Sharing Practice: A Framework for Peer Observation (2014)

1. Introduction

This document sets out the nature and framework of a system of peer observation for staff involved in teaching and supporting learning at the University of Bolton. It replaces the October 2002 document on peer observation - Sharing Practice: A Framework for Peer Observation and Review. The 2002 framework needed to be updated because of changes in context, the maturity of the University in respect of peer observation, and the changes made as a result of implementing the University of Bolton Undergraduate Curriculum Framework (2011). Like the University’s 2002 framework, this 2013 framework has been developed from Higher Education Academy (HEA) guidance on Peer Observation with permission from the HEA.

The Higher Education sector has seen a recent increase in the focus of the importance of good teaching in order to enhance the learner experience. There is also a continued focus on the importance of reflective practice as a way to enhance teaching and learning, for example, the QAA (2012, p. 12) acknowledges that “in order that teaching and support for learning remains effective, staff reflect on their practice and consider how it might be changed and improved”. The University is committed to providing high standards of teaching, continually seeking to improve the standard of teaching, and the provision of CPD for staff. This is expressed in the Bolton Student Charter (2013) and the University of Bolton Learning Partnership Statement (2013). These developments highlight the importance of a framework for professional development in teaching and supporting learning.

Peer observation is widely used in universities in the UK as a collegial process through which staff can engage in reflective practice, and share good practice, around learning and teaching. The UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) provides a UK-wide benchmark (QAA, 2012) and a key area of activity in the UKPSF for teaching and supporting learning in higher education involves engagement in continuing professional development in the instructional techniques and strategies that enable learning to take place. Evidence from involvement of peer observation can, therefore, be used in support of an application for HEA Professional Recognition.

In this document reference is made to Academic Groups and Departments. The term Departments covers units which are not Academic Groups (e.g., Student Services, Information Systems and Technology, Library, the Off-Campus Division, and the Standards and Enhancement Office), and which have staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning who are included in the peer review process.
2. The Framework

2.1 Policy Statement

All staff (full and part-time) directly involved in teaching and supporting learning will participate in a scheme of peer observation on an annual basis. The scheme aims to:

- encourage discussion on teaching effectiveness and the enhancement of teaching and learning;
- benefit all parties directly involved through a process of dialogue, sharing practice, reflection, action planning and learning;
- encourage staff to value their own and others’ knowledge, skills, and experience;
- identify examples of good practice that can be disseminated to the University’s academic community;
- assist in the identification of individual and group professional development needs with the purpose of taking appropriate action to improve professional practice;
- provide appropriate evidence to support quality assurance and enhancement requirements.

2.2. Principles

The key principles on which the scheme is based are:

- it forms part of a larger institutional programme for enhancing the quality of learning, teaching and assessment;
- it is developmental and formative in its nature and procedures;
- it is based on the sharing of practice;
- it respects confidentiality whilst allowing the sharing of practice;
- it is a process that provides opportunities for staff to observe and be observed for mutual benefit;
- the process is developmental rather than judgemental and is separate from other University processes (e.g., performance reviews and appraisal schemes);
- it encourages all parties to reflect upon their own teaching methods and processes for promoting student learning, equality of opportunity, and inclusive practices;
- it takes account of the variety of settings (e.g., classroom, laboratory, workplace) and approaches (e.g., lecture, seminar, e-learning, distance learning, blended learning) in which learning takes place;
- it is operated consistently and regularly;
- there is appropriate briefing for participants;
- there are opportunities for the outcomes of the observations to be shared and good practice to be disseminated more widely through staff teams, Academic Groups/Departments, and the University.

2.3. Processes

A peer observation cycle will be carried out at least once per academic year for each member of staff directly involved in teaching and supporting learning. This is a process in which staff members will be able to observe as well as be observed.

The observation process will use an appropriate model to combine staff within and/or across subject areas or Academic Groups/Departments to form observation groups. There will normally be three or four members of staff in an observation group. It is expected that the observation group will normally change from year-to-year so that colleagues benefit from sharing practice with a variety of colleagues over time. Decisions about the formation of observation groups are made at the institutional and local level with the caveat that each tutor is satisfied that the observer is appropriate. Observation groups can be self-selecting.
or determined by the Academic Group Leader/Department Manager or his/her selected other. The process is outlined in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Who is involved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Decision at institutional and Academic Group/Departmental level on how the observation groups are formed</td>
<td>A decision is made at institutional and Academic Group level about how the observation groups are formed (e.g., within or across subject areas or Academic Groups/Departments).</td>
<td>• Managers&lt;br&gt;• Selected staff participating in peer observation</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Opportunity for staff participating in peer observation to attend a briefing</td>
<td>A briefing for staff participating in peer observation takes place so that colleagues can raise any concerns, be reassured of the reasons for the peer observation and the principles on which the scheme is based.</td>
<td>• The Peer Observation Scheme Manager at Academic Group/Department level - this is the Academic Group Leader (AGL) / Department Manager or person(s) designated by them.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Observation groups are established and target dates set</td>
<td>Observation groups are established and communicated and dates are set dates for when the observations will be completed and the individual reports submitted to the Scheme Manager.</td>
<td>• The Scheme Manager (i.e., AGL / Department Manager or person(s) designated by them)&lt;br&gt;• Academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Preparing, conducting the observation and giving feedback</td>
<td>There are three stages to this process (further details can be found in the guidance in Appendix 1):&lt;br&gt;<strong>Stage 1: Pre-observation meeting/discussion</strong> An initial meeting between tutor and observer to discuss the context (including learning outcomes), teaching programme, and assessment schedule and to agree the focus of the observation in the session(s) to be observed.&lt;br&gt;<strong>Stage 2: Observation</strong> Conducting the observations and completing the documentation.&lt;br&gt;<strong>Stage 3: Post-observation feedback meeting</strong> A feedback session (normally within three working days of the observation) with discussion of strengths, learning points and possible further action to be taken by the tutor after reflection.</td>
<td>• Participating staff</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Doing and progressing the paperwork.</td>
<td>A summary report will be agreed by tutor and observer, including:&lt;br&gt;• details of the event observed (e.g., date, course, class size, type of event);&lt;br&gt;• examples of interesting practice;&lt;br&gt;• the tutor's development needs.&lt;br&gt;This report will be sent to the Scheme Manager in the Academic Group/Department (i.e., the person responsible in the Academic Group/Department for managing the peer observation scheme). The report will be confidential to the tutor, the observer, the Scheme Manager and the Academic Groups Leader/Department Manager (if different).</td>
<td>• The observing tutor&lt;br&gt;• The tutor being observed&lt;br&gt;• The Scheme Manager&lt;br&gt;• AGL/Department Manager (if different to the Scheme Manager)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Reporting at Academic Group / Department level</td>
<td>The Scheme Manager will collect the reports from the observation groups and report the schedule of observations that have taken place, examples of good practice and an anonymised summary of issues. These will be shared at a local level (i.e., within the Academic Group/Department) and within the University. Each Academic Group / Department will produce a report of its peer observation activities detailing good practice to be shared and areas of practice that staff need/would like to develop further. This information will be collated to form an overview of good practice and areas of staff development wanted/needed. Further details can be found in the guidance in Appendix 2.</td>
<td>Scheme manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reporting, dissemination and action at University level</td>
<td>Based on the reports provided by the Academic Groups/Departments, an annual report on the scheme will be compiled by the Standards and Enhancement Office (SEO) and disseminated at University level via the Education Committee.</td>
<td>Standards and Enhancement Office (SEO)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4. Support

All staff will be given the opportunity to receive a briefing in preparation for the exercise. Organising this will be the responsibility of the AGL/Department Manager or person(s) nominated by them. This will give everyone involved the chance to appreciate the approach utilised.

2.5 Operation of the Scheme

Responsibility for operating the scheme will lie with the AGLs/Departmental Managers or persons nominated by them. This will ensure that the principles of the scheme are applied consistently and appropriately. In particular, staff will have the opportunity to raise any issues of concern and be assured as to the purpose of the exercise and the principles on which the scheme is based.

3. Equality Impact Assessment

The University of Bolton is committed to the promotion of equality, diversity and a supportive environment for all members of its community. The commitment to equality and diversity means that this policy has been screened in relation to the use of plain English, the promotion of the positive duty in relation to race, gender and disability and avoidance of discrimination to other equality groups related to age, sexual orientation, religion or belief or gender reassignment.

4. Other Related Policies and Documents

Related University polices and documents are:

- Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2012 – 2017);
- Employability Strategy (2012-14);
- Student Attendance Policy (2013);
- Bolton Student Charter (2013);
- The University of Bolton Learning Partnership Statement (2013);
5. Monitoring and Review

The policy is owned by the Standards and Enhancement Office (SEO). It will be implemented by Academic Group Leaders/Departmental Heads, academic staff and others involved in supporting student learning. The policy will normally be reviewed on a yearly basis.

6. Dissemination of, and Access to, the Policy

The policy relates to the staff of the University and will be made available to them via the University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) website, the SEO website, the University’s staff bulletin and staff email as appropriate. Initial introduction, or changes, to the policy will be disseminated via all staff communications such as the staff bulletin and email. Academic Group / Departmental staff meetings and staff development sessions will also be used to promote awareness.

This policy, once approved, will be held electronically on the University’s SEO and LTA webpages and the staff SharePoint.

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**Peer observation framework – sharing practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Ref</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Version Number</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version Date</td>
<td>6 October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Owner (School/Centre/Unit)</td>
<td>Standards and Enhancement Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons responsible for implementation</td>
<td>Andy Graham, Executive Dean, On-Campus Division Dr. Kondal Reddy Kandadi, Executive Dean, Off-Campus Division Academic Group Leaders / Departmental Heads Head of Learning Enhancement and Student Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approving Committee/Board</td>
<td>Senate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date approved</td>
<td>17 March 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective from</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissemination method (e.g. website)</td>
<td>Website, email, SharePoint, staff bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Frequency</td>
<td>Normally annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing Committee</td>
<td>Education Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Academic staff Jane Lovatt, Academic Development Anna Zaluczkowska, Senior Lecturer Dr. Maria Rodriguez-Yborra, Reader in Technology-Enhanced Learning Academic Group Leaders / Department Managers Andy Graham, Executive Dean, On-Campus Division Dr. Kondal Reddy Kandadi, Executive Dean, Off-Campus Division Martin Hall, Dean of Standards and Enhancement Richard Gill, Academic Quality Manager Students Union Simon Arkwright (Student Representation Co-ordinator) Adam Johnson (President)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document History</td>
<td>This document replaces the October 2002 document on peer observation - Sharing Practice: A Framework for Peer Observation and Review</td>
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</table>

Senate Approved 17 March 2014
Appendices: Guidance

The following guidance will be used. The guidance is from the HEA with amendments to provide for localisation and updating.
Appendix 1: Preparing and Conducting the Observation and Giving Feedback

Stage 1: 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 concerns staff may have and give reassurance.

The pre-observation discussion is to cover the following:

- the programme and module;
- the specific learning objectives for this session (e.g. knowledge and understanding, key (transferable) skills, cognitive skills and subject specific, including practical/professional skills, and the University of Bolton Core Curriculum);
- 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 module 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;
- the tenets of good teaching (e.g., how they apply to the observed session);
- 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.
Pre-observation Meeting

Programme and Module

Programme/s __________________________ Module Name __________________________
Level __________________________ Group size __________________________
Main aims of the module (copy and paste from Module Template)

Assessment schedule (details are in the Module Guide)

Session to be observed

Type of session: Lecture/Seminar/Tutorial/Practical

Date of session: Week no. Room:

Time of session:

Session topic/subject:

Intended outcomes/objectives

Signed __________________________ Observer

______________________________ Tutor

Senate Approved 17 March 2014
Tenets of Good Teaching

Absolute definitions of good teaching in higher education are necessarily elusive as what defines good teaching will vary according to the learners, the context and the subject. Nevertheless, from the extensive research and sharing of good practice undertaken in higher education in recent years certain key tenets of good teaching can be identified regardless of the type of session being observed and these are listed below as a guide.

Preparation: Consideration has been given to the size of the group, who the learners are and what their needs might be. Additional support needs are identified in advance.

Aims and objectives: The session has clear aims and learning outcomes and consideration has been given to the structure, purpose and relevance of the session including for example links to assessment and employability.

A high level of learner activity and engagement: The tutor has established a rapport with the learners, the session has been planned to include differentiated learner activities and attention is given to fostering collaboration (for example through peer and group activities).

Effective use of questioning: Use is made of open and critical questions to increase student engagement and foster deep learning. Learners are actively encouraged to generate and ask questions.

Inclusion: The group is made to feel welcome and used as a resource (social and cultural diversity is promoted and students are encouraged to learn from each other by sharing diverse views and experiences).

Make good use of resources and actively manage the learning environment: Use the space creatively, move around the room, allocate students to work in groups, manage challenging situations, use blended learning opportunities.

Make good use of in-class assessment: Learner progress is actively checked through group work, using question and answer as above, using assessment activities such as gapped handouts or quizzes, or using appropriate e-technologies.

Subject content: The tutor is credible and up-to-date in the subject and demonstrates enthusiasm for the topic.
Stage 2: Conducting the observation and completing the documentation

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 and, in student-led sessions, it may be appropriate for the observer to discuss the students’ work with individual or groups of students.

The tutor:

- prepares the students for the presence of the observer;
- settles the learning group with the observer present;
- identifies if, in any part of the session, the observer will talk to students;
- works effectively with the learning group, ignoring the presence of the observer;
- incorporates 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:

- is discreet and diplomatic in the learning group;
- sits where he/she is not in the overt line of vision for the tutor or the group and can see both the tutor and the group;
- takes brief notes when necessary, and ensures that these notes relate to the enabling of learning rather than the content of the session;
- carefully observes 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;
- shares 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.
Observation (The Peer Review)

Participant: ............................................................................................................

Peer Reviewer: ........................................................................................................

Date: .........................................................................................................................

1. Key areas for reflection (what are the concerns and areas for attention identified by the person being observed)

2. Observations and notes during the peer observation (drawing on the above and the Tenets of Good Teaching document)
3. What aspects of good practice have you identified that could be shared with peers?

Signed ....................................................... (Participant)

Signed ....................................................... (Peer reviewer)
Stage 3: 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, are to be raised.

Good feedback will:
• allow the tutor to describe the class and say how he/she 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. It is important that specific instances are cited as evidence for any comment about what did not go so well;
• not apportion blame, but provide adequate opportunity to discuss any matters of concern to the tutor about the lesson or about the observation process;
• provide 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.

Individual Action Plans

The observer should help the tutor to identify and record the nature and type of development actions that they should take.

The action plans and observation sheets need to be sent to the Academic Group Leader / Departmental Manager (or his/her designated other) by the agreed date.

NB. All information is to be anonymous.
Action Plan
(confidential)

Tutor: __________________________
Observer: _______________________
Module Name: ____________________
Date of Session: ___________________

Summary of the Observation

My best practice

What I could develop further
**Action Plan**

What aspects of my practice can I improve?

What resources/support I need (including staff development)

Signed

Participant

Peer observer

Date
Appendix 2: Academic Group / Departmental 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 Academic Group/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 Academic Group/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 Academic Group.

Summary reports will, therefore, need to be written in general terms, 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 tutors and observers believe, on the limited basis of the classes observed, the Academic Group/Department should reflect on and consider whether there are indeed grounds for development in relation to these issues.

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 Academic Group/Department's reflection on teaching and learning and professional development - not to pass judgement. It should help identify what kind, and what extent, of resource should be allocated.