

Peer observation for distance learning tutors

Introduction

The University's Distance Learning Forum has established a peer observation programme for distance learning online tutors and programme managers which was trialled successfully over the spring and summer terms of the 2010-2011 academic year. The programme has subsequently been delivered over the 2011-2012 and 2013-14 academic years and offered again over the spring and summer terms of academic year 2014-2015 in partnership with distance learning tutors from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The programme will run again in 2016, with York tutors being offered the opportunity of being matched with colleagues from the University of Waikato and Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand.

The programme supports the professional development of online tutors and their skills development, with participants owning the observation process and outcomes.

The programme is not linked in any way to departmental quality assurance or performance review processes. Subject to agreement by a tutor's head of department or programme leader, participation in this programme may though count as an alternative form of activity in fulfilment of the University of York's Peer Support for Teaching scheme.

Principles of peer observation

Peer observation is primarily a developmental technique for the individuals involved. It facilitates the sharing of impartial and objective feedback based upon actual observations of online tutoring practice in order to:

- enable the person being observed to better understand their behaviours and actions whilst tutoring and so make informed decisions about how to behave and act differently in order to become a better tutor;
- enable the observer to objectively describe and discuss the behaviours and actions of other online tutors and to be informed by these observations. This will include the identification and sharing of good or innovative practices; and
- enable diverse and innovative tutoring methods and practices, including use of technology, to be opened up to external friendly scrutiny and discussion, in order to ensure that good and innovative practices are shared.

The process is intentionally non-directive, with participants free to determine their own objectives and how and when they will conduct the peer observation – whether this should be a reciprocal arrangement (participants experiencing both roles as observer and observee) or a one-way arrangement.

Further information

Please consult the following companion resources:

- **Managing peer observation: timescales and responsibilities**
This briefing note provides guidance on timescales and responsibilities for managing your participation on the peer observation programme.
- **Peer observation pro forma and guidance notes**
This pro forma will help you to prepare for the peer observation - specifically the observation and feedback arrangements. The guidance notes provide further information on the steps involved in conducting an observation, both observing and being observed.

You may also find helpful a short **video introduction to the peer observation programme**, which offers an overview of the programme, addressing the aims of the programme and potential benefits to participants: <http://tinyurl.com/peer-observation-video>

For a **tutor's perspective on how a cross-institutional peer observation exchange can work**, please view the short recorded talk by John Gray (Centre for Applied Human Rights and York Law School), which he gave to the Distance Learning Forum in 2015: <http://tinyurl.com/John-Gray-Talk>

For a recorded presentation on the **key outcomes from the 2015 Waikato-York peer observation exchange**, please view the following video: <http://tinyurl.com/York-Waikato-peer-observation>

For further information on the peer observation programme and details on how to get involved, please contact Dr Richard Walker (E-Learning Development Team): richard.walker@york.ac.uk