PEER REVIEW IN PRACTICE GUIDANCE
INTRODUCTION

At the University of Essex, we want colleagues to ask their peers regularly for feedback on their teaching practices and in return to give feedback to others. Peer exchanges form part of our commitment to professional development and are central to building our learning community. Listening to feedback on teaching practices and sharing different approaches between colleagues is one of the ways we can consistently improve the quality of our student experience.

Peer Review of Teaching is organised by the department. There is deliberate flexibility in the policy so that the model can be shaped by departments but it needs to provide a mechanism for academic colleagues to reflect formally on their teaching practice.

These guidelines provide examples of the different models for peer review.

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1. Who is to conduct peer review?
Academic colleagues will take part in peer review if they are involved in the following areas of activity in the UKPSF (2012) dimensions of professional practice: designing and planning learning activities, teaching or supporting learning, assessing and giving feedback to learners and developing effective learning environments.

The rationale for this is that some academic staff may not currently deliver many classes (if at all) but can still benefit from reflection on specific elements of their role. It also means that experienced academics that are not currently delivering teaching can share their experience and good practice with peers.

2. Deciding who reviews who.
Peer review can be between colleagues more, less or similarly experienced. Landy and Farr (1983) have suggested that peer review is likely to be more productive if it is conducted between colleagues with different levels of experience. However, the benefit of peer review for colleagues will depend on how approachable each individual is and an “open, trusting relationship and within a culture of criticism” (Blackmore, 2005: 224). Departments will need to consider what the current culture towards peer review is in their department and how reflective practice can be integrated appropriately amongst academic staff engaged in teaching.

A variety of approaches are currently used by departments in the University: these include departments inviting peers to choose their ‘peer’; grouping peers into teams of 5 or 6 to observe each other; and some have interpreted ‘peers’ as role specific, for example GTAs observing GTAs and lecturers observing lecturers.

Defined pairs or groups/clusters: Departments may choose to have a designated member of staff responsible for placing people into pairs or groups for peer review. This can make it easier to match individuals based on their respective area(s) of expertise.

Randomly allocated partnerships: Departments may choose to randomly allocate colleagues to ensure a mixture of subject expertise, and to widen exposure to different teaching approached.

Self-chosen pairs of groups/clusters: Departments may choose for colleagues to select freely. This may encourage greater ownership and confidence in the peer review. A different person could be requested every time or one could remain partnered with the same person within a given cycle.

3. Does peer review need to take place within the department?
No. Peer review can take place across departments and faculties. Each model has advantages and disadvantages.

Within the department:
- Both colleagues will be familiar with the discipline approaches.
- The focus for the feedback can be aligned easily with the Department Education Plan.
- It can contribute to a sense of department community.

But
- It can be difficult to have an impartial eye particularly if the colleagues know each other well and it might be a challenge to see things differently.
- It can become too familiar and possibly less effective.

Across the department and faculty:
- It can give you rich insight into ways of teaching which you may not be common in your department.
- It can help to share and exchange practices more easily within and beyond the faculty.

But
- It can be challenging to organise.
- It can be difficult to sustain over a longer time.
- The differences between discipline approaches may be too wide in teaching practice.

4. Is the peer review partnership two-way?
This can vary. It is most common for one individual to observe another and vice versa. This can help maintain the sense of partnership and build rapport and confidence.

Some departments though prefer not to operate in this way and a colleague giving feedback does not ask for feedback in return. This is often used when the model is less of a direct exchange and more of a continuous loop of feedback.
5. How often can the peer review take place?

Once every two years is the minimum requirement (as agreed by Senate) but there are many benefits to taking part in more regular or continuous feedback.

**Continuous feedback:** This can help a department to share ideas continuously and to reflect on the different approaches to teaching the students experience during their studies. This may be particularly suitable for subjects involving intensive teaching hours or heavy performative element in their curricula.

**Termly:** This provides frequent feedback. This may be an ideal timescale for those using the ‘grouped’ method. This method naturally incurs heavy organisation but it is an interesting way for colleagues to observe each other at separate points across the academic year.

**Annually:** Some academic staff prefer to conduct their observations once a year. This allows for a relatively frequent time for observation and reflection, and provides more time for observation planning. This timescale can be either at the same point during a given academic year, or changed each time to ensure a wide variety of experiences.

6. What should the feedback focus on?

It depends. Some colleagues prefer to select the area they would like feedback on. Some examples of these include: an evaluation of a Moodle resource, effectiveness of presentation display software or how well an individual is building rapport with their students. This offers colleagues a chance to be specific about the feedback they want to receive. Of course, this may lend itself to a somewhat restrictive feedback outcome but this can be managed.

Others choose from a defined list to help to focus discussion around specific aspects of teaching and learning. For example, this may include: instructor preparation and organisation; content knowledge; rapport with students or modes of delivery. In either case, peer review of teaching is not to be necessarily focused on the ‘what’ of teaching but more on the ‘how’ and ‘to whom’.

7. How can good practice be identified and shared?

There are many ways to do this and the department will have a preferred approach. In addition to a specific record of peer review departments could consider using appraisal reviews, dissemination days, blogs and departmental intranet sites as other methods of sharing good practice.

**Informal conversations:** are often the best way of sharing honest and constructive feedback with colleagues. These happen during any part of the peer review of teaching process but commonly occur shortly after a given observation, to allow both parties to share their open and honest thoughts.

**Lunchtime meetings:** Some departments use this method as a way of helping colleagues to develop the teaching support and peer observation strategy that best meets the needs of the department. Furthermore, this provides an open and safe form for feedback to be discussed at the departmental level and can be scheduled to meet as many attendees’ needs as possible.

**Self-reflection:** Colleagues report that there tends to be two ways in which they self-reflect on their practice; neatly reflecting the ‘In-Practice/On-Practice’ model from Schön (1983). There is no ‘correct’ option; rather a much more personal choice.

**Formal meeting:** This is a choice often made by those who prefer a more ‘sit-down and discuss’ environment for looking back at the teaching observation that took place. It may also be appropriate for those who are looking to gain a deeper insight into a given process or element of discussion which requires more time than an informal chat would allow for.

**Action Learning:** Action Learning sets provide an opportunity for teams and groups of people to deliberate over any potential challenges problems they may be encountering. Colleagues have found that this type of space productive particularly in terms of exploring challenges with people from another faculty or subject discipline.

**University-wide initiatives:** Colleagues may also wish to disseminate their good practice via internal conferences, Faculty Education Committees or other leadership events.
8. What needs to be recorded?
In order to report peer review engagement to Deputy Deans (Education), Heads of Department will need to monitor and record that peer observation has happened. The format for the record is flexible.

Provided forms: Some departments find that providing a pro forma for their colleagues is a useful way to standardise the approach and identify common themes. Forms provide colleagues with space for reflection on what went well, what did not go well or what could be changed or added in light of the observation.

Own notes: Although pro-forma documents are widely used, some departments opt for a freer way of recording their thoughts by encouraging academic colleagues to make their own notes using their own preferred structure. Although this makes comparisons and ease of access a little more limited than use of standardised forms, colleagues report there is great value in being able to freely make their own notes on their own terms.

A mixture of standard forms and own notes: Most typically, colleagues tend to use a mixture of these two methods of physically recording constructive feedback – aligned with actual discussion shortly after the event. This inherently enhances the scope for a broader observation (and constructive feedback which can occur alongside).

9. Is there a link between peer review and Performance and Development Review (PDR)?
No. Peer Review is developmental and provides colleagues with an opportunity to reflect on their practice. The content of, and reflections on, peer reviews could inform the discussion between line manager and academic colleague.

If there are any areas of concern with individual teaching practices the HoD will manage this separately to the peer review process.

10. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
Some departments disseminate FAQs to standardise, departmental processes and expectations; often accompanied with key contact details. This can allow for a quick method of obtaining information specific to a given department or group of individuals.

11. Advance HE (formerly known as Higher Education Academy) Fellowship.
Undertaking peer review of teaching is part of professional development. It is included within the CADENZA framework (including the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice – PG CHEP). For instance, peer dialogues are a current feature of D3 (Senior Fellowship) and D4 (Principal Fellowship) applications, and peer observations are a requirement of those working towards the PG CHEP.

The majority of colleagues engaging with these routes to professional recognition have found they have helped them to feel more confident in giving and receiving constructive feedback. Colleagues can find out more about these approaches by contacting Organisational Development.

Additional support and guidance is available to all colleagues involved in the design, delivery and participation in Peer Review of Teaching. Get in touch if you would like to talk about peer review of teaching:

Deputy Dean (Education) Humanities:
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REFERENCES


