

## Developing a Peer Observation Program with University Teachers

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This paper evaluates a peer observation of teaching scheme one year after its introduction in a United Kingdom (UK) university. In order to understand why the case study institution chose to implement peer observation, there is discussion of the national policies that have encouraged its use in the UK and the lessons learned from universities in the United States and Australia. A series of themes are identified which provide an analytical framework for the consideration of the responses of individual academics from some of the departments involved to the underlying principles, processes and practices of the scheme. The research demonstrates the importance of implementing peer observation sensitively, taking account of the organizational culture of the different departments and being fully aware of the anxieties and concerns of academic staff.

This paper evaluates the peer observation of teaching process one year after its introduction in a United Kingdom (UK) university. The decision to implement peer observation was taken centrally, but the execution was decentralized to departmental level. The departments started at varying points in the journey towards acceptance of the value of peer observation. These different starting points, and other factors related to the variety of academic tribes involved (Becher & Trowler, 2001), resulted in departments making different choices about how to implement the model that was presented to them. Reactions of individual academics to these choices are described through interviews with members of academic staff from some of the departments involved. To understand the decisions taken by the university management to implement a programme of peer observation, a brief discussion is provided of the national policies that have driven this agenda forward.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) publications have emphasized the importance of enhancing teaching quality in UK universities to meet the challenges of the increasing numbers and diversity of students in the early part of the twenty-first century (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002). The UK government now requires all universities to be judged on their performance in teaching and the facilitation of learning. This concern to address the issue of teaching and learning quality is explicit in the QAA's Institutional Audit of universities that commenced in September 2002. There are ten objectives of institutional audit and the first of these is, "to contribute...to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning" (QAA, 2002 p.2).

Also, the HEFCE's Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 states its aim to develop a higher education system that regards excellence in teaching as highly as excellence in research (HEFCE, 2003).

Given this emphasis on the importance of university teaching, peer observation is seen as a means of improving teaching quality through the sharing of good practice among academic staff. However, the enhancement of teaching quality will only be achieved if schemes are implemented sensitively and address the significant concerns of academic staff. Often there will have to be substantial change in the attitudes of staff who will need to appreciate the value of peer observation if it is to lead to quality enhancement. Peer observation involves a university lecturer attending a colleague's teaching session with the intention of offering feedback as a 'critical friend' (Kinchin, 2005).

There is an examination of the challenges of implementing quality-enhancing peer observation through the construction and use of theoretical models and frameworks. A case study of the implementation of a scheme in a UK university leads to the identification of a number of themes that highlight the key decisions which need to be made and the issues that need to be addressed.

### *Historical Context*

In UK universities, peer observation of teaching has been a relatively recent development that has benefited from the lessons learned from the earlier introduction of the process in universities in the United States and Australia. Its use has varied from accountability and individual performance review at the judgmental end of the scale to wholly developmental reasons (LTSN, 2002). In these cases peer observation is seen as a means of providing professional input based on experience and expertise into the lecturer development process (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001). Blackwell and McLean (1996) regard peer observation as an opportunity for academic staff to reflect critically upon their teaching which leads to an improvement in performance. Essentially, peer observation is seen as a valuable tool for improving the teaching skills and knowledge of university lecturers.

### *Peer Observation and Quality Enhancement*

There are a variety of reasons why peer observation has become more wide spread in the UK. Peer observation has been a response to the quality assurance agenda of the QAA. More recently, the debate has moved towards peer observation as a quality enhancement tool rather than a quality assurance mechanism, with its main objectives being to help academics examine their teaching for the purpose of self-improvement and to establish good practice as a means to enhancing student learning.

Whereas quality assurance establishes systems and processes that require conformance to externally imposed standards, quality enhancement aims to achieve improvements in quality by encouraging new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment (Biggs, 2003). Peter Williams (2002), Director of the QAA, argues that quality enhancement can occur as a consequence of the quality assurance process. He claims that quality enhancement is an integral part of quality assurance by disseminating the mass of good practice collected through reviews, and also by warning against the bad practice that is sometimes seen. However, Jackson (2002) suggests that quality enhancement is more transformative and is directly concerned with adding value and improving quality. Quality enhancement involves enthusing the students, responding to new technologies as one of the many means of coping with the more diverse range of students, and ensuring that staff are recognized and rewarded for excellent teaching (TQEC, 2003).

Developmental peer observation is a formative rather than a summative process that links to lecturers' continuing professional development by identifying areas of teaching and learning that require in-depth consideration (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001). Continuing this argument, peer observation can be seen as a key factor in institutional quality enhancement at a broader level. Formative peer observation involves direct classroom observation, followed by supportive feedback and constructive advice, elements which Keig and Waggoner (1994) consider as being essential to improving teaching.

Hutchings (1994) suggests that there are three main arguments for the peer observation that should be considered by the academic community:

- to encourage collaboration amongst academic staff in order to share ideas and good practice;
- to ensure that the enhancement of teaching is largely the remit of professionals rather than members of outside agencies; and
- to supplement student evaluations of teaching with the comments of respected colleagues and thereby provide multiple data sources.

Each of these elements require academics to be actively engaged with the substance of teaching, to be directly involved in collecting the evidence to show what they actually do and so reveal the thinking behind their actions they take. Currently, the evaluation of teaching rests largely on student feedback, and often the evaluation report is given directly to the head of department. Consequently, academic departments and individuals within them are objects of that evaluation rather than participants within the process. Gibbs and Habeshaw (2002) suggest that relying on student evaluation is not sufficient on its own to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across departments. Academics and senior managers need to be active in the process of enhancing teaching and learning.

On the basis of the discussion so far, it is clear that formative peer observation can be a positive means of enhancing teaching and learning within the academic community.

### *Peer Observation Models*

Gosling (2002) identifies three models of peer observation, each of which aims to enhance the quality of teaching in universities:

- the evaluation model,
- the development model, and
- peer review model.

There are significant differences between the three models. With the *evaluation model* senior staff observe the other staff, whereas with the *development model* educational developers observe the lecturers. The *peer review model* involves lecturers observing each other. The status of the evidence is also very different. The more hierarchical evaluation model is based on the authority of senior staff. Expert diagnosis is fundamental to the development model while the peer review model is far more collegial and involves the shared perceptions of the observer and the observed.

### *Opposition to Peer Observation*

There are many reasons why academic staff might oppose educational innovations or be indifferent about the prospect. A major stumbling block to peer observation has been the reluctance of academics to engage with the process. Keig and Waggoner (1995) cite some of the reasons for academics' lack of involvement or engagement:

- peer observation can be seen as challenging academic freedom;
- perceptions of the representativeness, accuracy and generalizability of what is observed;

- concerns about the objectivity of those who observe; and
- values relating to the institution's rewards and incentives – incentives are perceived as far greater for research than teaching.

Lecturers may be concerned about 'change overload' which, together with internal pressure to teach and publish more while the diversity and numbers of students increase and resources fall, has made many academics suspicious and regard peer observation as yet another time-consuming management initiative (Evans & Nation, 2000).

Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck (1994) argue that academics will engage with any professional activity if they find it intrinsically valuable or if they are rewarded for it. However, Fairweather (1993) reminds us that most universities promote staff on their ability to publish research rather than on the basis of their teaching. Therefore, it is important that understanding, managing and implementing a peer observation process takes account of the realities of academic life. The Carnegie Foundation's research in the United States (1989, 1990, 1994, 2001) has shown that academics are very often more interested in their teaching than research, but feel forced to give up the intrinsic satisfactions of teaching for the external rewards of research. The UK government's report "The Future of Higher Education" (DfES, 2003) aimed to increase the commitment of academic staff to teaching by setting out ways that universities can recognize and reward good teaching. The report exhorted them to support the enhancement of teaching and learning by demonstrating the intrinsic value of peer observation.

Martin, Smith, and Double (1999) raise the objection of some academic staff that the observation of their teaching is an intrusion into an intimate part of their work. Blackwell and McLean (1996) go on to argue that this is perceived as a threat to their professional autonomy. Resistance to change in organizations often surfaces through an uncompromising 'not invented here' attitude (Carnall, 1997; Knight, 2002). Becher and Trowler (2001) contend that the acculturation that occurs within particular academic 'tribes' serves to reinforce these boundaries and further increase the difficulty of the change-management task.

Identifying effective ways to counter such views held by academics is the key to creating an effective developmental approach to continuing professional development and the enhancement of teaching and learning. Research by Keig & Waggoner (1995) and the HEFCE (2002) suggests that academics participating in formative peer observation of teaching have improved their understanding of the teaching process and increased their understanding of teaching actions and the level of collegiality in departments.

### *Managing Peer Observation*

Managing change in a university can be a most difficult task with academic staff often failing to respond to the arguments advanced by innovators (Trowler, 2002). Innovators need to persuade and cajole if there is to be any success in addressing the concerns about peer observation. High levels of leadership skill, commitment and perseverance are required if these barriers are to be broken down (Kogan, 2002). Fullan (1991) reminds managers that change is a complex process rather than an event and it requires a fine balance of pressure and support. He advises that pressure without support can easily lead to resistance and alienation whereas support without pressure can lead to drift and a loss of momentum.

Bell (2001), Ferren (2001) and Keig and Waggoner (1995) consider that departments that undertake formative peer observation raise the levels of understanding and engagement in innovation in teaching and learning environments. These authors argue that peer observation is more likely to be accepted by staff if:

- assessment is non-judgmental by colleagues and indicates areas for development;
- there is peer observation on a regular annual or biennial cycle;
- departments lead in the design and implementation of formative peer observation;
- departments provide opportunities for training in the skills needed to conduct formative peer observation; and
- there are institutional rewards and incentives structured to demonstrate that participation in formative peer observation is valued.

### *Changing Culture*

When implementing a program of peer observation, the organizational cultures of a university and its departments need to be understood. Individuals and their departments still have a great deal of power within a university and it is essential to take account of the departmental culture with its particular historical and political elements (Bamber, 2002; Bowden & Marton, 1998).

The basic beliefs and values (Schein, 2004) of academic staff members should be discussed and, if necessary, challenged in an attempt to raise the status of teaching and develop an awareness of the importance of peer observation in continuous improvement. The aim should be to embed peer observation as part of the departmental culture. In order to achieve this, the perception that teaching is a private activity, which is not shared with colleagues, needs to be tackled (Hutchings, 1994). The changing of this perception requires a different mindset leading to changed behaviors. Clark's (1998) research on

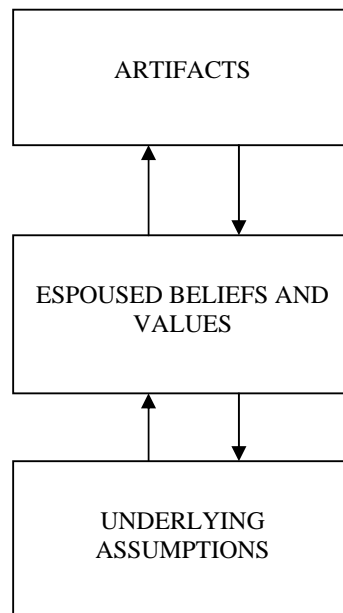
cultural change is most helpful here. He found that universities that were successful in changing culture were characterized by a concerted effort to innovate and to galvanize all the staff of the university: senior management, academics and administrative staff. There was 'stronger steering' from the center, with staff responding in a flexible and adaptable manner. Both Salford University, in the UK (Powell et al., 2001), and the University of Western Sydney-Nepean, in Australia (Duke, 2001), made use of Clark's work when seeking to transform their institutions' predominantly bureaucratic culture to one that was far more entrepreneurial. Clark's strategy can be used in a similar way to help bring about an organizational culture that is more conducive to innovations such as peer observation.

Similarly, Quinlan and Åkerlind's (2000) comparison of departmental peer observation in Australia and the United States demonstrated that cultural change is required if academic staff are to be committed to peer observation and it is to be conceived as "collegial conversations and collaborations about teaching, rather than merely as peer judgments about teaching" (p. 27). Achieving this collegial approach to teaching is more likely when collaborative working, regular dialogue about educational issues and a history of educational innovation already exist in a department (Quinlan & Åkerlind, 2000).

Consensual leadership and skilled management are required in order to gain the confidence and support of academic staff. Intrinsic motivational approaches are likely to be far more effective (Knight, 2002) and, by adopting a normative-educative approach, staff can be persuaded that peer observation will greatly improve lecturers' teaching abilities. The value of self-reflection and continuous improvement can also be extolled. One can also appeal to feelings of institutional loyalty by arguing that not only will peer observation improve individual lecturer performance, it will also enhance the work of the department and the university.

As lecturers might reasonably feel anxious about the prospect of a colleague coming to their classes and evaluating their teaching, it is essential that their fears and anxieties are swiftly allayed. One way of doing this is to introduce peer observation as a support mechanism that involves other members of the particular learning community and who are 'critical friends' (Melrose, 1998). Martin et al. (1999) state that honesty and trust are key elements for the success of any scheme if a 'critical friend' is, for example, to suggest ways of dealing with a colleague's problems in coping with large groups of students in lectures, or possible strategies for encouraging all members of a seminar group to contribute to the discussion.

FIGURE 1  
Schein's Simple Model of Organisational Culture (2004)



### Case Study

The case study institution is a university that receives a significant proportion of its income through research. This research takes the approach of hypothesis generating rather than hypothesis testing. Initial discussions with School Teaching and Learning Coordinators helped to focus on key issues. This input was supplemented by the findings described by Jones and Zhou (2004) in their analysis of the process within the School of Social Science and Public Policy of the case study institution and allowed the identification of key issues (data categories) for exploration. The next step was to conduct interviews with colleagues across the college to clarify and amplify these themes.

In deciding upon the number of staff to be consulted, there is a trade-off between generalizability and practicality. Descriptions given in the research literature of attempts to achieve blanket coverage of staff within an institution have been met with very low response rates (Closser, 1998), making efforts to achieve generalizability non-viable. It was therefore felt to be more important to focus on the quality of data gathered rather than the quantity of data. Coded transcripts from initial interviews revealed seven themes that are described in detail below. These themes emerged from the first batch of five interviews and were amplified and clarified by the following five interviews. Further interviews were used to determine that these themes applied equally across academic disciplines and to achieve saturation of the categories. A total of 20 interviews were conducted. Interview data was collected from academic staff, below Head of Department level, during December 2004 and January 2005. Quotes from these interviews are used to illustrate points throughout the text. All interviewees were guaranteed total anonymity and so individuals and departments are not identified.

The aim of this evaluation is not to compare departments or conclude that one department runs a better peer observation program than the next. Rather the point is to identify and illustrate the evolving diversity within the college that has arisen as a consequence of choices made. These choices may have been conscious or subconscious. By raising the profile of these choices, it is hoped that departments across the professoriate will reflect upon them and use these reflections to justify the direction of future developments, enabling peer observation of teaching to make its contribution to enhancing the student experience.

#### *Efficiency versus Effectiveness*

In applying the model of peer observation, there is a choice between having a small team of observers within the department, or having everyone act as

observer and observee. Both options have been employed within the case study institution.

The use of a group of specialist senior staff observers has been adopted in some departments and this has allowed them to complete the process quickly. Interestingly, the view of speedy completion seems to overlook the developmental intention of the process. The research literature suggests that such a model can be improved by rotating the group of staff who are trained as observers so that more staff within a department are involved in the process (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). This specialist observers model, allied to Gosling's (2002) development model, may help to achieve consistency within the process, particularly if an appropriate discourse of peer observation develops among the observers within and between departments. However, time for such dialogue does not seem to have been given a high priority. The lack of such a discourse may have an isolating effect upon the observers, "I can't comment on what happened in any of the others, because I haven't spoken to any of the other observers. It might be sensible for us to have a little session between us."

Such an approach also loses one perceived benefit to most members of the department – that of observing others teach. This is seen to be of particular importance, and interest, to new and inexperienced lecturers who would like to see how others do it.

We will often take one of the younger, newer people in the department and send them in to observe someone like X, for example. He is a star man...magician. He's an excellent lecturer. Therefore the idea is that people can go in and learn from good lecturers.

Application of the specialist observers model also implies that the process can be completed and set aside, as an adjunct to normal teaching rather than as a part of it, "that way we did it efficiently. We had two people that discussed everything and it all got done. If you involve lots of people you don't get all the feedback returned and you can never have closure."

The effectiveness of the process is hampered in some departments by a lack of clarity regarding the aims of peer observation and a failure to contextualize the process explicitly for those involved, "What are the explicit aims of what peer observation is supposed to achieve?", and "In spite of all the excellent guidelines, I am not really sure what the aims are." Such comments suggest a lack of effective dialogue within the department before implementation and reflect a view of peer observation as an imposition rather than an opportunity for development, "we all did it, because we were just told to do it. I don't remember who told us to do it."

The level of engagement with peer observation crucially defines the rewards an individual will perceive from involvement with the process. This is linked with feeling safe during the process – for many anonymity, equal status within the pair and independence from appraisal have been helpful here. Within a safe environment, colleagues may see beyond peer observation as a tick-box exercise, and begin to engage with it more actively, as a developmental process.

If colleagues would choose more demanding scenarios to be observed – one that causes them real concern – they would gain more from it. By choosing a comfortable teaching situation to be observed (as many of our less enthusiastic colleagues do) there is less to be gained in terms of professional development as teachers.

I actually thought to myself I would take the opportunity to be peer observed in the setting of a challenging session. I thought that actually it would be the most useful time to have feedback on what was going on. I was having difficulty with a session and I wanted to work out why. Maybe not many of my colleagues would do the same thing, but I think that would be nice to encourage people to do that.

The level of engagement with the peer observation process also depends on lecturers' professional identities – whether you consider your stance to be from within or without the teaching community, and what you consider your role to be within that community (Åkerlind, 2004), "If you say "I am a medic/historian/engineer", then the process may seem less relevant. But if you say, "I am an educationalist", as many of us do, then the rationale for peer observation becomes clear."

#### *Anonymity versus Focus*

If peer observation is anonymous, departmental heads cannot then focus on an individual's developmental needs and so the department has to be treated as a homogenous body. If however you remove anonymity, you may inhibit the honesty of the process. Anonymity of the observation means that there is no way of establishing a picture of the overall student experience of teaching on any given course. It may be helpful to construct an image of consistency of teaching and/or diversity of teaching.

Links to student evaluations of teaching are conducted loosely within some departments within the constraints imposed by anonymity of peer observation. It is seen as a way of complementing student evaluations of teaching, as students often like or dislike courses/lecturers for the 'wrong reasons', "Students may say – I don't like [lecturer X] because he doesn't give us the answers – he makes us think."

Maintenance of anonymity seems to have been a key factor in allowing the development of the peer observation process. Removal of anonymity is likely to trigger widespread anger and resentment, though not among those staff who already label themselves as teachers. Overall, the linking of peer observation directly to appraisal is likely to be counter-productive and result in less honest engagement in the process.

#### *Formative versus Summative*

Formative observation will encourage participants to identify developmental needs, but this has to be followed up. There should to be a mechanism for this and adequate resource provision as a year-on-year rolling program. Summative assessment can be one-off and can be completed within a given time frame. This assessment can be linked to appraisal, but is less likely to be honest and deliver improvements in teaching quality. Peer observation is intended as a formative process of professional development, but for those who are not used to sharing their teaching space, it may initially appear to be appraisal-like, "I must admit to being worried about it beforehand and feeling that I was being tested, but actually it has given me confidence that I must be doing something right."

There is little evidence of effective mechanisms for the practical dissemination of good practice to occur within departments, beyond discussions at teaching and learning committees. This is a problem that is not unique to the case study institution (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004) and means that the department as a whole is not benefiting as much as it could:

My understanding is that the comments go to X and he has a look at them. I don't know what he does with them to be honest. I think the aim was that there should be some way of disseminating that back, but how is that being disseminated back to the lecturing staff? I have to say, I don't know.

Maybe they have it elsewhere in the college, maybe there is nothing new about it. However, for our department it was new.

It is happening in isolation and there is nowhere we are pooling that information.

In some departments there persists a content-driven view of teaching that seems to cloud the view of enhancing the student experience, "I'll get better by being more knowledgeable about my subject – spend more time in the library," and "I think that because so many people in [subject] focus very much on the knowledge they are transmitting and less on other things they are transmitting." This has to do with the departmental dialogue that precedes the

implementation of peer observation, and the department deciding what it wants to gain from the process (i.e. setting its own professional development agenda).

#### *Formality versus Informality*

The three part process – pre-observation, observation and post-observation – adopted by the case study institution is typical of those used in other universities (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004) and is cited by some colleagues as a strength of the system, providing a focus for those who have not previously engaged in this type of activity. However, completing forms is universally loathed, and a focus on paperwork may deter some colleagues from engaging positively with the process.

For some the paperwork involved is not seen to complement the collegiality of the process. It is perceived to add a managerial layer that is not productive and may be obstructive to dialogue between peers, a feature noted also by Shortland (2004). Effective use of the paperwork to complement the process requires colleagues to engage professionally with peer observation, “my observer still hasn’t got round to giving me the comments back. He was going to take them away to type them up nicely, and that’s the last I saw of them.” For others who are passionate about their teaching, and positive about peer observation, a criticism remains that observation of teaching sessions puts the focus on only part of the role of the university teacher, “There can be many good aspects of teaching which may not necessarily be identified by this process. For example, the extent to which a lecturer is available to talk to students.”

#### *Frequency of Observation*

Most departments seem to carry out observations of teaching once per year for each colleague. Others undertake to observe colleagues once per year per course as different courses may present very different teaching issues (e.g., teaching large classes of undergraduates against teaching small groups of master’s level students, or teaching in a classroom/lecture theatre against teaching in a laboratory or a hospital). Support is seen to be essential for each teaching context, “You might be lecturing to the whole cohort (120). Other times you will be doing a practical class of 20 and other times you will be doing a seminar in a much smaller group.”

Changing contexts for teaching create stress amongst the teaching staff that could be alleviated by support through peer observation, “We were just told – this is what you are doing now, so off you go. So for the first six months of doing it, I had a neck rash every time I entered the classroom.”

The departmental model adopted for peer observation needs to reflect the size of teaching loads and the diversity of teaching undertaken – though colleagues with little contact time may be those who could benefit most from the observations of a critical friend. In some departments, there is a significant reliance upon post-doctoral and other staff who are visiting or on short-term contracts – colleagues who are exempted from the process, “I don’t think there was a single course where the lecturer was genuinely bad – bar one. It was actually a course where somebody had been brought in from outside to teach it.” There is no evidence to suggest that the formal program has initiated more informal observation of peers, or team-teaching, largely because of the amount of time this would take. The amount of informal observation of peers varies enormously between departments. Team-teaching is common in some departments, absent in others. The benefits of peer observation to the individual can be immediate.

I feel confident that my individual experience of being peer observed actually did produce a positive impact on the session that I was leading. More interestingly, perhaps, because I have done that session again, I subsequently was able to further incorporate and consolidate on the other changes that I had made when I was peer observed and that was maintained and indeed more than maintained actually. I thought that I was going to have problems with teaching that session again, on the occasion that I did do it most recently, because I had to teach it several times in quick succession to different groups of students. That is very tiring and a very difficult thing to do. Because I really thought very hard about that session on the occasion when I was peer observed some months before, I had that session really quite sorted in my mind and so it wasn’t actually as difficult to do, although it was still quite a challenge.

But very often benefits may take some time to become apparent, “I am not really sure how much can be improved immediately.” and “You don’t know at the time whether you have been effective.” An annual observation of such developments would seem to be prudent if there is to be reflection on such long-term gains.

#### *Pairing Partners*

Some colleagues have noted that teaching experience does not equate with teaching expertise and this influences the choice of observer, for those who have that choice. This means that immediate line-managers or departmental heads are not always the first choice, particularly if that individual currently does little teaching. Issues are evident when

the observer and observee are of different status within the department, “What would I have done if I had been paired with someone ... for instance with the Prof? What if [X] had done a crap lecture that day?” and “To make it good you probably have to really make sure there is no threat on either side if it is going to be helpful.”

A buddy system of reciprocal pairs is used in some departments. This eases the process by helping to remove the perception of threat, particularly where pairs are self-selected rather than imposed, but also reduces the possibility of the dissemination of good practice as the process is governed by a ‘private contract’ within the pair.

In departments employing a panel of specialist observers, the main criterion for selection of observers appears to be teaching experience, “I think it was the people who had been doing it the longest.” But there is recognition that more junior colleagues may have much to gain and a valuable contribution to make, “in terms of more junior members of staff, it would almost be more valuable for them as a peer observer.” and “people who are coming through the College’s Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice program often come out with much newer sorts of ideas anyway, and therefore may be good doing peer observations’. Those who were acting as specialist observers in these departments commented that this role added significantly to their teaching load.

Pairings of unequal status give the process a feel of appraisal and tend to skew the process towards an evaluation model or a development model rather than a peer review model (see Gosling, 2002), “That [having senior colleagues exclusively observing junior colleagues] is slightly against the definition of peer review’. Pairings must be considered with care. Randomizing them may work for some colleagues but it may generate inappropriate pairings in some instances, “If I was being observed and I was told that [X] will observe you, and it was someone for whom I felt no professional respect, it would be a complete waste of time.” The question to guide pairings should be along the lines of, ‘who would contribute most effectively to this colleague’s professional development as a university teacher?’

### *Teaching versus Research*

While peer review of research is regarded as the norm, and indeed is seen to add credibility through journal publications and conference presentations, the same perception is not held universally for teaching (Asmar, 2002b). This difference of perception is associated with an apparent lack of dialogue about teaching and learning within many departments (see Jones & Zhou, 2004) and reflected in comments made by staff, “the day-to-day contact, talking about teaching matters has completely gone out of the window’.”

A common perception seems to be that if you want to talk about teaching, it is a sign of weakness and there must be a problem and this perception seems to deter the development of a departmental discourse of teaching in some departments. There is a widespread belief among lecturers that good teaching is not rewarded in the same way as good research, “Actually the more teaching I do, the more my career is under pressure.” and,

[Lecturer X] gives a tremendous amount to the students. His lectures are highly praised. He is obviously a meticulous lecturer and he has been interested in [subject] education for many years. He does all the right things – he is available to talk to the students, he encourages them and so on – but in the end, he didn’t get any reward for it.

This is not a view that is peculiar to the case study institution (Wareing, 2004; Young, 2004). This distinction creates a hierarchy of activities, with research rated above teaching. Therefore, time taken away from research activity is regarded as ‘non-productive’ because of the perceived link between research output and promotion; “You cannot be a star researcher and put in the amount of time that is necessary to deal with things like peer observation.” and “if we treat it all in detail, it will take up quite a lot of time. It might scupper my research for the day.”

The so-called ‘teaching-research nexus’ seems patchy. Many colleagues appear to be teaching in areas that are allied to their research interests, but which do not feed directly into their research. Consequently, colleagues do not relate their teaching to their research in the manner that is popularly perceived. In addition, the skills needed to be a good researcher are not seen to be the same skills required to be a good teacher; “You can become a Professor on the basis of outstanding research work and you might be one of the worst lecturers in the department.” and,

There is this big push isn’t there that good researchers are good teachers. Some are. I don’t think there are many of those around – who can do both. You end up getting to the lofty heights of lectureship and then you start doing some lecturing on the basis of a very strong research background. It doesn’t mean that you are a good lecturer at all.

### Discussion of the Findings

The scheme appeared to benefit both the lecturer and the observer through local learning and the reflection and detailed discussion that are key elements of the process. The scheme also identified general university-wide developmental needs as well as providing opportunities for good practice to be



disseminated. Before the introduction of the university-wide scheme, only a small number of departments had implemented peer observation. Overall, provision was very patchy and there tended to be few written records of the outcomes from these observations and this meant that the dissemination of good practice and the identification of general development needs had been very limited. In terms of the impact of the scheme, certain departments have made greater progress than others but in general the whole university has moved a long way forward in the eighteen months or so that the scheme has been in place. Although reactions to the notion of peer observation varied, many staff said that they found all aspects of the process – pre-observation, observation, post-observation meetings – to be highly valuable and how it helped their practice by providing them with constructive criticism within a supportive environment. Staff also commented on how the process had given them an opportunity to reflect and consider ways in which their teaching could be improved. Some staff appeared to be willing to take part in the scheme because they appreciated that it was expedient for the university to implement their own internal systems for assuring the quality of teaching. However, despite having a generally positive approach to the peer observation scheme, a few staff were openly hostile to the idea. These staff constituted a small minority group.

The progress made to introduce peer observation across the college may be mapped against the four main insights for successful change described by Fullan (1991).

#### *Active Initiation and Participation of Staff*

After the college had made the decision to initiate a formal program of peer observation, staff were required to participate. Responsibility for this was devolved to Heads of Departments and most members of the teaching staff were observed by a peer over the past academic year.

#### *Pressure and Support*

The QAA provided external pressure while internal support was provided centrally through the introduction of a dedicated seminar series and through the provision of standardized paperwork.

#### *Changes in Behavior and Beliefs*

For many colleagues, behavior had to change – to a greater or lesser degree. Some departments had previously run an informal peer observation process, while in others team-teaching was a common practice so that having an additional member of staff in the room was not unusual.

#### *Ownership*

Ownership was indicated by the ways in which departments modified the model (as originally presented to them) in order to address their own agenda for professional development. As such, the evolving diversity of approaches was interpreted as an indicator that departments were taking ownership of the process. However, direction of development within the themes described may indicate increased or decreased engagement.

While peer observation must be tailored to suit departmental needs, it must also mesh with the other demands placed upon academic staff. This is not to say that peer observation should be such a smooth process that it should proceed unnoticed, “One of the great benefits of [peer observation], is to some extent that it actually interferes with the normal process and it makes you think.” Such professional development has to recognize the diversity within the academic staff and the variety of starting points they will hold, in terms of their development as a teacher (Asmar, 2002a). It also promotes the concept of the *professional teacher*, as one who continually learns from the practice of teaching, rather than one who has finished learning how to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

It has been argued that peer observation can be a quality-enhancing tool that is an integral part of individual lecturers’ continuing professional development, and the professionalization of the teaching process. If the full benefits of peer observation are to be achieved and it is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, the implementation and maintenance of any scheme has to be managed thoughtfully and skillfully. The particular concerns and anxieties of academic staff need to be addressed fully with decisions on systems, structures and procedures being contingent upon the organizational culture and sub-cultures of a particular department. The dominant behaviors, beliefs, values and basic assumptions need to be taken into account. Having taken full cognizance of these concerns and the prevailing organizational culture, it is probable that there will be a positive response when the advantages of peer observation to individual lecturers and the organization are clearly, robustly and appropriately set out. Lessons can be learned from the examples of successful implementation of cultural change strategies discussed earlier.

The case study demonstrates that raising awareness, management of change and the implementation of a scheme are sensitive and time-intensive processes in which the normative-educative approach is not successful with all staff. However, the literature and the case study do suggest that the careful management of the change does lead to a peer observation scheme that is far more likely to enhance

the quality of teaching and significantly improve students' learning experiences.

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