission process:

- More efficient
- More secure
- More accessible (virtual)
- More visible
- More transparent

This process also allows information from students and tutors in the stages to be interlinked and not just seen in isolation

In brief

- Needs to be integrated rather than in week 4 as in pilot.
- No choice about process.
- Encourages tutors to engage with blended learning.

References

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Acknowledgements