

# UWS Peer Observation guidelines

UWS Academy supports everyone who teaches or otherwise supports our students learning. We believe an effective way to develop as a teacher is to find ways of getting feedback on your practice; one way to do that is to be observed in different teaching contexts and to observe your colleagues teaching.

The UWS Peer Observation of Teaching process described here is a supportive and developmental one. You may already have engaged in **peer observation** or **peer review of teaching** perhaps through your involvement in formal courses and schemes like the PG certificate in Academic Practice and the University’s professional recognition framework, sALTiRE. Alternatively, you might have been involved in peer observing close colleagues in more informal contexts. Perhaps, you’ve never been observed. Most people who have been observed and/or observed others’ teaching find it a useful and developmental experience and this is backed up by the research literature (Peel, 2005; Bell and Mladenovic, 2008; Mueller and Schroeder, 2018).

Ideally, peer observation should happen in pairs or triads thus offering everyone the chance to observe and be observed. While we encourage you to take a critical approach to observing your peer, it is essential that a balance is struck between praise for what they did well and pointing out things that might be done differently next time. In addition, although we suggest that peer observation should result in a written record of the observation, this report should only be shared between the observer and the observed teacher. It is up to the observed teacher whether they wish to share the report and their reflection on it with their line manager, for example to get support for specific professional development.

We encourage everyone involved in teaching or supporting learning to engage in peer observation on a regular basis and UWS Academy is committed to supporting individuals, teams and schools to engage in peer observation. We can help mentors, Programme Leaders or Schools to organise a scheme to accommodate several or many individuals to engage in peer observation. We can provide advice about the process and outcomes of peer observation. We can even observe you teaching if you would find it useful. Contact us for more information at UWSAcademy@uws.ac.uk.

The UWS Peer Observation process has four steps:

The assumption is that peer observation will take place in pairs but triads work equally well.

## 1) The briefing meeting

The first stage of peer observation should be a briefing or pre-observation meeting although if this proves too difficult to organise a telephone or email exchange will suffice. This meeting is an opportunity for colleagues to meet and discuss how the observations will be organised and what kind of feedback is being sought.

There are a number of issues which will need to be clarified at this stage including:

* where and when the observations will take place
* the level and topic of the sessions being observed including the aims and intended learning outcomes for the session
* who the learners are how well the teachers knows the groups
* how the observer(s) will be introduced to the students
* specifics you would like feedback on

We suggest that as well as focusing on any particular concerns, you consider three broad areas. These are: the design or structure of the observed session, the quality of the delivery, and the impact on student engagement.

As a bare minimum, peer feedback should include some positive comments about the teaching and identify any particular strengths of the teaching approach taken. It is also important for the observer to take a critical, yet supportive stance in suggesting areas for development, and the observer should avoid making too many suggestions for development. This will allow for more in-depth discussions to take place. We have provided you with a checklist in Moodle which might be usefully used in the briefing meeting.

## 2) The observation

Observers should arrive early and place themselves as unobtrusively as possible but where most of the teacher’s activities will be visible. The observer does not take part in the class but the reason for their presence should be explained to the students so that they understand that their performance is not being observed. The teacher should then go about the session as normal; we acknowledge that being observed can feel anything but normal. The observer should focus on the process of the facilitation of learning rather than the content of the session unless the teacher has asked for specific comments on the subject and content. The observer will find it helpful to take detailed notes. They might also find the UWS POT [checklist](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5C77800583%5CDropbox%5Cwebpages%5Cpeer%20obs%5CUWS%20POT%20checklist.docx) useful.

## 3) Post-observation meeting

Unlike the briefing meeting, this meeting must take place face-to-face. You may choose to meet immediately after the observed session although some observers prefer to write up their notes and consider how they might best provide feedback. Either way, it is good practice to arrange the post-observation meeting as soon after the observation as possible. This enhances recall of the details of the session and thereby facilitates reflection by the observer and observed.

The observer should aim to give constructive feedback i.e. pointing out what worked well but also what perhaps went less well and where appropriate make suggestions for improvement. Giving critical feedback can be difficult but it is essential if the teacher is to benefit from the POT process. Observing someone else’s teaching is a very subjective experience but the observer’s thoughts on what they observe can be highly illuminating for the teacher. If, during the meeting, the observer and teacher agree that there are any errors in the report these can be noted and the report amended.

[Guidelines](https://www.victoria.ac.nz/learning-teaching/support/approach/guides/peer-reviews/peer-observation.pdf) produced by the University Teaching Development Centre at the Victoria University of Wellington provide lots of good advice for observers to ensure their feedback is constructive. This includes: using outline four essential elements for ensuring feedback is constructive:

* *Use* *positive phrasing* – feedback messages need to affirm and acknowledge effort and achievements;
* *Be concrete* – comments should be based on observable behaviours
* *Be action-orientated* – make suggestions that the observed teacher can actually change or skills they can develop

## 4) After the process

Once the post-observation meeting has taken place and the report has been received, the teacher should continue to reflect on the process and, in particular, reflect on the comments that the observer has made in their report. The teacher might consider the following questions:

* Were there any differences between the observer’s views of the session and your own?
* Were you surprised by any of the feedback?
* What areas of good practice did your observer identify?
* What area of development did your observer identify and how do you intend addressing these?

At the very least the teacher needs to consider how they might adapt their teaching practice in the light of the POT process. Some changes will be very small and/or easy to implement. Others might be more radical and might require some staff development. You might find it useful to attend UWS Academy events or contact us for further advice and guidance.

Hammersley‐Fletcher, L. and Orsmond, P. (2004) Evaluating our peers: is peer observation a meaningful process?, *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(4), pp. 489-503. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507042000236380>

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A100, Barbour Building

Paisley Campus

Paisley

PA1 2BE

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Tel 0141 848 3000