

Peer Review of Teaching in a Changing World: Sharing Experiences of a UK University in Implementing a Revised Strategy for Teacher and Teaching Development

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Abstract

This paper presents the design and implementation of a change in policy for peer review of teaching at a UK University. The revised policy encourages collaborative working with the primary focus being on the enhancement of teaching in its broadest interpretation. The outcomes from piloting the scheme in two schools are presented, together with reflections on the strategy for roll-out across the whole institution.

Introduction

The Changing Landscape:

In the mid-1990s, with the introduction of Teaching Quality Assessments (TQA) by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK Universities were required to have in place schemes for the Peer Observation of Teaching. In the majority of cases these schemes (often called POT) involved members of staff observing the teaching delivery of another, in pairs, originally for the purposes of quality assurance – a process that mirrored the observation of teaching undertaken on a sample basis by external reviewers as part of their assessment.

Over subsequent years the external academic review processes conducted by the QAA have become “lighter touch”, with a gradual shift in focus to quality enhancement and being held increasingly at the level of the institution as confidence and maturity in the sector grew – going from TQA to Teaching Quality Review, Subject Review, Institutional Audit (2002 – 2011), Institutional Review and now for the current 2013-14 academic year to the more “flexible, risk-based method” called Higher Education Review.

Correspondingly, the development of peer review mechanisms in many institutions has reflected changes to the external review processes by becoming increasingly focused on quality enhancement.

These changes in peer review of teaching, however, are also set against a backdrop of changes to student review processes, in particular the development and implementation of the National Student Survey (NSS) which was introduced in the UK in 2006 and which has been operating on an annual basis ever since.

Statements on the NSS seek feedback about final year students’ satisfaction with various aspects of an institutions provision for them – including:

- Teaching on their course
- Assessment and feedback
- Academic support
- Organisation and management

- Learning resources
- Personal development
- Overall satisfaction
- Student Union (a question only included from 2012 onwards).

The outcomes of the NSS provide national data via Unistats (<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>) that is used in the creation of University league tables and which can influence directly students' and their parents' decisions around choice of University - thereby having the potential to impact on student recruitment. Over the years since its implementation, the fallout from the NSS has thus formed a key driver for curricular and infrastructure developments at UK HEIs.

The University Context

The Higher Education Institution that is the subject of this paper is a pre-1992 University that is a member of the Russell Group of research-focussed UK Universities.

The University has over 33,000 students from over 145 countries and offers a huge range of courses: (560 undergraduate courses and 300 postgraduate courses).

The university has over 7,000 staff of 99 different nationalities. Of those staff who teach and/or support learning at the University almost 15% (~1500) are Fellows of the HE Academy (FHEA) and 16 have been awarded National Teaching Fellowships – both statistics being high for a research-focussed university and indicating a relatively high degree of commitment by individuals to their own professional development for learning and teaching.

Since the start of the 2004/5 academic year the University had in place a policy for the peer review of teaching which stated:

“that each School/Faculty should be required to have in place a procedure for the assurance and enhancement of the quality of all teaching including that delivered by postgraduate students, technical staff, clinical staff and external lecturers who have a substantial role in the teaching of either undergraduate or taught postgraduate students. The procedure must involve the direct observation of teaching for staff with a substantial teaching load but may also rely upon indirect evidence of teaching quality such as that obtained through student feedback and other mechanisms Schools identify as appropriate

Equally, the institution's internal review processes are driven in large part by the outcomes of the NSS as they form the basis of annual action plans for teaching development at a school level.

The requirement for individual schools to respond to its NSS outcomes has provided renewed impetus to strengthen third party (peer) review processes, although in the main management has seen this as an opportunity to revert back to peer observation for quality assurance purposes and in extreme cases as a means of performance management. More constructively, some colleagues have felt that collection of peer feedback on teaching could enable it to be triangulated with sometimes critical feedback from students obtained via NSS plus reflection by the staff themselves, enabling teaching and teacher developments to take a more balanced and considered approach, rather than knee-jerk response.

Literature context:

The changing landscape for peer review of teaching from quality assurance to quality enhancement is reflected in the published literature during this time (1995 – 2012), with the work of Gosling being key over this period.

Indeed, the research of Gosling (2005) has shown that processes for peer review of teaching cannot realistically fulfil the quality assurance and enhancement requirements of different stakeholders simultaneously. Equally Shortland (2004) has illustrated quite vividly the impact of perceptions of observation as either quality assurance or enhancement on the attitude of trios towards peer observation both pre and post-QAA visits respectively.

Further work by Gosling & O'Connor (2006, 2009) explored the re-configuration of such peer observation and review schemes to be more collegiate and developmental, and show-cased a number of models that UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had adopted, such as scholarly conversations and professional development reviews.

McMahon et al (2007) commented that the key aspect differentiating systems of third party observation is whether or not the person being observed has full control over what happens to information about the observation.

MacKinnon (2001) cites Boud (1999) by saying that it is in such sites of academic practice (e.g. classroom) “that academic identity is formed and is most powerfully influenced”. MacKinnon states that this aspect is largely overlooked in literature on peer observation. This indicates that there could be a relationship between observation and the shaping of academic identity which in turn implies that review should be social learning, collegiate and linked to the formation of an academic / learning community.

The work of Swinglehurst et al (2008) and Bennett & Barp (2008) has also shown how peer review can be extended to the online learning environment, considering the review as a process rather than an “event” and with a shift in focus to student learning.

More recently, Smith (2012) explores the use of peer observation of teaching for developmental purposes versus performance management. Smith considers that observation organised by individual academics for their own development is a powerful tool that has reciprocal benefits for both observer and observee and is critical of any attempts to make this a teaching assessment exercise.

In the main these published research papers have arrived at common features and in broad terms advocate an approach that:

- Is driven by the desire for quality enhancement
- Promotes collaborative / stimulating discussion
- Has as its focus an agenda set by the reviewee, with the reviewee having ownership and control of the information
- Has potential benefits for both reviewer and reviewee
- Is developmental and non-threatening, rather than judgemental
- Shifts the emphasis towards reflection and self-development rather than *observer* and *observed*
- Puts the students' learning environment first, which shifts the focus away from teacher and teaching performance
- Is separated from management processes

- Emphasises discussion and collaboration not documentation - documentation should not dictate the process or impose an inflexible non-negotiable framework

The project

This paper outlines a project to develop a revised policy for the peer review of teaching at a UK University, which sets out to take the messages from such research on board, to distance itself from the legacy of Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) and to create a clear distinction between processes for the quality assurance and enhancement of teaching.

The project itself was funded through a University Teaching Fellowship grant, awarded to the author via the University's internal reward and recognition scheme.

Note that the focus of this paper is not the design of the scheme *per se*, but the *way* the revised scheme was designed, together with reflections on the strategy for roll-out across the whole institution and the personal and institutional learning derived from this. The design and evaluation of the scheme will be the subject of future publications.

The specific outcomes and deliverables of the project were:

- To develop a research-based understanding of how staff develop excellence in their roles as teachers and supporters of student learning through conducting a survey of relevant educational literature
- To identify a range of effective models for peer review of teaching
- To liaise with other Universities who have developed peer review schemes
- To investigate the range of peer observation / review processes that are in use across the Institution currently
- To create a web-based resource to support the development of peer review schemes at the University of Leeds
- To work with 3 schools to provide direct support for the development of their own peer review scheme

Method

Based on findings from a preliminary search of relevant research literature it became evident, particularly from Gosling & Mason-O'Connor (2006), that the design and implementation of any new peer review scheme required:

- Finding out what the institution wants a peer review scheme to be for and to achieve;
- Consultation – through evaluation questionnaires and focus groups;
- Institutional buy-in – through the setting up of an implementation group with involvement from staff with local responsibilities for teaching quality enhancement;
- Buy-in from top – gaining credibility through taking a scholarly and evidence-based approach plus seeking discussion and approval by senior University management by being taken through quality management committees;
- A title or acronym that distances the scheme from peer observation connotations (Kell & Annetts, 2009).

To investigate and benchmark the design of peer review schemes across the institution, and to evaluate the extent to which they were operational and actively engaged in by staff, a survey of school peer observation and review policies was conducted via a questionnaire to School Directors of Student Education (DSEs). Responses were received from 31 of the 35 schools

(89%) and indicated a wide variation in policy and process at a local level, plus staff engagement with those processes. As a proportion of the total, 7 of the 35 schools (20%) indicated that no active scheme for peer observation or review was currently in place in their school. The reasons given for schemes having lapsed were: lack of staff engagement; high student:staff ratios; high teaching loads; logistics of organising observations; and the high workload of staff in general. DSEs commented that schemes had withered away also as a result of staff perceptions of their ineffectiveness – with the same “best” session being observed each year by a different person. This latter point ties in with research by Kell & Annetts (2009) showing that observations were often atypical of practice plus Chamberlain et al (2011) reporting that staff often considered peer observation to be a form-filling or “tick-box” exercise.

Of those school responses where active policies were in place, the terms peer observation and peer review were used interchangeably, although all schemes involved direct observation of teaching **only**. Such processes varied widely across the institution in the following aspects:

- **Inclusion** – varying from: PGRs/TAs only; all staff with > 10 hours contact time; needs-based rather than routine observations.
- **Frequency** – varying from: within first 2-4 weeks for PGRs; annually; every 2 years; every 3 years.
- **Reporting** – varying from: outcomes reported to DSE or other school co-ordinator; kept confidential to the pair; a record that the observation occurred maintained centrally; participants encouraged to identify and share good practice.
- **Selection** – varying from: individual free to choose; selectively allocated; randomly allocated (different each year); observed only by qualified / experienced staff; one person observes all.
- **Feedback** – varying from: the teacher’s practice is graded; feedback is given against specific aspects / criteria; against a broad checklist; strengths / development areas only are indicated; feedback given against observee’s own agenda.

Whilst some flexibility of approach is desirable to enable school policies to reflect their local context, the results presented an unacceptable level of variation in policy and practice across the Institution, particularly as some schools indicated that they had no active scheme in place.

These preliminary findings formed the basis for the project work. Following the guidance from Gosling & Mason-O’Connor (2006), a position paper was put to the University Board with responsibility for learning and teaching to request the setting up of a working group to explore the development of a revised peer review scheme. This was accepted and a working group was set up with representation from each faculty plus central units with responsibility for staff development and quality assurance in respect of learning and teaching. A further paper to the University Board sought approval for the Terms of Reference for the working group. The main delay in this part of the project was the setting up of the working group and the first meeting was held following the appointment of a Pro-Dean to chair and who provided the appropriate buy-in from senior management.

Findings

Over the course of several months the working group explored a range of models of peer review and development processes: established from published research; through knowledge of schemes at other UK HEIs; plus good practice identified at the University. Feedback from school-based colleagues was solicited on preliminary thinking. On the basis of these discussions a number of key decisions were made:

1. That the peer review scheme should be firmly established as a quality enhancement process;
2. That all staff with a teaching role at the University should, in so far as possible (within limitations of part-time and PGR teachers' roles), be included in the scheme;
3. That the scheme should be underpinned by a set of principles, rather than being a prescriptive statement of policy;
4. That the policy document should be short to encourage and support engagement;
5. That the policy should enable flexibility of implementation at School level and be capable of responding to University and local strategic priorities in learning and teaching;
6. That the peer review scheme should not be time consuming or burdensome, with minimal bureaucracy required to indicate that the process was taking place rather than for scrutiny of the outcomes;
7. That dissemination of positive outcomes should be encouraged.

A new scheme called the Teaching Enhancement Scheme (TES) was developed (the title firmly rooting the process in its desired outcomes) and a draft policy proposal was approved by University Board in October 2012.

TES is a highly innovative approach to collegiate working for the purposes of teacher and teaching development. TES aims to engage all teaching staff in a much wider range of development activities to enhance teaching and student education more broadly – e.g. assessment, use of VLE, learning resources, curriculum design.

The revised policy encourages collaborative working between colleagues and provides the ability for groups of staff to work together to respond to a range of stimuli – ranging from individuals' own priorities, to the strategic priorities of their programme, school or institution - but with the primary focus being on the enhancement of teaching in its broadest interpretation. Enhancement activities are expected typically to take place over an annual cycle, with opportunities to review and extend if necessary after that period.

A pilot of the revised scheme was successfully piloted in two schools during the 2012/13 academic year. The outcomes from piloting the scheme in two schools are presented below - representing opposite approaches to implementation from bottom-up to top-down approaches.

School A.

School A is a hugely diverse school, offering undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes relating to eight different professions. For a number of years School A had used a fairly traditional scheme for the Peer Observation of Teaching in which the focus was solely on classroom performance. Whilst most members of staff participated in this, the DSE felt it had limited value in addressing the broader aspects of student education.

As a result of the School's size and diversity, the School's Taught Student Education Committee (STSEC) agreed to adopt a broad approach to implementing a pilot of the Teaching Enhancement Scheme and staff were encouraged *'to explore their own priorities based on particular strengths or weaknesses that they perceive, or based on the wish to implement or investigate new approaches to teaching and/or assessment.'*

Staff were asked to decide which aspect of student education they would like to focus on, and were encouraged to work as groups or in module teams. Being mindful of not introducing what could be seen as an additional demands on staff time, it was suggested that staff use activities already in train to enhance the student learning experience rather creating new ones and that the focus of activity became an objective in their annual staff review with their manager (the University's staff appraisal process operated through Human Resources). As well as working to improve the teaching experience for students and staff, participation in the scheme was a good opportunity to formally record activities in this area to inform the School's annual review cycle. In the first year, 98 out of a possible 101 members of staff participated in the scheme

Some examples of projects:

- A group of 5: restructured module handbooks and 5 taught student days to develop more diverse teaching strategies and improve students understanding of research methodologies and appraisal of research literature;
- A group of 3: Developed induction workshops for new 1st year radiography students "How to survive as a first year radiography student";
- A group of 2: Enhancement of blended learning within a module developing skills in clinical examination.

School A is now in the second year of TES, and some projects are complete and others are continuing. Members of staff have disseminated findings from the projects at a Sharing Good Practice Day and "Learning@Lunch" meetings in the School. Presentations have also been made at National and International conferences and through symposia, workshops and parallel sessions at the University's 2014 learning and teaching conference.

School B:

School B offers a range of pure, applied and joint honours programmes at undergraduate level plus masters provision. At the start of the academic year, the School's Quality Enhancement Officer and DSE drew up a list of TES themes, based on current strategic priorities, issues identified in student surveys, implementation of a University-wide curriculum enhancement project, the development needs within the School, and suggestions from staff.

The list of themes approved for piloting TES in 2012/13 were:

- Alternative Methods of Examining;
- Providing Effective Feedback;
- Improving Hand-in Rates of Coursework at level 3 and 5M;
- Improving Student Confidence and Communication Skills;
- Revision to Final Year Projects;
- Project Marking and Feedback;
- e-Learning Tools for Maths;
- Academic Integrity of Students in Assessed Coursework;
- Teaching Observation.

Teaching staff were asked to indicate their preferences. All of the teaching staff (65) were involved. Some postdocs, postgraduate research students and temporary teaching staff participated on a voluntary basis.

Participants were organised into groups, with some staff directed to a particular group based on need or expertise. Most staff were given their first choice of group, so that groups were of varying size. Groups were expected to meet at least once each semester and discussions were confidential to the group.

Each group reported its recommendations to the STSEC. Outcomes were disseminated through School web pages and included 'Ideas for improving your teaching', and Teaching Development Days.

School B felt that the advantages of the scheme were that it provided a structure for driving forward learning and teaching issues, enabled sharing of workload and responsibilities in relation to teaching developments, and provided leadership opportunities for junior staff.

Some lessons learnt are that the choice of themes is crucial to engage all staff, and that persuading staff to join specific groups can be counterproductive.

Discussion

Based on the positive outcomes from the pilots, some tweaking was made to reporting documentation: requiring only an initial brief outline of plans and a final outline of positive outcomes to be recorded. The policy was then approved by University Board in October 2013 for full implementation across the institution during 2013/14.

Since then some schools have used TES as an umbrella under which to configure and make tangible a variety of pre-existing enhancement activities, whilst others have been able to use TES to provide impetus for enhancement activities that they knew needed to be carried out. Many schools have been creative in the way they have approached TES whereas others have found the lack of prescription and defined structure rather unsettling. This appears to reflect the context and cultures of different schools and may prove an interesting area for further research.

The developmental, non-judgemental nature of the Teaching Enhancement Scheme encourages positive outcomes to be disseminated. An unintended positive consequence of implementing TES is how far-reaching and wide-ranging the scheme and the outcomes from it can be used.

For example, TES outcomes can be used by individuals in making -

- an application for reward and recognition under the University Student Education Fellowship (USEF) scheme;
- a claim against Descriptors of the UKPSF (when seeking professional recognition by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), via either the University's recognition scheme or the HEAs own;
- a promotion application;
- a presentation at the University's annual learning and teaching conference
- a contribution to a school practice-sharing event such as an away day.

In addition, a further benefit of TES is the way it can be used for bringing together a range of University initiatives under one umbrella and providing a mechanism to mobilise staff in taking these forward.

For example, by groups of staff and entire Schools or Faculties in implementing the University's blended learning strategy –

- Exploring the use of specific tools in teaching – in particular, a whole faculty exploration of approaches to using iPads in teaching;
- Reviewing and enhancing use of the VLE across all programmes;
- Aligning with the work of faculty academic champions for blended learning;

At an Institutional level, TES and its outcomes can contribute to the work of a network to enhance educational practices which aims to enhance the scholarliness of enhancements to educational practices at the University and to develop staff confidence and capability in undertaking educational research.

A fuller evaluation of the scheme's implementation is to be conducted as Phase II of the project.

Practical implications

An implementation plan was devised and agreed prior to implementation with a system for managing and monitoring the scheme using existing quality management processes and committee structures. In addition the TES working group is set to continue to conduct work plus on evaluating the overall implementation and collecting case study examples.

From a practical point of view, the formation of a working group that has now become a steering group is proving effective as a means of supporting and monitoring TES implementation as it has developed a network of local champions for the scheme across the institution. Equally effective is the way that monitoring and evaluation of the scheme has been built into existing quality management processes. In addition, the policy places responsibility on the existing role of Director of Student Education or their nominee act as the TES co-ordinator - alleviating the need to set up any additional administrative roles to support the scheme.

What has proved less successful is the timing of implementation. Policy approval should ideally have been in May / June of the preceding year to provide time to enable Schools to allocate adequate resource for planning and co-ordination of the scheme.

Although the policy information was cascaded to faculty level in the autumn, implementation was at school-level and many schools were rather slow to pick up the scheme and allocate resource to plan and co-ordinate activities effectively.

An additional benefit has been to include as one of the University's learning and teaching priorities for 2013/14 "To encourage full engagement with the Teaching Enhancement Scheme" as this acts as a continued driver and signals the institutional commitment to TES.

Going forward, the central working group will need to develop a communication and dissemination strategy for the overall scheme to ensure its continued place on the minds and agendas of colleagues across the University.

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