

Observation of Learning and Teaching Policy

Background

It is our duty as educators to provide our students with a high-quality learning experience through aligning our practice to agreed principles and expectations and by continuously striving to learn and grow as academic professionals. The Observation of Teaching Learning and Teaching Policy (OLT) take a reflective and developmental approach to observation and seeks to cultivate engagement with the Study Group Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework (LTAF) and principles of constructive alignment. The introduction of trained Teaching and Learning Champions (T&L Champs) provides a previously untapped quality assurance and source of expertise whilst maintaining the collegiate peer review culture generated by the 2021-22 Professional Development Review.

This policy does not cover evaluative or management observations. Guidance for this type of observation can be found in Appendix A.

Purpose

The purpose of the OLT is as follows:

- To assure DISC stakeholders, university partners and external regulatory bodies such as OFS, QAA, QQI, as to the quality of learning and teaching provided to the students;
- To increase student outcomes by ensuring teaching staff receive guidance and feedback from expert practitioners in order to enhance their practice;
- To foster a culture of reflection, pedagogical scholarship and continuous enhancement in relation to the quality of learning and teaching;
- To foster a culture of learning and teaching quality across the programme, both in terms of effective and innovative practice and areas to be developed;
- To enable a network-level development strategy to be produced.

Study Group aligns with the Higher Education Academy's (HEA 2006) purpose for why academics should be observed and observe teaching:

- 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 to develop an action plan to remedy them.
- To assist departments in providing a high-quality educational experience for their students.

(Abridged from Gosling, 2006)

Scope

This policy applies to all academic staff employed by Study Group, including permanent and fixed term; variable hours and salaried, teaching on programmes approved by Study Group or validated by a partner HEI. Teaching staff employed by partner institutions are welcome to engage with the process, at the discretion of the university.

Principles and Policy Statements

The OLT strives to:

- align to the principles and expectations of the LTAF, as well as to the UKPSF, and the principles of constructive alignment.
- link to the student learning experience, such as the VLE and assessments.
- focus on the impact on student learning rather than the actions of the teacher.
- promote both a supportive and developmental approach to observation and a culture of continuous improvement.
- ensure student feedback is heard in the observation process.
- actively contribute to both local and provider level understanding of the quality of learning and teaching being delivered
- promote effective practice and address key areas for development.

Gosling (2002) identifies three broad models of observation in use:

1. Evaluative - observation and summative assessment of a teacher (i.e graded) by a superior as part of the management processes of an institution.
2. Developmental - summative assessment of an individual's teaching skills to give expert feedback in order to encourage improvement in teaching supported by the use of an agreed action plan.
3. Collaborative/peer - a formative process in which teachers observe each other, discuss the experience and engage in 'non-judgemental constructive feedback'.

The OLT brings together the collaborative/peer process and developmental observation.

Stages

Stage 1 – Buddying/formative

Stage 1 of the process focuses on:

- facilitating engagement with the Study Group LTAF.
- providing a safe space for peer discussion and sharing of practice
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- furthering staff ownership of their own development.

Maintaining peer review and providing a "buddy" with whom to discuss practice leads to learning both for the observer and observee, as the observer learns:

“by using the peer’s teaching as a lens through which to reflect on their own practices’, with the ultimate benefits for both being “greater collegiality, confidence, learning of teaching techniques and the development of greater self-reflective skills” (Engin, M., 2016, p.3)

Allocating a buddy:

Current and returning staff members should be grouped into twos or threes from the beginning of the term/semester at the discretion of the management team.

It is the centre’s decision as to whether staff should be of a similar discipline or whether they should be in inter-disciplinary groups and whether inexperienced staff should be grouped with those more experienced.

Careful planning should be undertaken to ensure that all teaching staff involved benefit from the process. Staff should remain grouped together for the entire term/semester if possible, in order to build trust and promote confidential discussion throughout that period.

Activities to complete:

In this stage, staff are buddied together and are expected to complete a set of activities:

- Self-reflection using the LTAF, including review of last year’s actions if appropriate
- Selection of focus area for development from the OLT Handbook
- Observation by buddy
- Summary Log (including actions and effective practice identified)

The Summary Log is the only document submitted to line managers and Quality Leads in order that progress with actions can be sufficiently supported.

Note, if staff wish to initiate further activities, such as action research in relation to their focus area, they will need to either agree the additional time required with their line manager or complete these in their own time.

Stage 2 – Developmental/summative

Stage 2 of the process focuses on:

- providing high quality guidance and expertise through dialogue and observation, ranging across all areas of the LTAF
- capturing effective practice and key areas for development across centres to feed into a network development strategy

Stage 2 involves the training and introduction of T&L Champs. T&L Champs will be academic staff who have the necessary expertise to fulfil the role of what Biggs and Tang refer to as staff developers:

“Staff developers have the expertise to act as critical friend and provide important insights on all stages of teaching where your own perspective might be limited” (Biggs, J. and Tang, C, 2011, pp.53- 4).

This addresses QAA advice on effective learning and teaching, which states that:

“Effective learning and teaching in practice features delivery by individuals...whose ongoing development is underpinned by robust evidence and expertise” (QAA, 2018, p.5).

Selection of T&L Champs

Management nominate their T&L Champs based on a combination of factors including:

- experience
- teaching qualifications
- awards
- student outcomes
- student feedback
- critical engagement with CPD activities.

Expectations of T&L Champs

T&L Champs will be required to engage in open-minded dialogue and provide non-judgemental guidance for colleagues while aligning with the principles of the OLT, as well as committing to participation in training.

T&L Champs undergo centrally-produced observer training in the form of an asynchronous self-directed learning course supplemented by synchronous standardization. The training process will be repeated, increasing the number of T&L Champs as required.

Each T&L Champ will be assigned a group of teaching staff (maximum eight) at the beginning of the term/semester and will review their Stage 1 Summary Logs. T&L Champs who are line managers should not be assigned staff who they manage. T&L Champs will conduct a short meeting with the member of staff to engage in pedagogical dialogue and share their expertise in relation to their area(s) for development. The T&L Champ will conduct an observation, giving at least seven days' notice, and support in the creation of an Action Plan.

This policy seeks to allow the flexibility to respond to peaks and troughs in the academic year. The only stipulation is that stages 1 and 2 must both take place over the course of one academic year and that staff be permitted the time to develop between stages.

Activities to complete

In Stage 2, staff are expected to liaise with their T&L Champ and complete a set of activities:

- Initial meeting with T&L Champ
- Developmental observation (including all key areas of the Study Group LTAF)
- Discussion with T&L Champ
- Action Plan

Recording actions

The Summary Log with Action Plan is submitted to line managers. If it is not submitted this is a line management issue and should be raised as such rather than dealt with by the T&L Champ.

The T&L Champ logs areas for development and effective/innovative practice in the Central App which is accessible by T&L Champs, Quality Leads, the Learning Effectiveness Team and the Academic Professional Development Team.

Areas for development will be recorded and will not include any detail or rating of current practice.

Effective practice will be recorded in more detail to capture techniques which are working well, particularly in relation to certain sub-sets of students and to specific levels and subjects. This policy recognises that

“What is effective for this teacher, for that subject, at this level, for those students, may not apply to other teachers, working under their own conditions” (Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*)

Reporting and Review

Outcomes from the OLT process will be reported to the Study Group Quality, Learning and Teaching Committee (QuLT) to ensure that the OLT is successfully embedded, regularly reviewed and outcomes from this are included in strategic development of teaching and learning practices.

The purpose is to:

- represent views and share evidence in relation to the OLT.
- recommend enhancements to the OLT policy and process.
- identify network trends in relation to areas for development and areas of effective/innovative practice.
- recommend development opportunities, amendments to the LTAF and any enhancements to the student experience.

Outcomes and decisions from QuLT are reported to Senate and inform the ongoing enhancement of academic delivery across all Study Group.

Appendix A

Guidance on Evaluative Observation

Evaluative observation does not form part of the main observation of the learning and teaching process as this is managed by line managers. Evaluative observation should be carried out for new staff in their probation period and a development plan agreed with the line manager. Evaluative observation can also be triggered by poor student outcomes or poor student feedback and can form part of a performance management process supported by HR. Quality Leads and T&L Champs are not involved in evaluative observations except in the capacity of expert practitioners to provide advice to line managers should they request it.

References

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