

# Guidelines for Peer Observation of Learning and Teaching

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### Introduction

These guidelines have been prepared to enable schools of education or education departments to undertake peer observation of learning and teaching. They are designed to assist departments to put in place a process whereby all staff are able to have feedback on their teaching from colleagues in advance of Subject Review. They also can form the basis for a longer term process of peer observation.

QAAHE have made it clear that when a department has a good peer observation process operating that this will reduce the need to carry out comprehensive observation of teaching during the Subject Review visit. These Guidelines have been designed taking into consideration QAAHE's advice to Reviewers and are consistent with QAAHE's approach to the observation of teaching.

These Guidelines are designed to have general applicability to any department undertaking observation of learning and teaching, but the particular circumstances and the requirements of specific subjects will almost certainly mean that there will be variations in practice between departments and subject areas.

<b><u>Objectives</u></b>	To assist departments in providing a high quality educational experience for its students
	* To enhance the importance attached to quality of teaching
	* To encourage all staff to reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching and identify their development needs
	* To foster discussion and dissemination of best practice
	* To increase staff awareness of the whole student experience
	* To identify any weaknesses and put in place an action plan to remedy them
	* To help staff prepare for a QAAHE Subject Review

### Stages

1. **Planning for peer observation of learning and teaching**
2. **holding pre-observation meeting**
3. **observing learning and teaching - criteria and methods**
4. **holding post-observation feedback meeting**
5. **individual action plans**
6. **departmental summary and departmental action plan**
7. **staff development**

### 1. Planning for peer observation of learning and teaching

#### **1.1 Departmental planning**

A meeting in which the process is discussed with all staff is essential in order to address the concerns that staff will have and to make decisions on between some alternative strategies.

Some of the issues that will need to be considered are as follows:

- how will staff be grouped to undertake the peer observation (see section 2 below)
- will any external observers be required in specialist areas?
- will any other peers from outside the department need to be involved?
- how will student feed-back be obtained?
- what forms of teaching and learning should be included in the process?

## 1.2 Principles

Some general principles of the scheme as proposed here will also need to be explained and discussed:

- the principle of confidentiality in the feedback to individual staff
- the separation of this process from other university processes such as those for probationary staff, for under performance or promotion, or as part of the appraisal scheme
- the emphasis on development rather than judgement
- the involvement of all staff with teaching responsibilities whatever their grade or status.

### 1.3 Alternative models for peer observation

Some alternative models that may be considered:

**Peer Triads :** Department is divided into groups of threes; all staff in the department attends a staff development session on observation of teaching; each member of the group observes the other two members of the group and provides individual feedback; they meet as a group to identify general/common issues; one member from each group represents his/her group's views with other group reps; overall report is distilled from comments and discussion of the reps and discussed/agreed in whole department meeting,

#### **Pairs with external sampling**

Staff are grouped according to subject interest and then divided into pairs. Each member of a pair observes the other member and an external observer samples across the group. The group meets with the external observer to agree common issues which are forwarded to the department.

**Internal panel:** A group of selected staff within the department receive staff development on observation of teaching; each member of the internal panel observes a selection of staff ( and is observed him/herself) and provides individual feedback; the panel agree general issues and write report.

**Mix of internal and external panel:** As above, except that the panel includes some observers from outside the department; these may be drawn from educational development unit if there is one or from external peers. For example an internal panel may carry out observations of staff within the department and are themselves observed by the external(s).

When staff are formed into small groups (say triads) for the purposes of peer observation-. these groups could be:  
self-selected  
grouped according to cognate subject groupings nominated by head of department or her/his nominee(s).

There are advantages and disadvantages of each of these methods.

## 1.4 Observing a variety of teaching and learning activities

### 1.4.1 Sampling

Any process of this kind involves sampling a range of examples of learning and teaching across the department and as such the principles which guide any form of sampling apply. The sample should include, as far as is possible, the full range of different types of teaching and learning activities undertaken by the department and not just teacher-led lecturing. The full range of different programmes of study and across all levels - from level one (or level zero) to taught doctorates - should be sampled.

### 1.4.2 Confidentiality

Particular attention will need to be paid to the method of observation that is appropriate to particular forms of teaching. For example, there may be sensitivities concerning sampling classes/tutorials that involve some form of counselling, or when confidentiality is important. It will be necessary in these circumstances to consult fully with the students and to obtain their agreement for the observer to be present.

### 1.4.3 Resource-based learning

When the class is working primarily on resource based learning, for example in a computer lab, the observer will need to move round the class and observe student activities. In these circumstance it is particularly important to make sure that the students understand the role of the

observer before any individual discussion with students takes place. It will be appropriate to talk to students about what they are doing in order to understand the activity being undertaken.

#### 1.4.4 Workshop observation

When students are working for long periods on projects or practical activities, it is acceptable that the observer should not observe complete sessions. The observer should sample some teacher-led activities (openings, discussions, explanations etc.) and also observe student work. It will be appropriate to talk to students about what they are doing in order to understand the activity being undertaken, providing students understand the role of the observer.

#### 1.5 Timing

Departments thinking about implementing observation of teaching for Subject Review, the process should be timed to occur not later than in the semester/term prior to the semester/term in which the internal Subject Review will occur. Ideally the process should start much earlier. Although it is possible for observation of teaching to be a continuous process which can occur throughout the year, in practice it is often preferable to identify a specific period of say two to three weeks in which the bulk of the observations will occur. This enables more systematic planning of timetables for the observers, organisation of feedback to the department and greater sense of purpose and achievement.

If, however, the process is planned to take place over a longer time scale, there needs to be a specific target date when all observations will have been completed and evaluation reports submitted.

#### 1.6 Responsibility

Normally the Head of Department will have overall responsibility of ensuring that the process is completed thoroughly and professionally, but a senior staff member can be given responsibility for the day-to-day organisation of the process. Duties will include:

- liaise with educational development unit if there is one
- organise meetings
- ensure that the sample is adequate
- ensure that all staff in the sample are allocated to peer groups/pairs and observed
- act as an arbitrator if any difficulties arise
- receive evaluation reports from the panel or groups
- draw-up the departmental report

### **2. Pre-observation meeting/discussion**

The pre-observation discussion between the observer and colleague whose teaching is being observed is essential to the success of the whole process.

Try to meet beforehand, but if this is not possible then a telephone conversation or an e-mail dialogue may be sufficient.

An important function of this meeting is to establish trust, deal with any anxieties felt by any of the parties, and give reassurance.

- The pre-observation discussion should cover the following:
- the specific learning objectives for this session (e.g. knowledge and understanding, key (transferable) skills, cognitive skills and subject specific, including practical/professional skills)
- the teaching approach to be adopted, anticipated student activities, approximate time plan for the session
- the context of the teaching (room, timetable, the status and history of the student group, any particular constraints or opportunities)
- how the observation is to be conducted (time of arrival and leaving, any focus to the observation, where you will sit, any specific ways in which data will be collected)
- the time and place of the observation and feedback
- the content and its place within the curriculum of the unit and the programme of study
- any potential difficulties or areas of concern
- the way in which the students will be informed and incorporated into the observation
- any particular aspects that the tutor wishes to have observed
- any particular concerns that either the observer or the observed might have about undertaking the observation

### **3. Observing learning and teaching - criteria and methods**

#### **3.1 Criteria**

The criteria of good teaching should emerge from the critical self-assessment carried out by the Department and agreed by teaching staff. The model of a good tutor can vary to some considerable extent between different institutions.

Observation should not become a process of checking performance against a check-list which cannot encompass all the complexities of the teaching situation. The pre-observation meeting between observer and tutor should explore which criteria are appropriate for the circumstances of the lesson to be observed.

Nevertheless some common features do exist across almost all learning situations and these can be used to provide feed back. (See Observation Notes below)

#### **Openings and closings**

All sessions should have a clear introduction which indicates the aims and learning outcomes of the session and time plan. The session should be closed within the timetable time with some kind of conclusion or summing-up, summary of learning outcomes achieved and setting of work/reading for students to complete their study time.

**Planning and organisation:** the class begins and ends on time; planned activities occur within the time allowed, there is evidence of planning of student learning; the tutor addresses the particular learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve, that these relate to the overall aims and objectives of the unit/course, and that these outcomes are communicated to the students.

#### **Methods/approach**

The approach to organising and stimulating student learning is suitable to achieve the learning objectives set. The method adopted is justifiable in comparison with alternative approaches which may be taken. The approach ensures adequate student participation which is planned and not incidental. The approach is explained to students and understood by them.

#### **Delivery and Pace**

In a tutor led session: the pace and delivery is appropriate for the students present; sufficient time is given to explain key concepts; neither too rushed nor too slow.

In student led activities: explanations to students of activities was well paced; sufficient time was allowed for student activities.

#### **Content:**

The tutor demonstrates a good command of the subject being taught; the content is appropriate to the level being taught and the needs of the students, is up-to-date and accurate; the tutor is able to respond to students' questions, provides authoritative and accurate guidance on reading and further study.

Intellectual stimulation: the class is conducted in a constructive learning environment in which the material of the lesson challenges the students and encourages them to develop their skills and move beyond their existing levels of understanding.

#### **Student Participation:**

Students have opportunities to participate in the learning process in an active way that promotes their understanding, which gives them an opportunity to ask questions and relate the material to their own learning development.

#### **Use of appropriate learning resources:**

Which learning resources are appropriate depends very much on the topic being taught examples include texts, video and film, visual material such as posters, pictures, diagrams, samples, computer based learning packages, multi media packages. Good teaching does not necessarily involve high tech equipment, more important is having the right stimulation for learning. The students' own knowledge and experience is often the most valuable resource.

#### **Use of accommodation and equipment**

Best use is made of the accommodation and equipment available; suitability of the room/lab/studio for the type of learning activity being undertaken; seating arrangements are effective; any health and safety issues have been identified and dealt with.

### **Overall style and ambience**

Good communication with students: the tutor can be heard and understood clearly; the tutor communicates an enthusiasm for the subject; is lively and encouraging to students. Explanations are given at the appropriate level in clear language.

Respect for students' own culture, language and religion: the diversity of the student body requires staff to be sensitive to the different cultural backgrounds of the students.

Rapport with students: students are encouraged by the tutor, a good relationship exists with the group and students receive positive feedback.

**Acknowledgement of students special needs:** where students have special needs or disabilities the tutor takes these into account and accommodates those needs in the presentation of material and in his/her response to the students.

Other specific criteria will apply in particular teaching situations. In learning sessions which are student-led or rely on resource-based learning (e.g. in computer labs) there will need to be some specific criteria which relate to the objectives of the session.

(A proforma for Observation Notes based on these categories is provided in Appendix 1)

### **3.2 Observing learning and teaching**

Students need to be incorporated into the observation as a matter of courtesy and good practice. Students need to be informed about the observation in advance, and the following information given to them :

- the purpose of the observation is to assist in the development of professional skills, and the focus of the observation will be the work of the tutor
- the observer will not participate in the session as this changes the focus of the activity and reduces the observer's capacity to comment on process
- & in student-led sessions it may be appropriate for the observer to discuss the students' work with individual or groups of students

The tutor needs to

- prepare the students for the presence of the observer
- & settle the learning group with the observer present
- identify if, in any part of the session, the observer will talk to students
- work effectively with the learning group, ignoring the presence of the observer
- incorporate the comments of the students in relation to the usefulness of the session (*this could be a short discussion; feedback on most/least useful aspects of session; short questionnaire or comments on paper to be collected - process to be agreed with observer*)

The observer needs to

- be discreet and diplomatic in the learning group
- sit where they are not in the overt line of vision for the tutor or the group, but at the same time they need to be able to see both the tutor and the group
- take brief notes when necessary, and ensure that these notes relate to the enabling of learning rather than the content of the session
- carefully observe the methodologies employed, the responses and interactive processes used, the ability of the tutor to effectively achieve their aims, and the areas of successful and less-successful achievement in the session
- the observer needs to be able to share with the tutor a reflective feedback process at the end of the session

The observer is not to participate in the session as this changes the focus of the activity and reduces the capacity to comment on process

#### **4. Post-observation feedback meeting**

As soon as practically possible after the class has been observed, and at most within a week, the observer should meet with the tutor to provide confidential feedback. This is essential to the success of the process and must be handled sensitively.

In such a meeting there is a joint responsibility to keep the feedback focused and constructive, and to emphasise that the role of the observer is not to be a judge, supervisor or superior, but rather to encourage reflection on the lesson observed. To this end the observer needs to be aware of the tone of voice, language and body language, to ensure that the feedback is not perceived as confrontational or judgmental. On the other hand, real issues where they are perceived to exist must be raised and not avoided for the sake of a quiet life.

Good feedback will :

- allow the tutor to describe the class and say how they felt the lesson went before the observer makes any further comment. The tutor might reflect on whether the observation process had affected the session in any way, for example, in his/her behaviour or that of the students
- · positively state what the observer considers the tutor to have done with skill, insight, competence, etc. The observer will provide evidence or instances of any claims made
- · identify what did not appear to be so successful, or any areas in which some difficulties were observed. Again it is important that specific instances are cited as evidence for any comment about what did not go so well. Rather provide the opportunity to discuss the issues raised.
- · not apportion blame, but provide adequate opportunity to discuss any matters of concern to the tutor about the lesson or about the observation process
- & provides an opportunity to identify constructive solutions to any agreed difficulties, including sources of professional development and support
- · focus on particular issues rather than allow generalised description or evaluation.

Where it is requested, the member of staff observed will receive a written account of the observation which will summarise the feedback discussion.

#### **5. Individual Action Plans**

Where there are substantial weaknesses observed, it is possible to use an Action Plan to identify any follow-up actions needed and a date when a further observation may be undertaken. Whether this can be made to work depends a good deal on the culture of the department and the institution.

(see Appendix 2 for an example Action Plan Pro forma)

#### **6. Department Summary and action plan**

It is helpful to find a way of summarising the outcomes of the process to inform future staff development and provide evidence to QAA that the process has taken place and is embedded in the department's procedures.

It is essential to acknowledge that any process of observing teaching involves sampling from a much longer and more complex process - namely the students' learning experience with the department. Only a small part of this process (i.e. teaching and learning activities within contact hours) is amenable to observation and only a small number of instances of teaching will be observed. For this reason alone it is necessary to be cautious about judging the teaching standards of the department.

Any summary report will therefore need to be written in general terms, giving a descriptive account of the sessions observed and an indication of the strengths and examples of good practice observed, and some 'points for consideration'. This latter section will suggest any issues that the team of observers believe, on the limited basis of the classes observed, the department should reflect on and consider whether there are indeed grounds for development in relation to these issues.

Particular care will be given to focusing the report on issues which the QAAHE assessors are known to be looking for, as identified in the QAAHE Guidelines.

No individual lecturers should be named in the report and there should be every effort to phrase the report in a way which does not enable individual lecturers to be identified.

The purpose of the report is to facilitate the department's preparation for Subject Review and HEFCE Assessment, to encourage reflection on teaching and learning, and professional development - not to pass judgement.

(See Appendix 3 for a sample Departmental report **pro** forma)

### **7. Staff development**

As a result of the process of observing teaching and producing the Departmental Action Plan, clear staff development targets should be set in consultation with the Head of the Department or School and any educational development unit. It is essential to identify who will undertake, or assist in, the delivery or the facilitation of the staff development.

**D Gosling, EDS/IJEL, May 2000**

Appendix I

Observation Notes

This proforma is designed to help you undertake observation of peers and may be used in a variety of teaching and learning sessions - both tutor-led sessions and students' independent learning sessions.

### **Pre-observation meeting/discussion**

Note here the information you gathered from the pre-observation meeting.

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### **The Session being observed**

Observer	Member of staff	Subject
Courseunit/module	Length of session	Observation Time
Level/Year	Mode (FT/PT)	Number of students at session
Type of activity (e.g.lecture; seminar; tutorial)	Title of Topic	

**Introduction**

Were the objectives of the session made clear to the class?  
Were the anticipated learning outcomes for the session identified?  
Did the class begin on time?  
Was the structure of the session clear?

**Summative comments**

**Planning and Organisation**

Did the tutor relate the session to previous sessions and set it in the overall context of the Unit/Module? Did s/he set out the structure of the session at the start? Did the session appear to be well-planned and organised

**Methods/Approach**

Were the methods/approach taken suitable to achieve the learning objectives set? What other alternative approaches could have been taken?

**Delivery and Pace:**

Did the pace and delivery seem appropriate for the students present?  
Were any aspects, in your view, dealt with too briefly/with too much elaboration?  
Did the session seem rushed/too drawn out?

**Content**

Where you feel qualified to make comment, did the content seem accurate, up-to-date?  
Were examples given?  
Was the session pitched at the appropriate level for the students present?  
Did the content match the needs of the students?



**Student Participation**

Were students invited to participate?

How was participation managed? Did it appear to be carefully planned?

Did participation enable the tutor to check the students' understanding of the material/approach?

**Use of Learning Resources**

Were OHTs used?

Were they professionally produced and free from error?

Were they clearly produced and in a suitable font size?

Were other resources used, e.g. slides, video?

Did the students get hand-outs?

Were they well-produced?

Did the resources contribute to the session or detract from it?)

**Use of Accommodation**

Was the accommodation suitable for the session?

Were the seating arrangements appropriate?

Did there appear to be any Health and Safety issues?

**Overall style and ambience**

Did the tutor appear confident in delivery?

Did s/he convey enthusiasm? Was s/he clear and audible?

Did the session seem to "go well"? Was there good rapport with the students?

Were students attentive/bored? Did they seem to "engage with the session"?

Did the tutor have good presentation skills? Was there good eye contact with students?

Did the tutor seem sensitive to the "mood" of the students?

**Summary**

Summarise the main points which you wish to feed back to the teacher. Identify key strengths and areas that need attention.

**Appendix 2**

**Post Observation Individual Action Plan**

Name

Observer

Date

Strengths to build on

Agreed areas for further development

**Responsibility for development actions**

Identify here where there others have responsibility for following-up on any identified actions

**Programme for development actions**

Identify here what actions are to be taken by the staff member e.g. further reading, planning, consultation, attendance at staff development/training

Action	Date to be achieved

### Appendix 3

#### Departmental Summary Report

Name of Department/Subject Area

Date of Observation Period

Observers (where this is not the whole department)

Number and type of sessions observed

#### **General Response to the observation of teaching exercise**

Comment on response of staff to the peer-observation, any difficulties that were encountered, any areas of work not covered, whether feedback was always given

**Summary Comments on learning and teaching in the department/subject area** Comment on overall quality of sessions observed, qualities of staff and students, quality of the students' educational experience. Identify any particular characteristics of the student profile that influence learning and teaching.

Timing of sessions, punctuality and attendance.

Organisation and planning; pacing of teaching overall; response of students; student participation.

Range of learning experiences observed; is there too much reliance on particular types of teaching?

Use of learning technologies and learning resources. How well integrated are these into teaching session?

Quality of accommodation overall - identify any particular rooms, labs or studios that give rise to concern.

Overall impression of staff responsiveness to students' learning needs, their enthusiasm, subject expertise and commitment.

#### **Areas that need further consideration by the department**

Identify here any matters of concern which emerged from the peer observation of teaching and indicate where improvements are required.

Do not identify individuals but consider the issues to which staff need to give further consideration.

Actions to be taken by the department

Action	date to be achieved

**Actions by any others**

Identify any other issues which require a response by anybody outside the department.  
Identify staff development needs.