PebblePad

CASE STUDY

PGCert transformation: From award to apprenticeship and dissemination of practice

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

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

THE CONTEXT

In February 2019, the University of West of England (UWE) launched its new professional development programme for academics starting at the institution. The UWE Academic Professional Programme has transformed the University's traditional Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) into an apprenticeship. It is aligned to the new Level 7 Academic Professional Apprenticeship Standard and nests an enhanced PGCert in Academic Professional Practice (PGCAPP) to structure the off-the-job learning. It also leads to the award of Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (O'Leary, Mudd & King, 2019).

The programme focuses on developing and enhancing academic practice, especially in teaching and supporting learning, in part through engagement in regular reflective practice. As an apprenticeship, the lines between work and study are blurred. The ethos of the new programme also mirrors that of UWE more broadly. UWE is a practice-orientated institution, and its programmes aim to have strong links to employment, the workplace and 'the real world' (University of the West of England, 2019).

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

The development of the new UWE Academic Professional Programme provided impetus to reimagine our use of PebblePad. Our aims were:

- **To use PebblePad to best facilitate the learner journey**. PebblePad offered greater flexibility than Blackboard (UWE's Virtual Learning Environment), and greater scope to aid participants' regular engagement with mentors and tutors.
- **To house many of the apprenticeship's administrative and structural processes**. Regular Progress Review Meetings between participants and mentors entail co-created documentation and require reporting and auditing by the programme team.
- **To model the effective use of PebblePad**. Our programme assembles many colleagues from across the whole institution. A priority has therefore been to model the value of PebblePad to everyone involved.

These aims necessitated that we consider the user experience of three main groups:

- **Participants** are staff who are registered as learners on the programme and experience PebblePad through a student lens. This is especially useful to those who have limited experience of PebblePad, and helpful to all in supporting their own students in their staff roles.
- **Mentors** are experienced staff members and for some this is their first experience of PebblePad. Mentors provide feedback and guidance and contribute to Progress Review Meeting documentation using collaboration and feedback tools.
- **The teaching and support team** are drawn from across the University. PebblePad is used to mark assignments, provide formative and summative feedback, and report on key information.

We also identified several challenges:

- **This is a large-scale programme**. UWE has c.3,700 staff and c.30,000 students. As of December 2019, we have almost 200 participants on the programme and in future we envisage having c.300 participants. There are nearly 150 mentors, and over 30 colleagues in the programme's teaching and support team.
- **The programme is an atypical UWE programme**. Our participants are both staff and students. The programme is also an Employer/Provider apprenticeship with UWE representing both roles, so certain colleagues (especially mentors) represent these two different roles.
- **Reluctance and difficulties in learning a new technology**. Our participants have a broad range of digital skills and range of PebblePad experience. We therefore ensure that our use of PebblePad is more than 'just another thing' modelled, and that we articulate the added value.
- **Employment complexities**. The programme is compulsory; engagement is both a condition of contract and tied to probation. New academics on the programme are often facing a steep learning curve in terms of doing their job, are low on time, and are dealing with many competing pressures. We are also aware of inevitable inconsistencies. Different faculties and departments will likely offer different support for individual participants, as has long been the case with such PGCerts (Smith, 2011).

Most of these challenges could result in added complexity experienced or feared by certain users, with the added danger that by using PebblePad these challenges are aggravated. In an effort to win 'hearts and minds' we therefore identified two main design principles:

- **'Hide the Wiring'**. Make things as simple as possible for everyone.
- **Articulate the benefits of PebblePad**. Showcase to everyone how PebblePad can be a tool which facilitates the learner journey, aids the programme in a structural sense, and makes everyone's work easier.

To this end, we employed a dedicated Learning Technologist to spearhead our developments.

THE APPROACH

We designed a **single PebblePad workbook** to be used throughout the programme. This locates all participant-generated and related digital material in one place, including activities, reflections, documentation and assessments. Developmental, formative and summative feedback from tutors and markers is also recorded within this workbook, with space to allow participants to reflect on this feedback.

Having all content in one place facilitates participant reflection throughout the programme. It also makes it far easier for mentors, the programme team and participants themselves to keep track of their progress. Furthermore, we envisage that this makes it easier for participants to prepare for their apprenticeship End Point Assessments (particularly in drawing together evidence for the reflective portfolio component).

PebblePad training is provided at the start of the programme and is introduced as a tool for the user to design and create online material. As well as our structured workbook, we show the basics of creating assets, encouraging exploration and engagement with the more creative side of PebblePad. We also make clear the possibilities beyond academic-directed use for both staff and students.

It is important for participants to understand how the workbook supports their journey through the programme and its availability beyond. In turn it also helps participants understand how PebblePad interoperates with other UWE systems, such as Blackboard.

Two **apprenticeship processes** which have benefited significantly from our ongoing PebblePad developments are:

- **Off-the-job learning**: Recording all relevant development activities undertaken whilst on the programme, reflecting on completed activities, and planning intended future activities.
- Recording regular **Progress Review Meetings** between an apprentice and their mentor using a set form.

Early iterations of our workbook used Excel and Word documents respectively, requiring participants to download, complete and then upload as assets in the relevant sections. We have since redeveloped the Progress Review Form as a PebblePad Template, making use of cascading tags which automatically displays it within a new Progress Review collection page when saved. We plan to gather participant feedback and evaluate the effectiveness of this for potential use with Off-the-job learning.

A related development surrounds the Academic Professional Apprenticeship Standard (Institute for Apprenticeships, 2017). Participants rank their confidence against all dimensions of this Standard at the start of the programme to help identify key areas for development. We encourage participants to revisit this activity regularly with their mentor, as the End Point Assessment will assess them in line with the whole Standard. Originally a Word document, we are now investigating the use of the numeric capability feature, which allows participants to rank their confidence regularly and quickly whilst retaining a record of previous rankings, so both participant and mentor can track their progress.

We have also focused on improvements to the **team experience**. For instance, our assessment marking form was originally a Word document uploaded to a participant's workbook as a feedback attachment. This required downloading and re-uploading if second marked. Developing this into a PebblePad feedback template enables live edits to be made and better facilitates contributions by multiple authors, thereby making second marking easier.

We are continually reviewing our team's ability to report on participants' progress and status. **Progress reporting** was initially difficult to do at scale. Details were located within Excel/Word forms uploaded to the participant's workbook, so manual checking was required. We have since identified the vital elements and have moved these key sections into the main workbook where the participant can maintain and update this information as appropriate. This allows us to gather up-to-date progress information rapidly via the inbuilt reporting features in ATLAS.

THE RESULTS

It is perhaps telling that participant feedback rarely mentions PebblePad explicitly. Our theory is that many participants do not conceptualise PebblePad as a separate entity, and so rarely mention it individually. We intend to explore this further in our participant staff forums.

One area where we have received significant feedback is from and regarding our PebblePad training session. Participants from early iterations provided a variety of opinions on how we could better implement this session, and we have gradually improved our provision. We now offer a one-hour webinar and feedback on the session is overwhelmingly positive, with participants seeming confident and motivated:

> *'What a great tool for collaborative working. Thank you both for such a useful and informative webinar.'*

> *'Great. Very clear, useful, not too much detail but enough to get us started. Thank you.'*

'I really enjoyed this session. I liked watching the instructors use PebblePad. It's helpful to see the way they interact with the software.'

'It was a very useful way to learn about PebblePad. Thanks!'

'I must admit I had insight to PebblePad before, but I learnt a lot more today.'

In line with the last quote, we have also gained feedback from participants already experienced in using PebblePad as a teacher. Their feedback suggests they have found it extremely useful to see PebblePad through a student lens, and observe how another programme, module or apprenticeship uses PebblePad.

Several participants who had not previously used PebblePad are also now interested in using it in their own teaching. A notable example is one of UWE's faculties where very few modules make use of PebblePad, despite several disciplines being especially suited to digital portfolios. In the first ten months of our programme we have been contacted by four separate colleagues from this faculty asking for guidance in implementing PebblePad in their own modules. We are now supporting these colleagues, in the hope that these trailblazers will help disseminate this practice more widely.

LESSONS LEARNT

An emergent difficulty has been how we handle **participants who are not on a standard pathway** through the programme. A programme workbook is designed for each cohort, with the set module workbooks embedded within. If a participant deviates from this pathway (usually by delaying engagement with a module), content within their workbook becomes obsolete, and the participant often also requires access to an additional module workbook (usually one relevant to a later cohort). Our current workaround is to also give them access to a second programme workbook (the one for the next cohort) which houses this additional module workbook, but this is messier than we would like and does cause occasional confusion. We originally estimated that this would be a minor problem, with up to around a quarter expected to deviate from the expected pathway. Yet this has turned out to be a larger issue; in our ten months over 40% of our first cohort have deviated. This is a key area for our future enhancements.

We have also experienced difficulties with **the balance between structure and simplicity**. Participants on our predecessor programme reported anxiety because the module assessments were broken down into numerous small components which made it seem like they had much more work to do. We therefore followed a 'fewer, larger tasks' design principle. We correspondingly designed our first cohort's workbook so that it had fewer spaces to upload several assets. But participants and markers reported this in turn caused confusion as some spaces needed up to 16 assets. Participants frequently forgot to upload or mislabelled an asset, and markers struggled to identify which was which. We are therefore working to find a balance between structure and simplicity, but it seems that three or four assets per section is generally a good compromise.

A third key lesson learnt has been regarding **assignment submission**. We require our programme workbook to be submitted multiple times; at least once for each module undertaken. The workbook was originally configured to submit automatically, in line with our design principle of making things simple for users. However, this led to participant confusion (especially on a participant's second and subsequent modules) as to whether their workbook had been submitted. PebblePad adds to this confusion by displaying the message 'this asset has been shared for assessment'. This resulted in increased workload for the programme team as numerous enquiries asked us to check, confirm and provide additional guidance. We have therefore changed to manual submission, which has alleviated these issues by putting the participants in control of the submission process for each module. We provide guidance en masse on sharing for assessment in our PebblePad training, and participants receive receipts of submissions.

IN BRIEF

- Our workbook is thoroughly embedded into the programme. It supports the learner journey throughout and requires regular engagement. This supports our programme's aim of encouraging participants to develop a sustained, reflective and deliberate approach to academic practice.
- We have managed expectations by proactively introducing PebblePad and recapping regularly to all users. This encourages familiarity with PebblePad and visibility of its capabilities.
- We have focused on enhancing the user experience of our three main user groups. We make explicit to them the benefits of using PebblePad, in terms of improving the learner experience and in making their own work easier.
- We model good practice in PebblePad. By doing so, we are encouraging others to use PebblePad in their own teaching and disseminate this practice across the University.

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This Case Study is from PebblePad's 2020 *'Charting New Courses in Learning and Teaching'* conference. To download all of the Case Studies from this event, head to https://hubs.ly/H0rFypx0

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There are an awful lot of things that make PebblePad unique. Not least the fact that it's a platform designed by educators for educators. Indeed, the PebblePad team is bursting to the seams with innovators and practitioners, all of whom learnt their craft in teaching roles. If you want to talk to a team who really understands your world, get in touch.

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