

Hoyle, Kathryn, Ruston, Sarah, Scott, Joanne and Harvey, Tina ORCID:  
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enhance the effectiveness of personal tutoring and improve student engagement.  
(Unpublished)

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# CASE STUDY

Using PebblePad to enhance the effectiveness of personal tutoring and improve student engagement

Kathryn Hoyle, Sarah Ruston, Joanne Scott & Tina Harvey, University of Cumbria, UK



PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

**STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.**

## THE CONTEXT

It is widely recognised that there has been an increase in the proportion of students accessing a university education, in particular from groups who would not traditionally enter higher education (HE). With widening participation (WP) comes some key challenges, and pressure on institutions to retain students is ever growing. Therefore, the need for increasing achievement and reducing attrition requires an effective support mechanism for students through a university personal tutoring process (Stuart, Willock & Browning, 2019). In addition to the pressures for increased retention, universities are also under pressure to compete for customers (students) in an increasingly competitive market where performance matrices such as the National Student Satisfaction Survey influence positioning in National League tables. Along with this, and the constitution of an Office for Students in the UK (Gov.uk, 2018), the need for maintaining student satisfaction throughout the student journey is key, and pivotal to this is the Personal Tutor (PT).

At the University of Cumbria (UoC) we offer an Integrated Foundation Year (IFY) that underpins our Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) programmes, validated as part of a central framework that is managed and delivered using a Semi-Integrated Model approach (Warren, 2002). The purpose of the IFY is to offer a supportive route into HE for those that may not have the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points or subject area background to enter directly onto a level 4 programme, or those that may have taken an extended break from education and may be out of the habit of studying. A high proportion of the students recruited to this programme are from WP and 1st generation groups.

During this transitional year students gain the knowledge and skills required to succeed on their degree programme. In acknowledging the challenges faced by students on entering university, particularly those from WP backgrounds (Leese, 2010), ensuring effective student support has been a strategic priority of this programme. Understanding that the students' experience and satisfaction whilst on a programme influences retention makes it additionally important to get this right from the start. A student's early impression influences their future experience (Schreiner, 2009; Stephen et al., 2008). Students who experience issues with attendance, engagement, academic success and other barriers to learning are more easily identified where there is a developed relationship with a PT. These issues often lead to students having an unsuccessful transition and leaving university (Johnston, 2010). Kandiko & Mawer (2013) and Yale (2017) all suggest that support is vital in enabling students to adjust to university life and that a supportive, approachable and accessible tutor is important in facilitating the academic development of students.

## **THE PROBLEM**

The IFY programme commenced in September 2015 and over time the Principal Lecturer observed some inconsistencies in how the programme was implemented in different areas, in particular the PT support that students received. It was observed that there were differences in the frequency of meetings, the contact between the PT and student, the quality of the support provided, the practices in the recording of meetings, and the content discussed in the meetings. Through discussions with PTs it was evident that there were differences in the understanding of the PT role and the expectations of them, and in how comfortable some tutors felt in this position. A study conducted by colleagues within the UoC (Stuart, Willock & Browning, 2019) reviewed staff perceptions of the current PT system within the institution. Their findings identified a lack of guidance, training and support for PTs, coupled with workload restrictions on time for tutorial meetings. They also found that PT sessions varied in terms of structure, style, formality, initiation of sessions, length and format, locations, and record keeping. These findings also resonated with prior research from McIntosh & Grey (2017). The inconsistencies and poor processes potentially result in PTs not following up with students on important issues, or students not understanding or accessing personal tutoring which would result in students needing support and/or access to other services. This then subsequently causes a negative student experience and overall poor satisfaction.

Therefore, the key drivers for this project were to develop a process that would support the PTs by providing clarity and structure to the programme, in turn enabling greater confidence and effectiveness in administering the personal tutoring process.

## **THE APPROACH**

A PebblePad workbook template was developed and conversations began to take place amongst the Centre for Academic Practice Enhancement (CAPE) department, alongside academic and support staff. After much discussion and tweaking, the workbook was adapted for our Level 3/IFY students. They would form part of our initial pilot study of around 50 students.



The workbook included an introductory 'About You' page where students provided some initial background information about themselves and attached a photo. Separate pages were then provided for each meeting (four at L3) with targeted questions for specific times of the year. Students filled in the relevant page prior to each of their 30-minute meetings. The questions framed the meeting and gave useful pointers for discussion which were beneficial for PTs and also helped prepare the student for the meeting. There would be no hidden surprises. During the meeting, or immediately afterwards, the PT would add some notes to the Assessor Field section summarising the discussion and providing signposting for the student to further help and support where appropriate.

Unexpectedly, the workbook was adopted by a few other programmes which were led by academic staff who were familiar with PebblePad and could immediately see the advantages of using this system for their personal tutoring process.

## THE RESULTS

One of the advantages of using PebblePad was the reporting functionality on the Submission page. Of the 49 students on the IFY programme, 34 had filled in sections of their workbook. Of these 34, 30 students and their PTs had completed notes in the first meeting section. This was approximately a 69% take up rate.

A staff and student survey was created to assess the impact of the PebblePad workbook and to gain understanding of the participants' experiences. Quantitative questions aimed to explore engagement with the PebblePad workbook and if staff had changed practice due to its usage. The survey also had a qualitative element so that we could use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017) to create a coding framework to best judge participants experiences with the workbook. This has helped to highlight areas of success with the workbook and areas for possible future improvements.

Initial findings from the survey have returned staff reviews on the project. Students views will be collated for the end of the academic year.

The staff response rate was 67%. Of these responses, 88% felt that the workbook helped to prepare them for personal tutoring meetings. In addition, 75% felt that it helped with a structure and to cover important discussion areas. However, staff were more divided regarding its helpfulness in supporting students, with 50% saying it helped to identify needs and to signpost to other services. Its usefulness for recording and monitoring had a positive return of 63%.

The qualitative data provided some explanation for the staff responses. The majority (88%) of the responders had previously used some form of Word document for recording tutorials and 75% of responders had some hesitancy with using PebblePad. Staff negative comments were chiefly to do with students' engagement, feeling students were not well prepared or had reservations about using the workbook. These findings will need to be compared directly with student survey results. There were also comments regarding bureaucracy/workload and a need for support with this type of system. Positive comments focussed on its helpfulness for student monitoring, its flexibility to progress along with the

student, and its ability to support both the staff and the student to have better and more productive personal tutoring meetings. In terms of positive and negative coding indicators in the comments, 25% were purely positive, 25% were negative about their experience, and 50% could see benefits but offered areas for improvement.

Key Senior Leadership members were shown the PebblePad workbook to gain their insights into its capacity to assist the personal tutoring process and if it could be used at an institutional level beyond the pilot study. Heads of Department felt that this process would help remove the disjointed practice that currently exists and would help PTs be more consistent in their approach, thus giving the student a better personal tutoring experience. They also could see further potential uses for monitoring staff engagement with personal tutoring and higher-level reporting of this process. They asked about the tone of some of the questions and if they could sound more academic if it was to go beyond foundation year. There were also questions regarding behind the scenes reporting and how to enable staff to best use the workbook without it becoming a further workload strain.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

The strong positive aspects from this pilot study demonstrate that the workbook helps plan and support a consistent approach to the personal tutoring process, which is something that currently does not occur within the institution. Also, institutionally we feel this has scope to be deployed as a tool for monitoring staff engagement with tutorials.

It would have been useful to gain staff and institutional feedback about this pilot study prior to it going live so that any concerns could have been addressed and necessary amendments made. This also may have assisted with achieving positive staff buy-in, along with alleviating concerns regarding workload/bureaucracy.

From September 2020 the aim is to integrate this project during Welcome Week so that all students and staff are fully versed in the expectations of the PebblePad Personal Tutorial Workbook. However, before this is possible more training is needed by the staff to ensure they are confident in using PebblePad and are in a knowledgeable position to embed this in Welcome Week.

Further lessons learnt may transpire once all the research data has been collected and analysed.

## **IN BRIEF**

The institution has embraced the use of the PebblePad Workbook as part of the personal tutoring process. However, to ensure a successful roll-out the following steps are going to be taken:

- CPD mandatory training for PTs and further in class training for students in use of PebblePad for this approach
- To ensure that the workbook is flexible to meeting individual programme needs.

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### PebblePad HQ (UK)

01952 288 300

### PebblePad North America

(864) 650 5406

### PebblePad Australasia

0400 899 820

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