
Getting started with small-scale EMA

Not all universities are implementing EMA organisation-wide. In this short podcast Bryony Olney from the University of Sheffield talks about how she went about organising an EMA pilot in her department.

My name's Bryony Olney. I work for the University of Sheffield and I'm the learning technologist for the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

We started piloting in the department in May 2015. I joined in March 2015, so I was sort of dropped into the deep end. I was new to the HE environment and the principle of electronic management of assessment.

Gathering information

Having a background in adult education and FE, I wanted to gather as much information as possible to start informing my starting position. So the Jisc website was the first port of call, having familiarity with Jisc from previous work, and I pulled an awful lot of very rich case studies, guidance tools, general information from the Jisc website that informed how I conducted the pilot. It really shaped how I went about implementing, designing and planning the pilot and some of the case studies were absolutely invaluable in helping me decide what was appropriate and what process to take. It was great, particularly the lifecycle as a starting point to breakdown that process and sort of create separate stages in the pilot and what I wanted to focus on, and aligning my pilot with the Jisc lifecycle meant that I could easily access resources that were really appropriate to the stage that I was at.

It also helped me identify the right questions to ask of my academics and my students. So one of the first things that I did was conduct a survey of the students and how they felt about the way that they currently receive their feedback and the way that they submit their assignments. I did a very similar thing with academics, and I used quite a few of the resources that were made available on the Jisc site to inform those questions, so that I also had a benchmark against which I could sort of measure our journey against where other institutions were, which I found really, really invaluable.

Managing the project

Project management was something that I've done before and I was doing in a previous job, so I applied the project management principles to EMA and treated it just like any other project. So, for me, it was understanding the current issue, the current position, where we wanted to be, and some more of the detail around, okay I'm looking at digitising the assessment process but what are those assessments? How are they currently being handled and how easy is it to map across what we currently do to a digitisation process? Are there any exceptions to that I wanted to find a method of piloting the majority first and to do that I needed to know what the majority type of assignments were in the department.

The first thing I did was look at all of the assessments. We had a spreadsheet that had all of the assessments titles, what sort of assessment it was, the date that it was due and the module co-ordinators, and I just simply filtered out anything that was coming up which was around the May period that was a text based submission.

Getting buy-in

I knew I wanted to keep it simple and focused on one submission tool which happened to be Turnitin and then contacted those module co-ordinators with a very streamlined brief that was, "Would you participate in e-marking using Turnitin for this up and coming assignment?" It kind of snowballed from there. I probably had about ten people that I contacted and I managed to get five people to agree to it. Then, actually interestingly, people started to come out of the woodwork then who were seeing their colleagues mark electronically and saying, "I want to mark mine electronically. I want to have a go," which was great, but it did then become a little unmanageable in some cases because people with very odd assessments were saying, "I really want to mark electronically,"

I didn't expect to be pushing back to people to say, actually can you wait to participate, but I think it would have been too much to take on to look at multiple submission tools and marking tools, and lots of different types of assignments.

Defining project scope

I would recommend to anyone who's doing a pilot to really focus down on a specific type of assignment. I guess we're quite unique in urban studies because we do have quite a lot of design work, group work, GIS design mapping, whereas other departments like sociology, for example, I know they do 100% essays pretty much, so for them choosing a tool isn't an issue, but for me I had quite a challenge on my hands isolating types of assignments that I actually wanted to pilot to start with. I think it could have got out of control if I'd looked at more than just a single type of assignment to start with.

Essential data

Having the data at my fingertips, as a list of assignments and when their due dates are and when the moderation happens. That was absolutely invaluable. I know not all departments have that holistic information which shocks me actually because you'd think you'd want to have a handle on how much you're assessing students and clashing of timetables. For all of those other learning and teaching purposes having a holistic view of assessments is, for me, absolutely crucial. Certainly another department that I was working in didn't have that information and saw no reason to have that information. So I think, again, as a pointer and a recommendation that's got to be the first place to start. If you haven't got a holistic view of what your assessment types are and the breadth of your assessments, start there, map out what your assessments are and when they're due in and what type of assessments they are.

Review and embedding

I reviewed the success, both from the students' and the staff's point of view in July, at the end of the year, and the department leadership team have made a decision to continue with an extended pilot into this year.

For all intents and purposes we are operating a full EMA lifecycle in the department, to the extent that we're also including things like exam results and seminar attendance and presentation marks into the blackboard grade centre so that we can release feedback and marks electronically even where there's no artefact that's been submitted. So we're going belt and braces full-on EMA as part of this extended pilot, with a view that by the time we come to September 2016 and the academic year 16/17 everyone will be so used to it that it will actually be embedded following the eighteen month pilot.

Benefits

The implementation of EMA has already brought huge benefits to us as a department. As I think every institution finds, there is a little bit of resistance from people that are adopting new technologies who find the way that they work now works, so why change things. But we've had some great interim feedback from students that are very grateful for the change that we've made.

It's also made some of our academics think about the way that they approach marking and I've had a number of people say it's really made me think about the way that I mark and the feedback that I give, which is interesting and I think an area for us to explore that could have an impact on our learning and teaching strategy and our pedagogy. Certainly it's making us think about our marking criteria and how transparent it is to students and to markers. The time that it's saved our professional services staff, who would previously spend quite a lot of time barcode scanning, paper submissions and putting them into piles, has meant we can start to redirect some of that time into other processes that will support academics in other ways

We're still finding time saving that take us by surprise actually, and it means that we really can review the resources that we've got on the team and make sure that we're putting our energies into supporting academics in other ways.

Next steps

I think as we progress with our EMA journey there's obviously another kind of six areas to look at in that cycle, particularly going back around in reviewing the process and reviewing the setting of assessments. Now I'm able to start looking at the breadth of assessments that we've got and I can start looking at bringing a broader variety of assignments into the department. I definitely feel I will be returning to the resources that Jisc have got at that point to draw on some advice and inspiration on what sorts of assignments we can perhaps start to look at in the future. I quite like to use it as a measure of the journey and how far we've come. Certainly for me, personally, have recently moved into working at a faculty level on a part-time basis and I will certainly be revisiting the resources again to take stock of where we are as a faculty and help shape whatever projects come out of the review that we're undergoing at the moment.