Peer Review: Guidance for Participants

Introduction

The University’s Peer Review scheme aims to enhance the students’ learning experience and enable lecturers to teach and facilitate learning even more effectively. It is also intended to be a supportive process that promotes a reflective conversation between colleagues about teaching that can link to an individual’s personal and professional development.

The process is defined by the following principles;

- It is a confidential, non-judgemental and developmental process
- It is a collaborative process that centres around a professional and supportive dialogue between colleagues
- It focuses on the full range of teaching, learning, support and assessment activities that impact on the overall student learning experiences
- It requires participants to reflect on their teaching and learning practices
- It should be a reciprocally beneficial process for all Peer Review partners involved and linked with future professional development opportunities
- It should be flexible enough to enable different Departments to implement it in ways that best suit their particular context

Peer Review has been introduced to extend and enhance the University’s previous ‘Teaching observation scheme’ which was felt to be too narrowly focussed and of limited value. Consultation with past participants has shown that ‘Teaching observation’ was focussed only on ‘observable teaching events’, had concentrated on teaching style and delivery, often resulting in feedback that was too vague and bland to be helpful to the observed lecturer. In addition, it was very closely associated with evaluative observation of probationary staff resulting in junior colleagues feeling that it was a process that needed to be ‘passed’ and was ‘done to them’. Senior and experienced lecturers felt that they learnt little from the Scheme after the first few years, as repeated observation of a small range of teaching activities did not challenge or provide new insights.

This newly revised scheme therefore seeks to address these concerns and broaden the remit and scope of a peer based approach to the development of teaching and learning and the effective delivery of programmes of study that promote student learning. It also seeks to support a collaborative approach to academic professional development.

Overview

Peer Review requires a teacher to identify an area of teaching activity that s/he wishes to focus on and develop in some way. The Review involves working with a colleague, or colleagues, in order to identify ways in which practices can be enhanced, developments made or initiatives taken. Teachers will share parts of their practice with their Peer Review partner(s), (either through direct observation of activities, provision of documentation, students work and other evidence or through
open discussion), before taking part in a reflective dialogue. The teacher will decide the focus of the Peer Review process and the partner will seek to facilitate a productive conversation in which ways forward can be explored, limitations are acknowledged and action plans are made. It is hoped and anticipated that, although focussed by the needs and interests of one partner, both (or all) colleagues will find points of reflection, learning and benefit in these conversations.

Contents

These materials are intended to be a helpful guide, rather than a set of requirements and are divided into the following sections that map onto the chronological stages of implementation for a Peer Review process:

1. Preparation
2. Activity
3. Reflective Dialogue
4. Follow-up and Recording
1. Preparation

Getting ready to participate in Peer Review involves the lecturer in reflecting on three key questions;

- What learning and teaching related activity would I like to focus on?
- Who would be best placed to do this with me?
- How can the Peer Review process take place?

1.1 What teaching and learning related activity would you like to focus on?

To decide what aspect of your teaching and learning role you would like to review you might like to consider the wide range of possibilities. You could focus on your teaching delivery e.g. your seminars, lectures, practical/laboratory teaching, project supervision or even your role in distance or e-learning. Alternatively you could consider a Teaching Design or Preparation activity such as session planning, module design, development of learning resources or research into alternative methods. Another focus could be Assessment whether that be the writing of exam questions, the alignment of assessment in your courses, the trailing of a new assessment method, fair and consistent marking or giving constructive feedback to your students. Peer review might also focus on your student support activities, such as the support for international students or students with a disability. It could focus on the supervision of research students or the provision of academic support for distance learners etc.

It is clear that the student learning experience is broad and discipline specific so don’t feel constrained, just considering face to face teaching provision, but think more broadly about your role. Please look through the provided examples of Peer Review Scenarios to better appreciate the flexibility of the process.

Another way to consider the most appropriate Peer Review focus for yourself is to think about your current teaching and learning priorities or concerns – What are you interested in learning more about, developing or introducing? What new teaching do you have for next session and what do you need to think about? What activities do you want to update or review, e.g. maybe feedback from your course evaluations has triggered a concern or raised a question?

A final consideration, which may influence your choice of focus, is the collective view of your Department. Are there common concerns or key issues that are being discussed between colleagues? For example, ‘How do we provide better feedback to students?’ or ‘How do we develop our students as independent learners?’ etc If there are several colleagues who wish to focus on the same or similar topics, Peer Review can be used as a group process. For example, a course team when reviewing their module could use Peer Review to focus on a common concern or explore the possibility of developing a new teaching method.
1.2 Who would be best placed to do this with you?

The question of ‘Who?’ is likely to be very closely linked to ‘What?’. Is there a person, or people, who you share a mutual interest in teaching with or who has expertise you wish to acquire? Is there someone who has piloted an approach or has considerable experience in an aspect of teaching and learning that you wish to develop? Or a colleague who wishes to explore, experiment and test out approaches that you too are interested in? Finding a common interest is clearly key but beyond that you are also looking to identify a Peer Review partner, or partners, who:

- You enjoy working with
- You trust
- You respect
- And who has the time available

Only if these ingredients are in place are you likely to be able to fully engage in the process of Peer Review.

Departments will have their own processes for the establishment of Peer Review partnerships and it is likely that some may wish to address ‘hot topics’ in teaching and learning through this process. Sharing common findings and discovered ‘good practices’ may well be one of the outcomes sought in such a Department and partnerships may be suggested by a Peer Review Coordinator to maximise this potential. However, the scheme does provide great flexibility and other Departments may wish to leave the partnering process to individual lecturers allowing them to focus on their own concerns and issues more variedly and independently. In this case partners are likely to approach each other informally to find out if there is indeed a mutual interest and ability to take part in a Peer Review.

1.3 How can the Peer Review process take place?

It is likely that the next step involves a conversation about practicalities. The checklist below highlights some of the points that should be clarified between Peer Review partners.

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**Initial Organisation for Peer Review**

**When and where can you meet?**
(ie When can you both make the time available? When would the process be most supportive? Where would Peer Review partners feel best able to participate?)

**When will the focus teaching and learning activity take place?**
(ie Does the Peer Review involve observation of a teaching session or consideration of student work handed in at a particular time?)

**What arrangements need to be made in advance of your meeting(s)?**
2. Activity

This stage of the process involves deciding how to let a colleague 'see into' your chosen teaching and learning practices and development interests. It may be appropriate for your partner(s) to carry out a direct observation of what you do. For example, they could observe a teaching session or a supervisory meeting, they could witness some on-line tutoring or observe the process of giving feedback to a student etc. If you wish to focus the peer review process on teaching skills or methods it is likely that observation of practice will be a useful way to proceed. (For further guidance on undertaking direct observations please see section 2.2).

However, there are many other ways that you can decide to provide insight into what you do and the chosen focus of your Peer Review. The collaborative review of documentation, reports, evaluation material etc might best provide your partner with the insight they need to take part in a useful reflective dialogue and direct observation may be superfluous to a particular Peer Review focus.

2.1 Reviewing documentation and evidence

Providing evidence of what you do may best be achieved through the provision of appropriate documentation. It may be that you can provide your review partner with a clear insight into your teaching and learning practices and the ways they impact on the student learning experience by sharing key documentation with them.

Documents may include:

- Programme and module documentation
- Student feedback
- Guidance notes for students
- Marked course-work
- Examples of assessments assignments or examination questions
- External examiner comments
- Examples of teaching materials
- Screens showing on-line discussions etc

You would then wish to organise a meeting with your partner in which to discuss your teaching activity (see checklist below).
2.2 Direct observation of teaching activities

Effective observation of a teaching activity will involve the Peer Review Partnership in agreeing an approach which is mutually acceptable and is likely to involve reaching agreement on the following points:

**Focus and Goals**
- What is the focus of the observation?
- What are the goals and interests of the lecturer?
- What are the interests and goals of the observer?

**Practical considerations**
- When will the lecturer provide the background and context of the teaching activity?
- When will the teaching activity take place?
- Do students or other colleagues need to be briefed about the observation?
- Does the observer need/want to stay for all the teaching activity – if not, when will s/he arrive and leave?
- Will the observer use an observation checklist or time log to take notes during the teaching activity?

**Reporting back to the lecturer**
- Timing of feedback? Will the observer give any instant feedback, at the end of the teaching activity, or will this reporting back be consumed within the Peer Review meeting at a later time?
- What form of feedback does the teacher prefer? Written or Verbal comments?

Below is a checklist intended to help you plan such a meeting.

**Checklist for the Planning of a Peer Review Meeting**

1. **When and Where should the meeting take place?**
   When - A mutually convenient and timely meeting for the chosen teaching focus. Where - A place where all Peer Review partners feel that they can speak openly without fear of being overheard and in a relaxed manner.

2. **How long should be allocated for the meeting?**
   Good idea to budget for slightly longer than you think you will need so as not to finish the meeting in an unnecessary rush.

3. **How will you share ‘agendas’ before the meeting?**
   It is clearly helpful if both (all) partners can consider what they would like to raise during the meeting itself and what might be a sensible order to address these. Sharing this information will give all parties a chance to think about the others interests and needs before the meeting too.

4. **Who will lead the meeting?**
   In most cases it is likely that the lecturer who has selected the focus of the peer
5. What are the personal goals of those present at the meeting?
Both Peer Review partners need to reflect upon their own personal goals even though the process has been instigated by and is likely to be more closely aligned to the interests of, the lecturer.

6. How should the meeting be recorded or documented?
For information on the recording of peer review exercises, refer to Section 4 of QA9 Development of All Staff Undertaking Teaching Activities.

3. Reflective Dialogue

At the heart of the Peer Review process is a dialogue between interested colleagues. The goal of this conversation is to move beyond a process of simply ‘giving feedback’ to a colleague but to use the teaching activity as an initial focus and starting point for a mutually interesting and valuable exchange of views and ideas.

This conversation may begin with the Review Partner asking about the teaching experience from the lecturer’s perspective, seeking to understand their thoughts and feelings during the activity. It may also be important to revisit the lecturers goals and desires – what do they want to achieve and therefore what input would be most useful?

The lecturer may also wish to hear feedback comments from the Review Partner and to consider their reactions to the teaching activity. Depending on the focus this may include the Review Partner in giving some direct observation feedback or in asking questions about the experience. The Review Partner may wish to draw parallels with their own teaching work and experiences or look forward to identify future possibilities.

It would be completely reasonable for the lecturer to ask his or her Review Partner to take notes in a teaching session and to give feedback tailored to his or her specific questions or criteria. However this should be seen as a starting point for dialogue rather than an end in itself.

It is intended that the conversation with a colleague will support a process of self-reflection that in many case will lead to the fostering of an teaching action plan and decisions about how it can be implemented. Below is a list of possible useful trigger questions to structure both self-reflection and the dialogue itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did I do?</th>
<th>Why did they think that?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why did I do that?</td>
<td>What would improve it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>Why did that work well?</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did I think/feel?</td>
<td>Why was it important?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why did that happen?</td>
<td>Why did that happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What influenced it?</td>
<td>What would I do differently next time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who thought that?</td>
<td>What will I do next?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Follow-up and Recording

For information on the recording of peer review exercises, refer to Section 4 of QA9 Development of All Staff Undertaking Teaching Activities.

Closing Remarks

The process of Peer Review is intended to be a stimulating a supportive one. However, it does require thoughtful participation and the encouragement to go beyond ‘hoop jumping’ to be truly beneficial for those involved. It is a process that will reward effort and provide teachers with a unique way to share their experiences and develop their skills.