

Guidance for Heads of School on creating a scheme for Peer Observation of Learning & Teaching activity

Introduction

Peer observation of learning and teaching activity has been shown to be an effective form of CPD for academic professionals in HE, allowing time and space for critical reflection on approaches and practices and, perhaps more importantly, shining a light on, and initiating dialogue around, what is often seen as a closed door activity.

As part of local (School or Department based) learning, teaching and assessment policies, Heads of School should ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for peer observation activity to take place. Rather than impose a scheme or particular approach, this guidance recognises there are essential differences between different parts of the university that require different approaches, especially in the details of management and organisation of time and resource. Rather, this documents sets out essential principles that underpin successful schemes and key considerations and suggestions that should be reviewed when setting up your own.

These principles have been drawn up in consultation with lead academics across the faculties and in light of the published work on peer observation in the Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences. If you would like to find out more about their work, please contact Matt O'Leary (Matthew.O'Leary@bcu.ac.uk) or Mark O'Hara (Mark.O'Hara@bcu.ac.uk) or see the documents or video described at the end of this guidance.

If you would like some further support in setting up your scheme, please contact the Education Development Service via the contacts on our [website](#).

Essential Principles

The University has identified 6 essential principles that should be at the core of the scheme that you set up in your School. They are:

1. Any peer observation scheme should emphasize the developmental rather than the managerial. There are other processes and procedures in place for defining levels of competence and they should be seen as separate from this form of CPD.
2. It follows that observation of teaching and learning activity is therefore suitable for all staff involved in such activity as everyone is able to gain new insights from it irrespective of any notion of levels of competence. Any scheme should therefore be open to all staff involved in learning and teaching from senior managers and student interns.
3. Learning and teaching activity occurs in many contexts and in many forms. Any scheme should be flexible enough to acknowledge and value this fact. If a scheme only focusses on a particular

activity (such as lecturing), it will create an unconscious bias towards that as being the most valuable activity, and potentially, the only valuable activity.

4. Learning occurs from peer observation in both peers. As competence based approaches to observation are common in society (e.g. driving test, Ofsted inspections, TV talent shows etc.), any scheme needs to counter potential preconceptions by emphasising that the observer should be learning as much, if not more, than the observee.
5. The observer is not there to make evaluative judgements on the observee. Rather they are there to observe and report on what has happened so as to better allow the observee to reflect on their own role in the learning and teaching activity. Any scheme should include a 'training' element for observers to ensure that they understand what their role is and is not.
6. When colleagues are new to this developmental approach they can be nervous or even distrusting of the motives of those insisting that it occurs, so clarity and measures designed to create confidence (such as starting with volunteers, giving observees control over the context and timing, managers taking part as observees etc.), should be incorporated into the scheme.

Key Considerations and suggestions

'Buy-in' from senior managers is important so that staff see the value of any scheme you set up, however in order to ensure that the scheme is set up in accordance with the principles and guidance here, it is best to create a 'Peer Observation Scheme Leader' who will have dedicated time through workload allocation to set the scheme up and ensure its ongoing success. It might be advisable to liaise with other Heads of School and arrange this at a faculty level.

You need to decide on timescales and scope. Will everyone eligible be observed and if so when? Will you make it compulsory? When will the training take place for observers? What guidance and support do you need to put in place first? See below for examples of documentation from the HELS scheme – you will want something similar.

How will 'pairings' be made? There are advantages to both in-department pairings (shared understanding of context) and cross faculty pairings (new ideas and ways of thinking). Perhaps people could be encouraged to alternate? Reciprocal arrangements may be encouraged. You could set up a register of volunteers with comments about what they do and are happy to be observed on. It might be sensible to start with volunteers or even start with the most senior people as observees to 'set the tone'. Consider how to make best use of your Senior Fellows of the HEA and National Teaching Fellows - they have, after all, committed to helping others' professional development.

It is essential that staff have the time to engage fully with the process. This means not just the time required for the actual observation itself, but other essential aspects that make the observation worthwhile. You should look at workload allocation and availability of time for development. For example, you could insist that a proportion of the annual 22.2 hours' allowance for staff development – see AWPf ver. 3, p17 – is dedicated to peer observation activity. Time needs to be provided for:

1. Early discussion for setting up the observation process, deciding on the context and the general focus;
2. Pre-observation discussion to finalise details and sharing ideas about what both peers are hoping to get from the observation;
3. The observation itself;

4. Post-observation discussion which involves feedback from the observer and the generation of a professional discussion

It is also important that these components take place in a timely manner. For example, you could define minimum gaps between items 2 & 3 and 3 & 4, or state that the process must start and finish within a 4-week period.

You may want to give local guidance on activities that may be included (or excluded) from the process. You will want to do this based on local priorities and student feedback (e.g. module evaluations or NSS/PTEs). If, for example, you know that use of the VLE is a concern, you could encourage peer 'observation' of VLE activity. In some departments, skills training is a key priority so you might suggest that people prioritise peer observation in skills delivery workshops over conceptual understanding facilitated in seminars or tutorials.

Consider what needs to be recorded. Individuals will want to make and keep notes but these are best kept private. Any attempt to share those notes outside of the two peers will damage the developmental aspirations of the scheme and make it seem managerial. This will devalue the process, make people less honest, and reduce the potential benefits of the scheme. However, you will want to find a way to assure yourself that people are engaging with the process appropriately and you will want to record any generic feedback or outcomes that can feed into wider School or Faculty CPD activity. If something particularly positive is discovered, you will want to find a way, with permission, to share this more widely. You will need a way to record and investigate any potential issues such as observers being judgemental or being pressured to divulge details of observations to line managers.

Further Information

You should find attached four documents from the faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences scheme to accompany this guidance. They are: Observer Guide, Observee Guide, HELS Observation FAQs, and Powerful Coaching Questions for Teaching & Learning.

You can also see a video of Matt O'Leary describing the approach as developed in the Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences here:

Direct Link: [Video Describing HELS approach \(12:31s\)](https://vimeo.com/225972670) or type in browser <https://vimeo.com/225972670>

Remember, if you would like to find out more about their work, please contact Matt O'Leary (Matthew.O'Leary@bcu.ac.uk) or Mark O'Hara (Mark.O'Hara@bcu.ac.uk).

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