



Peer Review in Practice Guidance

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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.

1. Who is to conduct peer review?

Every member of academic teaching staff needs to engage in a peer review development conversation at least once every year and be observed delivering teaching at least once every two years.

All newly appointed academic colleagues will engage with a teaching observation in the first 4-5 weeks of teaching but as a minimum in the first three months.

All Assistant Lecturers (ALs) will engage with a teaching observation every year. All newly appointed ALs will engage with a teaching observation and receive feedback on their teaching in the first 4-5 weeks of teaching.

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 Assistant Lecturers observing Assistant Lecturers 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 approaches.

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?

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 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 should the peer review take place?

The Peer Review of Teaching policy outlines that each School or Department will take a risk based approach to determine the frequency of peer review. New modules, modules taught by inexperienced educators (defined as two years or less experience), and modules which may have received poor student feedback in the past are examples of modules where there is higher risk and where more frequent peer review beyond the annual requirement is expected; while lower risk activities will require annual peer review.

6. What should the feedback focus on?

Specific details for peer review within the wider departmental focus can always be agreed by the colleagues taking part to ensure the feedback is tailored, constructive and immediately actionable. For example, a focus may be identified as student engagement, but the specific peer development conversation might be how to manage difficult conversations in the classroom.

7. How can good practice be identified and shared?

There are many ways to do this and the department will most likely have a preferred approach. The approach to capture good practices will be led by the Director of Education within each School or Department. A summary of actions proposed and/or taken because of peer review is shared annually with the Faculty Education Committee. Faculty based themes will then be shared at Education Committee, where appropriate. Themes shared could be instances of good practice, where additional resources or support could be requested, or how support accessed through the Educator Development Framework could be enhanced.

In addition, all colleagues engaged with peer review could also consider some of the approaches below to share good practices:

Informal conversations: These 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 forum 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 or group coaching for educators provides an opportunity for teams and groups of people to deliberate over any potential challenges or problems that 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. Group Coaching for Educator sessions are regularly scheduled on HR Organiser to support educators.

University-wide initiatives: Colleagues may also wish to disseminate their good practice via internal conferences, Faculty Education Committees or other leadership events. These can be searched on the Educator Development Framework.

8. What needs to be recorded?

This will be decided by the Director of Education within each School or Department. For peer observation of teaching, a set of criteria is used for every peer observation of teaching delivery as agreed by the School or Department. Feedback shared will be by theme and not on individual practices.

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 (develop@essex.ac.uk).

12. Support.

Group Coaching for Educators is available to departments on an individual or group basis and is offered as a development space for teachers to reflect on their practice with peers, understand why and how they would like to develop new approaches, and build the confidence to put these changes into action. This type of coaching contributes to a Department/School culture of reflective practice and continuing professional development with the potential to engage with colleagues beyond their immediate area (for example, cross-faculty). Colleagues can engage with Education Coaching by developing a profile and/ or exploring the [Peer Mentoring Database](#). Group Coaching for Educators sessions are facilitated centrally by Organisational Development and can be booked via HR Organiser.

If you would like to understand more about the approach to peer review in your School or Department, get in touch with your Director of Education.