

PEER REVIEW WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

Overview

Peer review, whereby colleagues review and offer feedback on aspects of an individual's teaching practice, is used in many universities to enhance and promote high quality teaching (Shortland, 2004). Feedback is regularly received on teaching and student experiences through Student Perception Questionnaires (SPQ), the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and external examination processes (Kell & Annetts, 2009). However, rarely are discussions around teaching and learning with colleagues prioritised, despite the potential benefits to both the individual being reviewed and the person undertaking the review (Clegg, 2003). Peer review can create a forum for scholarly discussions around teaching and learning, allowing the wider sharing of good practice and identification of developmental needs (Gosling & Mason O'Connor, 2009; Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Lueddeke, 1998).

Peer review is underpinned by the principles of reflective practice, which is seen as central to the role of being a university teacher (HEA, 2011; Clegg, 2003). Observing, reviewing and discussing learning and teaching activities creates a context wherein the process of teaching can be examined critically (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). To be developmental, and therefore to enrich future practice, discussions should be more than simply evaluating how teaching occurs; they should also explore why (Hignett, 2003). This can be enhanced by deeper consideration of connections between the teaching experience under discussion and relevant educational theory and pedagogic research (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). It is through such discussions that teachers can be encouraged to experiment or innovate, and this can lead to them becoming more sensitive to their students' learning experiences (Clegg, 2003).

In this document a revised model for Peer Review with Plymouth University is presented which is informed by current research and practice from across the UK.

Managing the peer review process

For the peer review process to be effective it needs to be embedded into the normal working practices of Schools, and therefore it is recommended that it is undertaken on an annual basis (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). This enables all staff to engage in regular discussions around teaching and learning and also to respond to recent pedagogical innovations in developing their own practice (Shulman, 2002). However, it is recognised that peer review can be perceived as a quality assurance process required by the institution, rather than an opportunity for personal development (Kell & Annetts, 2009; Shortland, 2004). To overcome this negative perception, planning for peer review should involve all teaching staff to enable them to gain a sense of ownership of the process (Kell & Annetts, 2009). Consultation should be used to determine the focus of the annual peer review; for example some years, there may be a focus on a specific aspect of teaching practice (perhaps identified by NSS/SPQ/PTES data). It should not be an expectation that more experienced individuals review newer colleagues; rather the emphasis should be placed on the insights that can be gained by both the reviewer and reviewee for their teaching practices through reflective discussions (Shortland, 2004). The process has been identified as less daunting if individuals select who will engage in the peer review, although ideally the observer should be someone who could provide an objective perspective (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005).

In order to ensure that peer review is embedded in institutional practices, the scheme should be linked with other university-wide processes and initiatives such as the Performance Development Review (PDR) (<https://exchange.plymouth.ac.uk/intranet/perdev/public/pdf/start.htm>), or the Teaching Development Framework (TDF) (<https://exchange.plymouth.ac.uk/intranet/tdf/start.htm>). However, trust and confidentiality underpin this process (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004), therefore it is not anticipated that the discussions, and resulting feedback, would automatically be shared beyond the individuals involved in the review. For practical reasons (e.g. monitoring participation / collating feedback) it is recommended the Associate Head of School (Teaching) coordinates the implementation of the scheme and records the occurrence of peer reviews.

The peer review process

To support peer review, and the TDF, forms have been developed which addresses the three stages presented below, and follows good practice outlined by Gosling & Mason O'Connor (2009). This template has been developed based on the benefits identified by Shortland (2004) of the importance of a clear structure to guide both parties through this process. These forms can be found at <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=32343>.

i) **Preparation** – This depends partly on the approach taken to the review process (i.e. whether or not this is undertaken as a collective or paired activity). In either case, it is necessary to consider teaching activities holistically, rather than focus simply on efficient delivery of lecture material (Kell & Annetts, 2009). Instead of concentrating solely on classroom interactions, participants might ask for peer review of a sample of their assessment feedback, on-line activities, course documentation etc. The focus might be an aspect of teaching which has been identified through students' feedback as less effective, or a proposed development incorporating new technology.

To accommodate the breadth of teaching and learning activities that could be the focus of a peer review two forms have been developed; Form 1 is designed to be used for a face to face teaching session (e.g. a lecture, seminar, laboratory practical), Form 2 is to be used for the review of other teaching activities (e.g. assessments, e-learning, teaching related administration).

Completing Part 1 of each form provides the reviewer with sufficient information about the session to support them in undertaking their review. The use of this form is optional, and an alternative approach can be taken if appropriate. Please note, however, that if you plan to use this review in conjunction with the TDF to obtain Fellowship of the HEA, these forms should be completed.

ii) **Undertaking the review** – As a range of learning and teaching activities may be the subject of peer review, only general guidance is offered here. If observing a teaching session, it is worth taking time and note down what students are doing as well as what the lecturer is doing. You may also be able to engage in a brief discussion about their perspectives after the session.

As a reviewer, it may take some time to adjust to thinking about the different aspects of the session which are important, and the template provides guidance on what kinds of things you might consider.

The reviewee can help here by drawing your attention to areas which they are concerned about or would particularly like feedback on. In undertaking the review McKinnon (2001) recommends that reviewers create a timeline for the session, as this may help to trigger reflections during the subsequent feedback session.

iii) **Feeding back** – This should take place as soon after the session as possible, whilst it is fresh in the memories of both parties. The success of this stage relies on both the reviewer and reviewee being willing to be self-reflective, open to questioning and discussion (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). This should be seen as a two-stage process that needs to be allocated sufficient time for completion to ensure that it is developmental rather than a rhetorical activity (Kell & Annetts, 2009). Initially a meeting should be held to discuss the session; subsequently the key points of this discussion should be captured using the peer review form (part 2). The reviewer and reviewee should collectively identify and agree on the aspects of good practice and developmental needs identified through the review as these are fed back to the individual managing the process (part 3) (Gosling & Mason O'Connor, 2009).

Guidance on the feedback process

The discussion, and subsequent feedback, integral to the peer review process has been identified as providing an effective and powerful insight into an individual's teaching practices (Mackinnon, 2001). It can build confidence and enthusiasm, particularly when an aspect of an individual's teaching is recognised as being of value to others. However, it is also the feature of this process which is often identified as challenging for both the reviewer and reviewee (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). There is a tendency for critical feedback to be perceived negatively rather than as developmental. Outlined below are recommendations for the provision of feedback:

- Underpin the delivery of feedback with questioning to examine why specific actions were taken. This can trigger self-reflection and lead to a deeper insight into practice (Shortland, 2004);
- Be focused in the provision of feedback balancing the positive and negative comments to avoid overwhelming the recipient. However, the potential benefit of this process is lost if the reviewee does not receive feedback on areas they need to improve on;
- Avoid offering prescriptions or solutions as this can cast the observer in the expert role (Mackinnon, 2001). It also does not provide the reviewee with the opportunity to engage in self-reflection and development. Rather, where necessary, brainstorming should be encouraged, with connections made to individuals' own experience and knowledge of educational theory / pedagogic research. This may involve the reviewee in undertaking wider reading and / or participating in developmental activities following the review process;
- Use non-threatening, neutral language to ensure that areas identified for improvement are discussed in a way that promotes change rather than despondency (Jones, 1993).

Using the peer review to enhance teaching

Individually and collectively the peer review process can be used to enhance future teaching practice. Individually teaching staff can integrate the outcomes of their own peer review into their PDR. The Associate Head of School (Teaching) should collate the outcomes of the peer review process at a School level in a timely fashion to allow them to be integrated into School / Faculty planning meetings. This collated School feedback should be shared with the ADTL and Educational Development team to ensure enhancement opportunities are made available. Although it is recommended that peer review be undertaken annually, teaching staff can participate in this activity more frequently. Additionally, Associate Heads are encouraged to support teaching staff in participating in regular discussion of their teaching that extends beyond issues of quality assurance and management. The Educational Development and Academic Support, Technology & Innovation teams offer a programme of workshops designed to support individuals in developing their pedagogic practices.

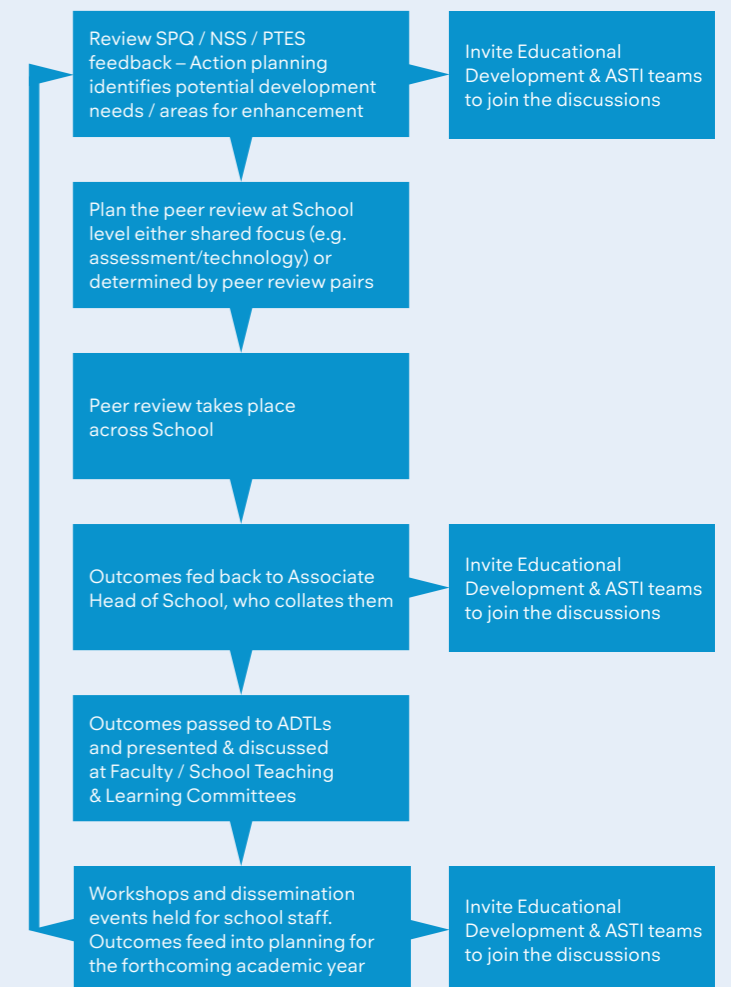
Proposed timeline

Timeline – Each year peer review should be used alongside other activities (e.g. attending teaching and learning workshops; reading literature relating to teaching and learning), to receive feedback on, and enhance, teaching practices. It is recommended that peer review should be planned alongside other enhancement activities to allow the outcomes of this process to inform future planning at a School and Faculty level. An indicative timetable for peer review is provided below, but this might be adapted to suit the processes in each school:

- Summer term – Review of SPQ / NSS data to inform Action Planning process. Planning for the peer reviews takes place e.g. determine focus and timetable for reviews to be completed and collated;
- Autumn / Winter term – peer review takes place across the school in pairs or small groups;
- Spring term – feedback collated by Associate Head of School (Teaching) and passed on to ADTL and Educational Development;
- Summer term – Provision of events for sharing of good practice/ developmental workshops undertaken.

It is recognised that this may happen at different timescales in across the University, but the expectation is that a full cycle will take place annually.

Overview of the peer review process



Exceptions to this Scheme

– the peer review scheme should not be used for:

New staff – Those with less than three years full-time teaching experience in a UK university will be engaged in the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (<https://tulip.plymouth.ac.uk/Programme/4223/SitePages/Home.aspx>). As part of this course they will be completing three Reviews of Educational Practice and engaging with current pedagogic research / educational theory.

Performance management – This documentation is not intended to address instances where peer review is requested as a consequence of poor performance. In such instances separate procedures are required, and staff are directed toward the Capability Policy (<https://exchange.plymouth.ac.uk/intranet/perdev/public/capability/start.htm>).

Useful links

Higher Education Academy's Resource Centre – this includes teaching and learning resources relevant to disciplinary areas and a range of key themes (e.g. internationalisation / employability): <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources>

JISC Learning & Teaching Practice – these pages provide links to the programmes of work and projects JISC have supported that promote the use of digital technologies in learning and teaching <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/topics/learningteaching.aspx>

The Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) – who promote innovation and good practice in higher education: <http://www.seda.ac.uk/>

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

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