



PEER Support and Observation Policy

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Peer Observation and Support Scheme

1 Summary

Peer Observation and Support forms a key element of the continuing professional development (CPD) for learning and teaching at Northumbria University. It is a collaborative, non-judgemental process that aims to promote dialogue about how best to engage students in learning and improve teaching excellence.

All academic staff¹ are required to engage in a minimum of two rounds of Peer Observation and Support per year, of which a minimum of one round will involve peer observation of teaching. Peer Observation of Teaching can include interactions with learners in an on-line environment where staff are not involved in face-to-face teaching. The second round may be a further peer observation of teaching if supporter and supportee agree, or may involve support with another aspect of teaching practice, such as assessment, TEL, etc. A round of Peer Observation and Support involves both observing/supporting and being observed/supported. It is expected that Peer Observation will take place in scheduled teaching sessions.

Departments should schedule Peer Observation and Support events at the start of each academic year, before the teaching begins, and record a monthly summary at Departmental level (session, date and time) to allow for University monitoring of completion. A monthly summary of planned and completed events will be reported to Faculty Executive and Education Committee.

Observations of teaching should take place once in the period October – March, and Peer Support can take place between October and July. All staff should undertake one round of peer observation of teaching and one round of peer support or a further observation of teaching practice if supporter and supportee agree. All outcomes of Peer Observation and Support are confidential to supporter/observer and supportee / observee²

Information on the Scheme is available below. Further information on the Scheme can be sought by contacting Susan Mathieson, Principal Lecturer, Quality and Teaching Excellence (x4123), susan.mathieson@northumbria.ac.uk.

¹ Graduate Tutors should also engage in the Peer Observation and Support Scheme

² The only exceptions to this are where Peer Observation and Support is a requirement of other qualifications, including HEA Fellowship, where one of the referees will have observe teaching and will comment on this in the reference, and the taught Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), which includes critical reflection on a recording of teaching as a component of the assessment.

2 Peer Observation and Support Scheme (POSS)

Peer Observation and Support forms a key element of the continuing professional development (CPD) for learning and teaching at Northumbria University. It is a collaborative, non-judgemental process that aims to promote dialogue about how to engage students in learning.

- Peer observation of teaching and learning is a key element of peer support and is an important collegial professional development tool for HE staff. It enables staff to learn from each other through observing and being observed, thus gaining a shared understanding of best practice; it provides opportunities to observe students as they are learning, and helps Northumbria as an institution to identify developmental needs amongst its staff as a whole (Race, 2009). It also contributes to the practice learning of programme teams (Boud and Brew 2013), and forms a significant aspect of the informal learning that has been identified as central to teaching excellence in programmes (Roxa and Martensson 2009, Mathieson 2017). Within the Peer Observation and Support process, the learning from observing/supporting professional practices of other staff is regarded as being as valuable as being supported/observed. Peer Observation of Teaching can include interactions with learners in an on-line environment where staff are not involved in face-to-face teaching.
- Peer Support of teaching and learning can involve areas of activity that are priorities for support, for example interactions in an online environment, curriculum planning, assessment and feedback practice, development of online and distance learning materials, use of new technologies, student support, and pedagogic innovation. These wider experiences of Peer Support can be used to evidence one round of Peer Support engagement annually, in addition to annual engagement in a round of peer observation of teaching.

3 What principles underpin the Peer Observation and Support scheme?

The aim of the Peer Observation and Support Scheme is to facilitate continual improvement to learning and teaching practice through the recognition, sharing and development of good practice. It enables staff to take time out to reflect on their practice with a colleague, providing mutual support through a safe but critical vehicle for creative thinking around teaching, learning and assessment. A level of personal autonomy has been built into the process, which is intended to make a real difference to professional practice. It enables staff to take time out to reflect on their practice with a colleague, providing mutual support through a safe but critical vehicle for creative thinking around teaching, learning and assessment. A level of personal autonomy has been built into the process, which is intended to make a real difference to professional practice.

3.1 Mutual support

Peer Observation and Support is for the benefit of both parties involved; it is not just a one-way process where an 'observer' reviews the activity of an 'observed', but a two way process for sharing and discussing ideas. It provides an opportunity for the observer to share in the good practice of the observee, as well as for the observer to benefit from the thinking of a peer as a critical friend. It can also be conducted by small groups of staff in order to address issues identified by programme teams. However, for the purpose of evidencing annual engagement in Peer Observation and Support activities, individuals must evidence both supporting and being supported in relation to a specific aspect of their own practice, one of which must be observation of teaching. Participation in generalised group discussions, while valuable, cannot be used for annual reporting of individual Peer Support/Observation (further information on the Reflecting Teams approach to Peer Support can be accessed here).

3.2 Wider than classroom observation

In addition to one round of Peer Observation of teaching, colleagues are required to undertake a further Peer Support activity. Peer Observation and Support recognises that the professional role of the academic is far wider than can be covered by classroom observation, and can for example include laboratories, studio sessions or field trips. In addition to Peer Observation of teaching, it can also include other areas that are priorities for support, for example interactions in an online environment, curriculum planning, assessment and feedback practice, development of online and distance learning materials, use of new technologies, student support, and pedagogic innovation.

3.3 Confidentiality

All outcomes of Peer Observation and Support are confidential³. The only information on Peer Observation and Support that is available internally records the type of activity, the date, and who was involved, examples of good practice, or issues of wider interest (POSS Form, Section 1). The online form also has space for confidential reflections on learning from engaging in Peer Observation and Support that can be shared with the supporter/observer, which is also available as a downloadable word document (POSS Form, Section 2)⁴.

4 Who should do Peer Observation and Support?

All academic staff 1 are required to engage in a minimum of two rounds of Peer Observation and Support per year, of which one round will involve peer observation of teaching. A round of Peer Observation and Support involves both observing/supporting and being

³ See footnote 2 on confidentiality.

⁴ Please note that those applying for HEA Fellowship will use evidence from their engagement with Peer Observation and Support to authenticate their claim. At least one of the referees for HEA Fellowship will have engaged with applicants in peer observation of teaching and will draw on this in their reference.

observed/supported. All outcomes of Peer Observation and Support are confidential to supporter/observer and supportee/observee.

In many disciplines Peer Observation and Support takes place more regularly, particularly to support the induction of early career academics on probation, graduate tutors and staff who are new to Northumbria. Support for at least one round annually of peer observation of teaching for graduate tutors and early career academics on probation must be provided by an experienced teacher, normally a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (or equivalent)⁵: this provides the additional support and guidance needed to become effective and critically reflective HE teachers. Research into the induction experiences of early career academics at Northumbria indicates that Peer Observation and Support, and reflection on learning from this, offers the most significant learning for new staff about their teaching, with benefits for programme teams and for enhancing student learning (Mathieson 2017).

If you are submitting for professional recognition as a Fellow of the HEA (D1-3), you need to confirm that you have engaged in two rounds of Peer Observation and Support, including one round of peer observation of teaching with a Senior Fellow of the HEA (or equivalent) in the 12 months prior to submission. Your personal reflections on what you have learnt through Peer Observation and Support and how this relates to the UKPSF must be included in your HEA Reflective Commentary, as this will demonstrate the development and effectiveness of your practice. If you are gaining HEA Fellowship via the taught Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) your final assessed Peer Support will be a critical reflection on a recorded teaching session. Further details of this can be found via the PGCAP programme handbook.

In addition, at least one of the referees for HEA Fellowship applications will have engaged in peer observation of teaching, and will draw on this in their reference.

Section 1 of the online Peer Observation and Support record form must be completed for a minimum of two rounds of Peer Observation and Support activity annually, including at least one round of peer observation of teaching. This confirms that the process has taken place. Section 1 also provides space for any points that both parties agree they wish to bring to the attention of others, e.g. exemplars of good practice or requests for staff development sessions. This form will be completed electronically. There is an additional confidential part of the Form (Section 2) for reflection on what has been learnt from engaging in Peer Support, which may be shared with peer observers/supporters.

Associate Heads of Department/ line managers, Directors of Equality, Diversity and Development and others requiring access for reporting purposes will be able to access Section 1 of the electronic records to enable up to date information on who has completed Peer Observation and Support in Faculties and Departments, to identify good practices and issues that have emerged for sharing more widely.

⁵ Where a Senior Fellow is not available, peer observation may be by a person of equivalent teaching experience as a Senior Fellow.



All academic members of staff are allocated time for their participation in Peer Observation and Support, peer mentoring and contributions to internal CPD activities in accordance with Northumbria's workload model. Currently this is 21 hours annually for participation in Peer Support and Observation, peer mentoring and contributions to internal CPD activities.

Workshops on Peer Observation and Support can be booked on the [HR portal](#).

How does Peer Observation and Support work?

Peer Observation and Support will involve:

- one observer and one observee (for a peer observation of teaching session)
- one supportee and one supporter (for peer support of teaching practice)
- a meeting to agree the focus for each of the observation/support sessions
- at least two sessions each academic year, one of which must be an observation session, and another being an observation or other form of support session (this can be another teaching session if agreed by supporter and supportee)
- a post observation / support session follow up meeting to discuss written comments made at the time of the observation/support, and provide a forum for reflection
- a post-observation reflection on learning and changes to practice resulting from Peer Observation and Support

Templates to structure these meetings can be found in Section 2 of the online form.

The time required for participating in Peer Observation and Support should be included as part of the staff workload. Early in the academic year, each member of academic staff will schedule a Peer Observation session, and a Peer Support session. Peer Support themes may be framed as:

- **Good practice** - The staff member has an activity they consider suitable for more general dissemination which they would like to showcase and receive a view on.
- **An issue** - The staff member has something they wish to work through with a colleague, e.g. how to embed research into teaching, how to facilitate group work, how to respond to an issue that has surfaced through student feedback, how best to deliver or assess a new topic, how to make effective use of online tools, how to deal with student disruption in class, etc.
- **An innovation** - The staff member is trying something new and would like an opinion on it.
- **A programme issue** - A programme team has identified an area for development e.g. in response to student feedback, such as trying to identify ways in which teaching can be made interesting and engaging. Peer Observation and Support could involve individual observations of teaching across the programme, as well as programme level discussion of the issues arising.

Where programmes follow the Reflecting Team approach, this can only be formally recorded as Peer Support by individuals who have shared specific examples of their individual practice, and received feedback on this.

5 Academic faculty engagement

Responsibility for ensuring the implementation and reporting of the Peer Observation and Support Scheme rests with the Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, and ultimately the Deputy Vice Chancellor, although operational responsibility will normally be devolved to the Associate Head of Department. This includes meeting the 100% target for engagement with Peer Observation and Support.

Associate Heads of Department (AHoD) should:

- deliver, annually by end of September, a full schedule of teaching observations for all staff required to engage with Peer Observation and Support, and make a monthly report to Education Committee on progress against the schedule
- have mechanisms for matching supportees/observees with supporters/observers, ensuring consent, mutual respect and trust. It is desirable to avoid extensive use of 'closed pairs' so that good practice and ideas are shared widely
- respond to staff expectations of what they want to gain from Peer Observation and Support, or issues they want to address
- take into account any probationary and HEA Fellowship requirements in matching supporters/observers with supportees/observees
- ensure that staff understand the developmental goals of Peer Observation and Support, for example by running workshops, or directing staff to attend central workshops
- facilitate meetings, for example to identify specific areas for investigation, or discussion of good practices identified through Peer Observation and Support recording
- Report on engagement with and learning from Peer Observation and Support to the Faculty Education Committee each semester

AHoDs may arrange Peer Observation and Support across disciplinary and Faculty boundaries, for example where good practices have been identified in another discipline that may benefit modules and programmes.

A small number of academic staff will not engage in direct teaching as a normal part of their duties; these staff may be exempt from the annual peer observation of teaching requirement on approval of the **Faculty Associate Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning)** – these staff must nevertheless engage in a minimum of two rounds of Peer Support per year.

Engagement with Peer Observation and Support will be discussed annually as part of Northumbria's Performance, Development and **Appraisal** process.

6 Where can I find Peer Observation and Support scheme documentation?

The online Peer Observation and Support form can be accessed [here](#)

The full policy paper approved at Education Committee (EC18-10, 13/09/2018) can be accessed [here](#)

7 What resources have been developed at Northumbria to support Peer Observation and Support

7.1 Peer review Teaching Observation Framework

A key employment requirement to support the Corporate Strategy is the achievement of Advance HEA fellowship. Anecdotal discussions with staff and HEA Mentors suggests early career academics/ newly recruited academics often struggle to understand the alignment of teaching, learning and assessment and the wider contexts of quality assurance, health and safety requirements, UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and NU policies. Also mentors were not always clear about this feedback

The [Teaching Observation Framework \(TOF\)](#) facilitates the observation of teaching practice allowing for a meaningful and authentic formative assessment of the participant's skills of facilitating excellence in teaching and learning within the real world of professional practice. A pilot study has revealed that new academics have found it as a useful vehicle to support the development of teaching skills and confidence and mentors have stated it offers a supportive framework for considered peer feedback. An HEA consultant has also stated the TOF is an example of good practice.

You are welcome to utilise the framework to support your development as an academic or to offer feedback to those who are mentoring/peer reviewing their colleagues.

Ethical approval and a TQEF award have supported a study to formally evaluate the impact of the tool on staff development across NU. If you would like to know more about the study or/and are interested in participating please contact Carol Wills.

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Tel: 0191 2156685

8 What does the literature say?

This page discusses the literature that informed Northumbria's current Peer Observation and Support Scheme.

See the [Red Guide](#) for the origins of the Scheme. More recent references can be found [here](#).

Peer observation of teaching (POT) is one of the most frequently used processes for professional development within UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and has been enthusiastically reported in much of the associated literature (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Smith, 1998; Bell, 2001; Martin and Double, 1998 and Keig, 2000). Gebhard (1999) concisely defined POT as being "Non-judgemental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation." In traditional models, POT involves one academic being observed while teaching by a colleague, in the role of a 'critical friend' (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006).

Other literature considers POT in terms of:

- The concept of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1987, p.31) "a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled";
- 'critical friends' working collegially to improve practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988 as cited in Bell, 2002);
- identity as a professional teacher operating in the changing context of higher education (Taylor, 1999);
- as a tool to enhance teaching practice which helps one understand themselves as a learner (Daly et al., 2004);
- enabling change for the better (Peel, 2005).

On reporting upon Peer Observation in Australia, Bell (2002) neatly summarises the strengths as being: a supportive and constructive, practical, collegial activity; motivating and giving affirmation to all those involved; developing awareness that 'problems' in teaching are shared by others and that solutions can be found with others; providing new ideas and skills; building awareness of the value of, and skills in, critical reflection and reflective practice; stimulating discussion about teaching and learning within departments; promoting self-assessment; benefitting the observer by providing insights and ideas; supporting continual improvement; reassuring highly self-critical teachers; implementing changes based on evidence; a potential significant turning point.

The concept of enhancement featured significantly in Crutchley's (2006) survey where nearly 90% of respondents indicated that the process had enhanced their personal and professional practice, either individually or as part of a group. Shortland (2001) also found that the use of classroom observation methodologies widened the scope of peer observation to the benefit of observer and observee through the feedback process. Identification of 'good practice' teaching techniques enabled change and modification to teaching practices, to the benefit of teaching quality.

While, as mentioned above, there have been enthusiastic reports of POT in the literature, certain factors have also been identified which inhibit the full realisation of the potential of POT. Bell (2002) noted how POT tends to focus on face to face classroom teaching behaviours and that the presence of an observer or video recorder may affect the dynamics in a small class. Cosh (1998) argued that observees may view the process as inherently judgemental and threatening and, in consequence, may become defensive and resistant to suggestions for improving practice. On the other hand, Bingham and Ottewill (2001) recognise that the assessment of peers might be too self-congratulatory – the 'mutually supportive club' (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004 p.502). Gosling (2002) comments that observations between colleagues in the same subject area tend to focus on course content rather than learning processes. Keig (2000) also refers to the fact that the POT process ignores the fact that students' learning experiences depend on a blend of tutor-led, tutor-directed and student-directed learning activities. As Gosling (2002) comments, the very use of the term 'observation' tends to focus on the 'performance' element in learning and teaching to the detriment of the less observable elements.

Other authors argue that POT is more concerned with institutional imperatives than individual development (Smith and Bath, 2003; Shortland, 2004). Fleming et al (2004) found that peer observation was the 'thorniest' issue in their Teaching Development Group model of professional development. Much concern was expressed by academic staff, leading Fleming et al to suggest, among other things, that a clear distinction and an explicit separation be made between 'appraisal' and the development element of peer observation.

9 Bibliography

Boud, D. and Brew, A. (2013) "Reconceptualising academic work as professional practice: implications for academic development." *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18 (3) 208-221

Mathieson, S. (2017) Developing rich learning environments in academic workplaces: lessons from an accredited CPD programme to inform the Apprenticeship for Academic Professionals, SRHE Conference, December 2017

Race, P. 2009 (2009) Using Peer Support to Enhance Teaching. Leeds Metropolitan University

Roxa, T. and Martensson, K. (2009) Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena" *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (5) 547-559

10 Peer support case studies

These case studies are included as illustrations of ways in which the Peer Support can be used to enhance Learning and Teaching practice beyond the required Peer Observation of classroom, studio, laboratory based teaching.

10.1 Example 1: "good practice"

Kyle McLeod has introduced a new series of seminars into his module, where every third week students are asked to sign up to a problem surgery rather than have the usual seminar session. Feedback from students has been very positive about this approach and he wonders whether this practice could be possibly adopted by other tutors within his subject area. Judith Davies, a colleague teaching within the same school (but a different subject area), met with Kyle to discuss this approach. Kyle was able to present Judith with the module questionnaire forms where a number of students had expressed as part of the qualitative comments their general approval of being provided with the opportunity to discuss issues on a one-to-one basis. Although Judith was impressed by the approach, she was keen to find out whether all students had signed up to the surgeries. Kyle, by examining his records, noted that around 5 students from his cohort of 50 had not engaged with the surgeries. As a consequence Kyle decided to ensure that in the future he would at regular intervals check the records and contact the students by email and pass on an appointment time to them rather than relying on them to sign up, and would then monitor this approach. Judith suggested to Kyle to present his findings at a school staff development event.

10.2 Example 2: "a problem"

Andrew Park has designed a series of Blackboard quizzes for his students to use as formative assessment activities on his module. However, student engagement with these has been low and he would like advice on how this could be improved. Andrew, who teaches chemistry, had recently participated in the CPD e-learning module. He was aware that a previous participant (from outside of his school) had done some pedagogic research on computer aided assessment, and opted for this person to become the observer on the peer support scheme. Amir Abdul, teaching statistics, looked at Andrew's module site and made the following suggestion: firstly, that an individual quiz should be created to directly relate to a teaching session. As part of the feedback features of the quizzes, students could be directed to additional resources such as references to set texts, other websites etc and finally he made the suggestion that a small proportion of the summative module mark be given over to the participation in these quizzes. After following these recommendations, Andrew noticed a significant increase in participation as well as a marked improvement in the student feedback he received for the module.

10.3 Example 3: "an innovation"

Xue Yan would like to introduce into her module's seminar series sessions which involve students in constructing a poster collage, which examines the perceptions associated with the professional roles within Law. She is proposing that in the first seminar session students will be provided with magazines, newspapers and web access in order to collect images for the poster. In week 4, students will be asked to present these posters as part of a mini conference, where prizes are to be awarded by students acting as peer reviewers to the event. Xue Yan was a relatively new member of staff and made a request for two observers in this academic year, i.e. a colleague from her own school and an additional colleague from the Post Graduate Teaching Programme she had recently undertaken. Both observers felt what she had suggested was innovative. Her subject colleague recommended that she could probably provide more focus by suggesting to each of the groups which of the roles they should explore, rather than giving free reign, as well as giving her useful tips on booking an IT Lab through Timetabling. The PG tutor passed on to her some useful literature references, as well as passing on a name of a colleague from the Centre of Excellence who had experience in organising student conferences.