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| Student Expense Claims | |  | **INSTITUTION**  *(HR /Organisation Development)* |
| The RATIONALEWhat prompted you to participate in the PPR workshop? | | | |
| **Purpose** | Our process for managing student expenses had been on our radar for a couple of years as an area that a lot of people felt needs improving. Everybody thought that it was resource intensive and it was something that wasn’t working well, but it was less than clear who actually 'owns' the process.  One reason we felt it would be particularly interesting to use PPR to review this process is that dealing with our student expenses involves such a wide range of people from different departments. It is not just finance people talking to each other; it’s actually people from the faculties and the students themselves.  Students experience quite lengthy delays between when they go on their work placement and incur expenses and when they eventually get paid these back. This has generated complaints from students, but it also seemed that some students did not even know about claiming back their expenses. So we felt it wasn't a very efficient or fair process, which is something we very much wanted to address. | | |
| **Stakes** | Since student expense claims is very student facing, we knew improving it would have a big impact: we could have happier students and improve student satisfaction. The process handles around 100 – 150 travel and accommodation claims per month affecting students on NHS placements, school administration, school management and finance staff. Once students have paid out those expenses, they put in a really long torturous claim form that takes absolutely hours. It was an estimate of a hundred hours per month spent assessing and dealing with student expenses, just for the NHS students. When you think of the number of students that we have, that really is quite excessive.  Participative process review is not a part of our DNA yet, but I'm absolutely convinced of its merits. Part of the rationale for improving processes is financial; if you can show it makes a difference in terms of the beans that get counted, that’s a good advertisement for this approach. The process we selected is quite inefficient and we wanted some evidence that shows how you can improve things with not a lot of effort really. | | |
| **Objectives** | To improve the service delivered to students when claiming expenses to include:  1) simplification of claim process,  2) shorten time taken to process and pay claims,  3) potentially replace paper processes with electronic processes  4) reduce number of processes required before claim is paid  5) reduce number of errors on claims  6/ develop suitable and robust user friendly guidance for students to reduce the risk of errors  7) reduction of duplication of tasks to create a transparent shared process. | | |
| The PROBLEMWhat was the issue, challenge, opportunity the review focused on? | | | |
| **Context** | On behalf of the NHS, our faculty trains nurses and we get allocated a certain number of places with a fixed fee for each nurse, which includes any expenses to and from their placements. The University pays out around 100 – 150 such expense claims per month, the current process is paper based, labour intensive and complex, leading to delays in making payments and rejection of a large number of claims that are not compliant with NHS Bursaries Guidelines.  Claims are processed by the payroll department linked to their cycle of activity and financial processes, but there are a broad number of touch points with different departments. | | |
| **Need** | The need to improve the process stems from the quality of service to students. Some students are out of pocket between paying out expenses whilst on work placement and getting the money back. Because of the way they fill in the forms and the number of checks it goes through, there are usually delays as it is not deemed to be high priority. There is no set process or agreed turnaround time, which means some students can be waiting weeks for their claims to be paid.  This process was actually across several different sites and different functional areas. I was hoping that people would be able to see what they were doing in a wider context and getting people to see things beyond their silo. While we needed to restrict the process to its core area we could control, we were keen to consider who else needs to know about the process we are using. For example, how well student support services are aware of the process when it only really applies to NHS students, so who needs to know what and when and how do they get to find it out. | | |
| **Participants** | * NHS placement students * School Administrators, School Managers * Payroll staff, other Finance staff * Lecturers (placement briefing) * Student Union, Faculty Dean | | |
| The SOLUTIONWhat did participating in the process review achieve for you? | | | |
| **Key understandings** | The process review revealed clearly the timeline and the duplication happening across the different stages from the student submitting a claim. The delay was seen to be in part due to the number of checking processes it went through and in part due to errors not being picked up early enough. The claim moved from student helpdesk to student finance officer, to a manager; then it comes to Finance, who often have to pass it back down the line to resolve the errors. So by asking the question: if it has already been through all the different stages, why is it getting to finance right at the end when the students probably already waited 3 or 4 weeks and there’s errors on it? How could those errors get resolved early on, what were the issues; and that was the key thing we were trying understand.  The most valuable opportunity in PPR is being all together in one room for a day, because this doesn't happen often. We recognised the importance of getting the most of that time that you're together, map your process and actually agree something sort of get us and agreeing on what the process is and what the process should be. Because that's the most difficult thing, to get an agreement.  We certainly believe that we start with the end in mind so when you design a process to deliver benefit or value it’s about the people who are supposed to reap the value defining what that value looks like and then working backwards to design a process to deliver what’s valued. | | |
| **Intended outcomes** | Student satisfaction is about how quickly we can reimburse them by making sure the process is as straightforward as possible and avoiding duplication in the checking process.   * shorten the delay between claiming and reimbursing * decreased number of student enquiries * reduced time involved in clarifying information with students * decreased number of student complaints | | |
| **Light bulb moments** | The process mapping was very illuminating; we were looking at duplications, where links were broken and could see where there were too many variations at some decision points. Some people weren’t even aware that they were decision points so until we mapped out the whole process and followed the student expenses claim form from the point of them in the student faculty offices to ending up in payroll and getting paid, I don’t think there was anybody that actually fully understood that whole journey.  What was a big eye opener there for everybody was the amount of checking that was done and people checking the checkers and a lot of this 'recycling' that wasn’t actually necessary. It was time-consuming yet was not picking up errors at the first point, but 4 weeks down the line when problems were picked up by Payroll. Not only did we see this as the source of delays but also because incorrectly completed information meant forms going backwards and forwards We could see visually the problems: it’s quite a torturous messy process with a lot of redundancy.  When we got people from finance and people from the nursing schools actually saying what they did at various points and what they were checking, then there was laughter in the room because people saying “but I checked that at this point” and so 3 or 4 people are checking the same things and again nobody knew what was being checked so everybody was checking everything.  Furthermore, we realised the additional work arising from having two separate databases, one in the school and a different one in payroll office. This involved key information that we need and asking the question of where that is found in the University, how do we extract that so it’s one form, one database for this purpose, one set of records - a student’s records system that the school and the finance department have access to and where student information should come from. | | |
| **PPR techniques** | There are no mechanisms for people to make the connections even around the same process unless there’s a formal coming together like this process review did. It got all the different players into the same space, so we ended up with different understanding of what they do in relation to the whole and who else is doing what and then the whole thing in the context of what we’re trying to deliver.  We changed the Terms of Reference quite a lot and added stuff, because everyone sees it from a different viewpoint, that of the student or the administrator. Even though I was familiar with process mapping, it was the way it was done as a PPR that was slightly different, where you actually agree at the beginning collectively what the outcomes are, what you are trying to achieve, who are the different people involved and the order of things.  If I have to do process mapping again I’d use this technique. The whole tool of having the great big, long white sheet on a table with the swim lanes felt liberating and constraining at the same time. Mapping it all out and being able to move the post-it notes was good; it’s easier for someone for pickup a post-it notes and say actually I think this should be here. The swim lanes were harder to get a grip on, in terms of separating out stakeholders and/or functional areas; it can complicate where you feel the beginning and end of the process is that you can change. | | |
| **Actions / next steps** | During the workshop, we did come up with a couple of things there and then that we could do straight away that could hugely improve the process.. We picked five most common errors that the people who take the claims at the help desk can be asked to check while the student is in front of them.  Because two of the 'right' people that needed to be in the workshop were missing, we ran a second workshop ourselves as a follow-up session so they could fill in the gaps. These were people involved in the most detail of checking these claims, so we wanted to make sure what we are proposing was going to work for them, some of which was just logistics. That was quite important because they work as part of the finance team but are based in the faculty, so they’re not co-located with the payroll team and so we went through the process, we went through some of the key questions and possible actions from the first workshop so we refined or revisited the process map.  Certain fundamental things had also come to light that nobody seemed to understand, which we needed to explore after the workshop. For example, admin did not know where the students get the information they need to put their claims in, which may be the root cause of the errors the process was generating. | | |
| The RESULTWhat are the tangible outcomes & impact? | | | |
| **Immediate changes** | After the workshop, mapping the 'as it' and 'to be' process, it was easier to see where the bottlenecks or the hotspots were, how we can eliminate these and at what point earlier in the process. The immediate change is to look at the design of the form and to seek out student input into that. One of the actions is to understand what information is given to students, is it the right information, is it clear and is it given to students at the right time.  Immediate changes were not so much stripping things out but changing the order of things. Because there are some NHS bursary guidelines that have to be followed, the team of people managing the claims won’t necessarily know what they. What’s permissible in terms of claims from the NHS bursary perspective is not something that payroll, for example, would know about. Now we have a situation where the two people that were most involved in acting in different parts of the process, from finance and from the department, are responsible for the checking the forms and the input to payroll. It's a single process that they are jointly working on, as opposed to independent processes and duplication. This has taken a stage out the process and they now spend a particular day of the week going through the claims, which has created a better timeline for ensuring claims are dealt with swiftly.  It’s now been agreed that information from the student record system of students on placement that is needed for payroll purposes will be extracted into one database and used to log all information relating to expenses, such as receipts of expected claim forms. | | |
| **Improvements made** | We have already implemented some of the changes in terms of reducing duplication of tasks, so that’s an immediate improvement, but there’s still long way to go. There’s still a lot of things that we have to do, but we have already started and the team are now working more closely together. The key checking is between the department administrator and the finance, they do that together now so that they're not sending things backwards and forwards now they’re resolving issues in one step.  The instructions to students had not previously been clear and consistent in terms of how they’re given out. Some students didn’t know that they have to make their expenses claim form until they were just on their first placement.. Improvements were made in terms of the information that A) that needs to be available to students and B) what are the different ways that they should be given that information and at what time, so before they go on a placement as a part of their induction. Guidance is being produced on where to find the expense claim forms, what can be claimed, keeping receipts etc.  Five key errors were emphasised that account for 80% of the errors on claim forms and these are now checked at the point that the student hands in their form, which will speed up the process down the line from simple errors like incorrect bank details or no receipts. Using the 'five key errors' check procedure means:   * Reduced time delay for students between claiming and being reimbursed; * Reduced volume of queries as well as the volume of complaints logged.   One of the improvements we put in place is the spreadsheet we used to use for logging key dates, such as date a claim is submitted, date a payment is made, is now a shared spreadsheet between the different people involved. This will actually allow us to monitor things and give an accurate picture of the improved service. | | |
| **Evidence of benefits** | It's still early days, but in our case if we translated the improvements from our student expenses PPR into pounds and pence, the reduction from a 100 staff hours a month to 20 staff hours a month is very significant in terms of cost savings.  In terms of student satisfaction, since everybody is focused on trying to improve the experience of students, measures are about how we notice what’s different, what’s the turnaround time now and is that reflected in a different type of feedback from students.  Our metrics for improvements include:   * Improved student satisfaction (NSS scores) * Reduction in the cost and time associated with processing claims. * Increased number of correct first time submissions * Reduction in average time to turn around from submission to payment * Improved staff satisfaction (employee engagement survey) | | |
| **Unintended & unexpected** | One gap we realised during the workshop was we didn’t have student representatives which would have been better. We’re now getting a group of students together in focus groups to ask their views on the process and claim form design, in order to make sure we understand from their point view what the service should be.  Another issue was a significant restructuring internally from faculties to schools and from local professional support to centralized services delivered locally, which has caused some turmoil and uncertainty. Amidst all of that, it was surprising that people still found the time and energy to engage with this process review. | | |
| **Longer term impact indicators** | Keeping the momentum going is important for longer term benefits, as there are several things we still need to do to resolve current problems with this process. Actions that will have a big impact include investigating what information students get and when; improving the claims form and guidance on requirements; getting input from the students on the new process.  Wider impact depends on how do you define the beginning and end of the process. For instance, part of the process involves reporting back to NHS Bursary, so if you widen the lens, we would want to clarify with them how much of the information we give them is what they need or want, as this could save further processing time. | | |
| Lessons learned - what experience has been gained? | | | |
| **Prior experience** | Some of the tools and techniques were familiar, but it was this the participative element of the approach throughout that was slightly different. For example, I had done process mapping before, but actually the activity where we were standing together around the table, deciding on the swim lines (functions/stakeholders) and moving around post-it notes was really beneficial. The difference is that we are all in the room together and can actually understand from each others' perspectives, discuss and agree what to add or remove, what to improve, and then what the new 'to be' process should be, making decisions then and there. | | |
| **Participative experience** | The dynamics of us all standing round the table with that sheet of paper, meant being able to easily move things around and write things down, which felt quite inclusive. Having the Terms of Reference made it straightforward because we could see we’d already agreed what we were trying to improve and we could see the bits that we needed to understand in a lot of detail.  There was quite an open discussion with people committed to improving the process so there wasn't any sense of people getting defensive at all, which was nice. On a personal level, it was interesting to see the way that the relationships grew during the course of the reviews, which was most apparent in the second workshop when people came back together. Being in different departments, individuals experience each other in different ways. Before, people were seeing their part of the process as a discrete piece of activity, rather than a part of a continuum. Having a common interest in the process we were all trying to refine, the dynamic shifted and it became more of a “we”, finding common ground. | | |
| **Personal skills / application to other processes** | Having an experienced facilitator was very good in getting us to agree, making sure we were clear what that the terms of reference were. If you do a process review in one area, it seems to generate an appetite for people to undertake more. There has been some application of PPR to other processes already. People are now trying to refine a process for themselves as an ongoing activity, without waiting to be invited to take part in a formal process review.  Most of the processes we have here could do with a review, because at the moment we are in the midst of significant change. This is the ideal time to start thinking about what are the processes that are now impacted by this restructure and who’s going to be doing what, which should avoid unforeseen reinvention and duplication. I would think there are a lot of opportunities for reviewing what we do once the structures are settled. | | |
| **Success tips** | * A willingness to go right down into the detail can avoid getting it wrong by making assumptions that are actually incorrect. If you have a whole range of people in the room you can go beyond top-level processes, and drill down into the really detailed aspects, which financial processes tend to be, because otherwise you can miss the critically important bit that needs changing. In our case, we didn’t know what information students were getting beforehand and 80% of what we needed to do was with that bit at the very beginning, from where/whom and when the students receive the information booklet. We didn’t have that there, so if you’d glanced over that we would have missed the trick. * PPR is very much based on Demings work and his idea of getting those that work within the process to actually help evaluate, redesign and improve it as opposed to those that might own the process, which often are managers far removed from the day-to-day operational stuff. So it's putting the point of improvement or decision making about what could be improved into the hands of those who are most closely involved with the work. So that really is the whole nature that underpins the participative process review approach, to involve the people who have got the knowledge to make the difference. * The scope of the process/project has to be manageable with a clear beginning and end. We probably took a part of something that was actually bigger and then we started to see how the process is actually touched by other things that go on. Processes aren’t always easy to define in terms of their boundaries. Through PPR, you start building up a 'web of events' of how each element impacts on another (as opposed to a load of trams like unconnected railway tracks). You focus on a particular activity with as much breadth and depth as you can manage in order to do something meaningful, being mindful of the fact that it doesn’t exist in isolation. There’s a context in which all of this is happening and you might need to widen the lens and go through several iterations to refine the new process. * In the slipstream of significant restructuring in universities, it becomes necessary to do a bit of a PR job for PPR. An explicit desire from those at the top gives a formal recognition that this is a valuable thing to do and that the way you do it is through participation (and not as the way it is currently with a few people in a darkened room moving paper around without knowing what that means in practice). This should include supporting a programme for developing PPR facilitators and some convincing measures of savings that would make the case for the time and cost reduction arising from doing a PPR to encourage senior staff to see them as a priority.Money and student perceptions are two factors that will get anyone’s attention. If you can show that the PPR effort can have a very rapid and significant impact and benefit the individuals involved, reflected in a staff experience survey, you can tie that to the whole engagement agenda. | | |