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Peer Observation of Teaching

Exploring the experiences of academic staff at the
University of Huddersfield

April 2011

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1. Introduction

Peer observation of teaching (POT) is potentially an important part of identifying and sharing good practice in teaching and learning and a way to support the professional development of educational practitioners; a key element in enhancing the student experience and developing reflective practitioners.

At the University of Huddersfield all academic staff members are required to take part in an annual peer observation of teaching process, which is organised within the Schools rather than centrally. POT is meant to be a mutually beneficial activity for both the observer and the observed with the aims to enhance teaching quality and share good practice in teaching and learning.

The survey to explore staff perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the practice of peer observation of teaching (POT) was constructed in response to a request from the University teaching and learning committee (UTLC) to explore setting up a process for cross-school POT. In order to set up a new process, the Teaching and Learning Institute considered it was necessary to learn more about how POT was already organised in the Schools and try to evaluate staff interest in a cross-school scheme.

2. Methodology

The survey questions were designed following a brief review of literature on peer observation of teaching and a collection of POT documentation from schools, which included the forms staff fill in as well as guidelines and other POT process documentation where available. The questionnaire had three major sections: first section dealing with their latest experience of POT in terms of the process (organisation and feedback), a second section asking them more generally about the impact of POT on their practice, a third section on challenges and alternatives to POT and finally we asked them what they thought about the idea of cross-school POT.

The majority of the questions had open text boxes for comments to elicit as much staff experiences in their own words as possible. The qualitative comments were subsequently analysed thematically. The survey closed on 22nd December 2010 with 157 valid responses¹.

Follow up interviews with staff are planned as a second phase of the research to further

¹ The number of responses does differ throughout the survey as some respondents skipped some questions. Where relevant the actual number of respondents will be indicated in the text and/or graph.

explore a number of issues identified in the analysis of the survey responses. Please note that percentages have been rounded up and will therefore not always add up to 100%.

3. Perceptions of peer observation of teaching

In order to frame the findings of the survey, the next two sections outline some key themes and issues relating to POT which emerged from the literature review.

Although the idea of peer observation of teaching may seem to be a simple and straightforward this is not the case. Gosling points out that all these concepts have complex, context dependent and negotiated meanings, by asking: “[w]hat do we understand by ‘peers’, what is involved in ‘observation’ and what is our conception of ‘teaching’?” (Gosling 2002:2)

The purposes, the process and the definition of peer observation of teaching are all areas under discussion and the terminology itself constantly subject to revision. Some advocate changing the terminology completely to, for instance, “peer development” (Byrne et al 2010).

For example, a couple of higher education institutions have made such a move in response to undertaking research into current POT practices and consultations with staff about their experience of POT. Sheffield Hallam University established a Peer-Supported Review of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (P-S-R of LTA) shifting the emphasis from peer observation to peer support (Crutchley, Nield and Jordan 2005). Northumbria University established The Peer Support Scheme to replace the Peer Observation of Teaching scheme in order to reinforce among other things that the scheme is about “...*the mutual support function of a peer-based scheme and its separation from processes for management of performance...*” (Smailes, Dordoy and Gannon-Leary 2009:11).

The questions about what peer observation of teaching means raised by Gosling highlight that the peer relationship can be complex. Imagine for instance having to give feedback to a senior colleague or the difference there is between being observed by a colleague you know and trust and someone you don’t know. It can also be an issue that teaching staff have different approaches to teaching. These issues only underline the importance of observer and observed agreeing on aims and objectives for the POT prior to engaging in the process.

3.1 The POT process itself: questions of logistics and ownership

How the process is organised is also key to achieving the desired outcomes. How are observer and observed paired up, do they choose themselves and does this lead to so called “cosy” self-congratulatory pairings (Gannon-Leary 2007). Are pairs in fact the best way to carry out POT? Some recommend triadic peer relationships or dedicated POT teams (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004). A pragmatic guide to POT published by the Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching (ProDAIT) points out that “...as with all continuing professional development, you will get out of the process what you put in” (ProDAIT 2006:1).

The logistics and documentation of the process is also a key area. The question of how the observation is recorded and what happens with that record afterwards is essential to the process (Washer 2006). Is there a mechanism in place so that good practice can be feed back to other staff? To what extent can this infringe on the confidentiality of the process? How are any developmental issues followed up, by the individual drafting an action plan or more informally?

MacMahon et al argues that if POT is to focus on improvement of practice rather than demonstrate existing good practice, it is key that the participants have real control and choice when it comes to “...choice of observer, focus of observation, form and method of feedback, resultant data flow and next steps” (MacMahon et al 2007:510). If the observed has little choice in choosing the observer, focus of observation and what happens to feedback then most likely they will put on a performance, “rehearse a class”, instead of feeling confident in trying out new techniques or highlighting problem areas to get support with. This was also a concern highlighted by research into peer observation experiences carried out at Sheffield Hallam University in 2000 with staff talking about “putting on a show”. They also concluded that it was likely that peer reviewers were unwilling to engage in critical reflection on colleagues’ professional practice because POT reports were always positive with little evidence of constructive criticism (Crutchley, Nield and Jordan 2005).

The literature suggests that POT is still mainly carried out in traditional lectures, i.e. lectures/classroom setting (Bennett and Barp 2008:560) which doesn’t take into account the diverse HE provision as well as blended learning delivery. Byrne et al underlines that teaching occurs in a variety of different settings (2010) and the current University of Huddersfield POT guidelines underline that the POT process should recognise the diversity of teaching and learning interactions (see Appendix 1).

3.2 POT as development tool or audit tool

This very brief summary of some key areas highlights that there is a central theme running through most of the literature, which has to do with the purpose of POT. More specifically, it is the question of whether peer observation of teaching is a tool for developing teaching practice, and hence a supportive tool, or a quality assurance exercise, and hence a management tool for evaluating and “judging” teaching delivery (Gosling 2002, Peel 2005, Cosh 1998 and Shortland 2004, MacMahon et al 2007). It is ultimately this, the perception and/or understanding of the purpose that determines how you approach the POT process, the challenges you see in carrying out POT and also what problems you see or criticisms you make.

For example, for people who understand POT to be a question of quality assurance, the subjectivity of POT is an issue, in the sense of whether the observer is qualified to evaluate teaching and the lack of “objective” criteria that they are being evaluated against. On the other hand, for the ones who see POT as a developmental tool, creating an environment of trust is key and it is essential that any observational record belongs to the individual and is not feed upward in the institution. These are just two examples of how the perception of the purpose of POT structures responses to participating in POT.

4. Basic information about respondents

There were 157 responses with 141 who said that they had participated in peer observation of teaching. Almost all (96%) respondents were members of academic staff with only 5% identifying themselves as librarian/other. Almost a third (28%) of respondents came from Human and Health Science with 13% from Applied Sciences and the Business School and 12% from Computing and Engineering (see Table 1 for details).

The few respondents who had not participated in POT were routed to the final part of the questionnaire.

In order to get staff to comment on the current process of POT, we asked them about the last time they participated in POT. For most respondents (49%) that was the academic year 2009/10 but for 37% it was 2010/11 and another 7% said it was in the academic year 2008/09.

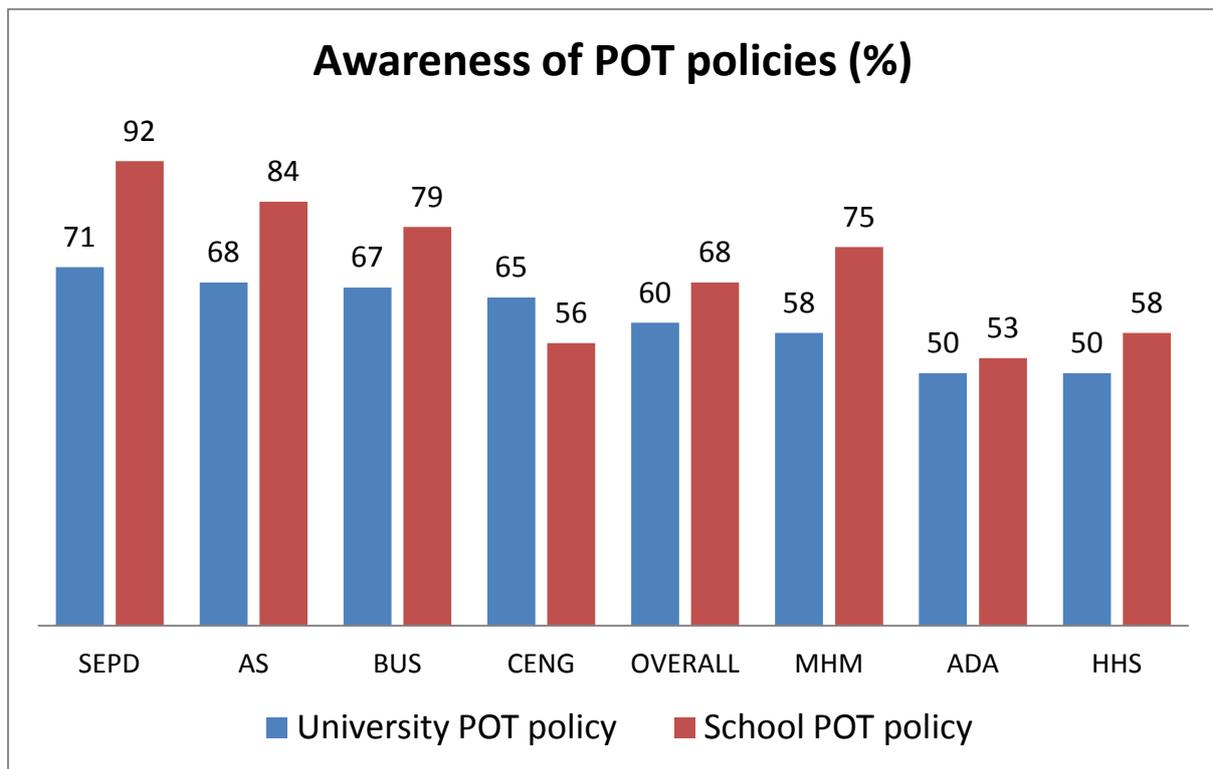
Table 1: Responses by School/Service who indicated they had participated in POT:

School/Service	Response (%)	Response (N)
Human and Health Sciences (HHS)	28%	39
Applied Sciences (AS)	13%	19
Art, Design and Architecture (ADA)	11%	15
Business (BUS)	13%	19
Computing and Engineering (CENG)	12%	17
Education and Professional Development (SEPD)	10%	14
Music, Humanities and Media (MHM)	9%	13
Computing and Library Services (CLS)	4%	5
Total	100%	141

5. Principles and guidelines for peer observation of teaching

Apart from the University policy on peer observation of teaching, Schools also have their own policy. In general, 60% said they were aware of a University policy on peer observation of teaching and 68% said they were aware of a School policy. The School of Education and Professional Development (SEPD) had the highest level of awareness of School policy (92%) as well as University policy (71%). Here it might be worth noting that the SEPD POT process is centralised via a Peer Observation Group that organise cross-departmental learning sets/peer observation circles in contrast to other School practices that can be at department level or organised more informally.

Figure 1: Awareness of policies on peer observation of teaching



6. The organisation of the peer observation of teaching process

A total of 140 respondents commented on the way POT was organised in their schools. It was interesting that within some schools, there were different systems in place. Certain departments within schools had different systems from other departments within the same school. There are two main organising systems:

- Formal, where it is centrally coordinated via either HoD, POT working group, subject leader, course leader, admin staff, nominated lead etc.
 - *“We got sent a list which was organised by the heads of the department.”*
 - *“A member of staff is given this duty as an admin role. As far as I can tell, allocation is then made on the basis of alphabetic surnames.”*
- Informal, where it is self-organised and it is the responsibility of the academic to locate or identify another colleague to observe or be observed by.
 - *“Academic staff organised the pairing themselves - initial contact via email and then lesson plans were provided before the POT “*

Some respondents stated that centrally coordinated allocation of academic staff members was random e.g. names drawn from a hat or alphabetic surname matching. A list of paired names was passed around the school or department which adopted a centrally coordinated system. One respondent in charge of organising POT commented that they tried to pair new staff with experienced staff members.

Centrally organised pairings doesn't always work out as reported by some respondents. Sometimes this is to do with problems matching availability to teaching times with paired partner or lack of chemistry. There are some reported cases of breakdown of the formal mechanisms or structures and academics resorting to informal or self organised POT to meet the university target of doing POT on an annual basis.

“POT teams were identified at Dept away day, but group fizzled out – resulted in individuals looking for a colleague.”

Some respondents mentioned that POT colleagues were from different subject areas, groups or departmental teams within their schools. This is a form of internal cross-disciplinary/subject POT going on within some schools.

“POT was organised across the department on a rolling pattern. My observer was from a different discipline and I peer observed someone else from a different discipline.”

A number of responses also highlighted that they did not know how the organisation process came about or on what basis they were paired with colleagues.

It seems that not everyone is doing POT on an annual basis as required² by the university and this is due to several factors or reasons.

- POT was conducted via learning groups of three (triads) and fours instead of the traditional two person structure.
- Team of 5 academics who carried out all peer reviews

² Although the current guidelines state that “all full-time academic teaching staff...normally to be observed and observe another person teaching on at least one occasion in the course of the academic year”. Here the qualification of normally could perhaps include alternative approaches to the organisation of POT.

7. The POT process

Most of the academics stated that their POT observations were conducted during classroom lectures which is unsurprising as this tendency to keep to traditional delivery is also highlighted in the literature (see for example Bennett and Barp 2008). Seminars, tutorials and lab sessions were the most frequently cited venues after the classroom. It should be noted that the University POT guidelines specify that Schools adopt a model of peer observation that “recognises the diversity of teaching and learning interactions including on-line engagement and assessment and feedback” (see Appendix 1).

The table below provides a breakdown of actual scores for each venue as respondents could choose all the venues that applied to their experience and the data in the table is therefore not presented in percentages. POT observation in studios was quite popular in the Arts, Design and Architecture school. There were some academics that either observed or observed colleagues in an online session though it remains the least cited venue for POT observations. Most of the academics that were involved in online POT observations were from the School of Human and Health Sciences.

Table 2: Most Popular POT Venues

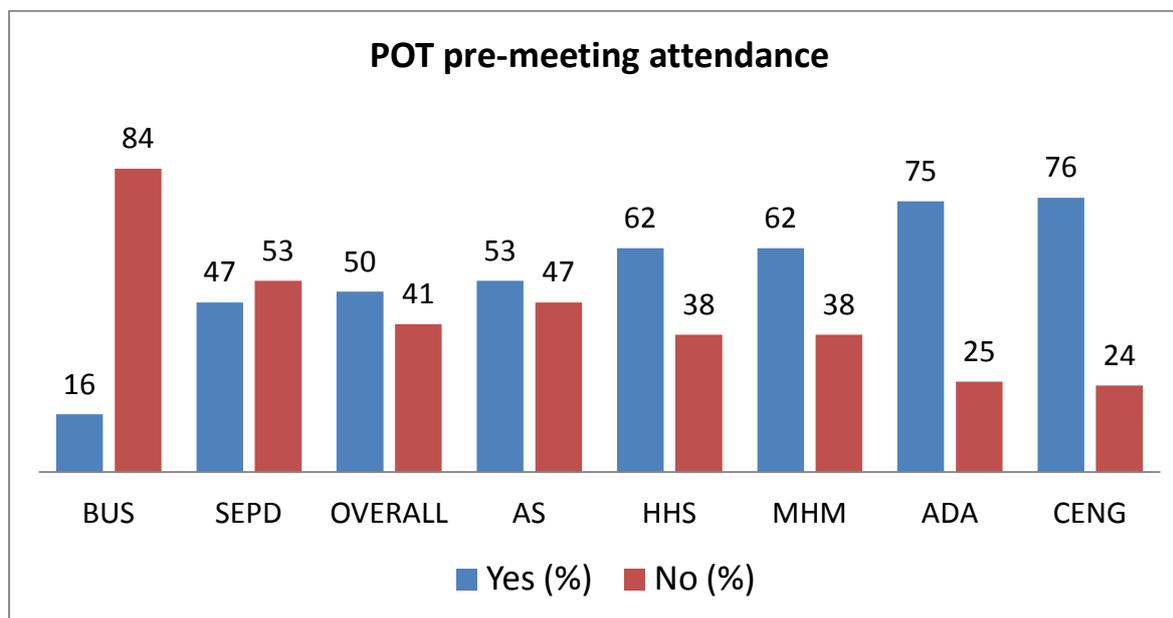
Venue	Scores
(1) Classroom Lectures	127
(2) Seminar	50
(3) Tutorial	45
(4) Workshop	41
(5) Lab Session	30
(6) Studio	13
(7) Online Session	7

7.1 Pre-meeting

Most POT processes include a pre-meeting where aims and objectives for the observation are discussed and as a post-observation meeting where feedback and reflection takes place³.

Half of the respondents report having had a pre-meeting and 41% said they did not⁴. There are some significant differences in Schools. For example 84% of the respondents from the Business School said they had not attended a meeting prior to doing peer observation of teaching compared to respondents from the School of Computing and Engineering where 76% said that they had attended a pre-meeting (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Pre-meeting attendance by School



The majority of academics who did have a pre-meeting found it useful but some (12%) had a negative view of it considering the process to be a time consuming activity.

“Not really. It was pretty obvious what the aims were, and it was just irritating to have to take time to go through this 'layer' of the process.”

Those who found it useful cited the following reasons for their positive views of the pre-meeting:

³ See for example the guide to peer observation of teaching from the HEA subject centre for education ESCalate: <http://escalate.ac.uk/resources/peerobservation/03.html>

⁴ There were 14 respondents who skipped this question and this is why there is only a 91% combined response.

- clarity of expectations for POT observations
- establishing POT targets or observation remit
- organisation/arrangement of the suitable times
- review of the module documentation
- rationale for observed lecturers' teaching decisions or approaches

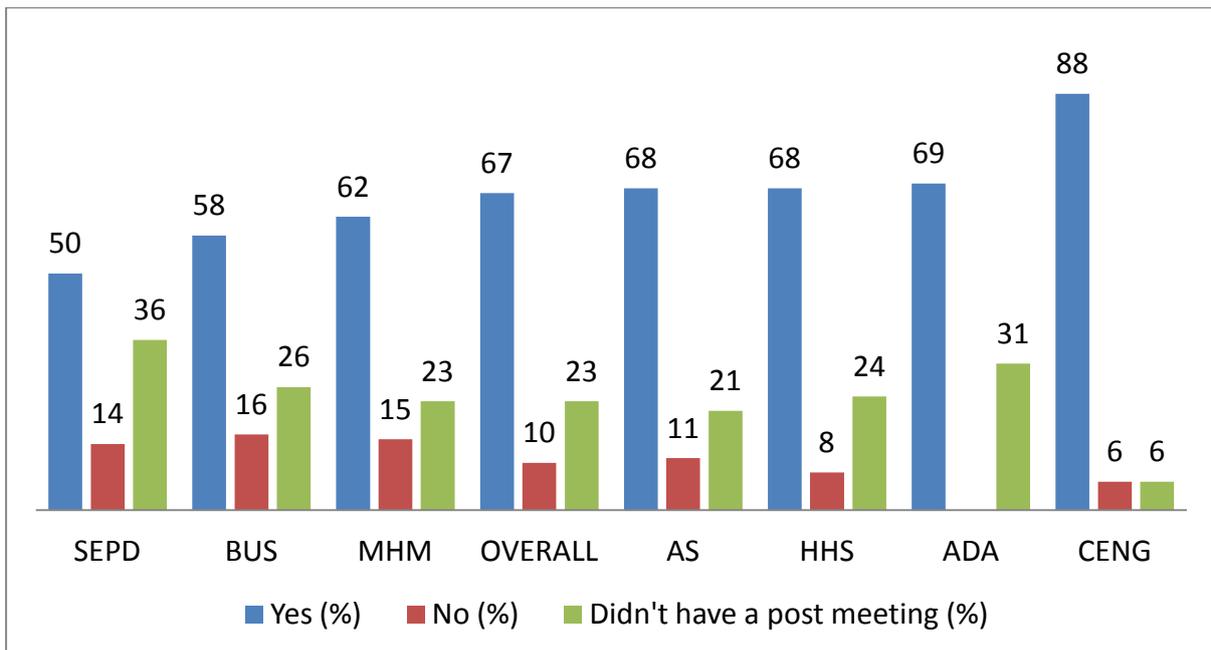
“Yes, -to meet the other member of staff -to organize suitable times and event to observe”

“yes, so that we knew what it was all about when we started and allowed us to drop into sessions that were already ongoing”

7.2 Post-meeting

The majority (77%) stated they had a post-meeting and a quarter (23%) said they did not. Respondents were asked whether the post-meeting provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice and the majority agreed with this. Again there were some variation between Schools.

Figure 3: Did a post-meeting provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your teaching practice?



The majority of respondents from the School of Computing and Engineering (88%) agreed that the post-meeting provided an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice whereas only 50% of the respondents who from the School of Education and Professional

Development (SEPD) agreed. Around a third of SEPD (36%) and ADA (31%) respondents said they had not had a post-meeting.

Further comments highlighted they found the post-meeting process to be useful or constructive and they felt they got valuable feedback from colleagues who observed them.

“Comments were encouraging, useful and led to one significant change in my PowerPoint presentations.”

However, there were 10% of respondents who found the post-meeting reflection to be superficial and forced instead of naturally occurring. Here it might be interesting to point out that students/learners are frequently directed to reflect as part of their learning and development process.

“Reflect yes, learn anything, no.”

“However the reflection is superficial. - In short peer observation detracts from true and meaningful reflection. Peer observation is presented as 'staff development' but is used for audit. If it is to be used for audit then this should be clearly stated, it should be planned and managed as audit and criteria (a standard set) against which observation is made and recorded. Whenever reflection is prescribed the reflector will do no more than 'satisfy the public lens.”

This criticism offered by the respondent reflects the central theme found in the literature namely a concern with what the aims of peer observation of teaching are, it expresses a concern that the current process is functioning as a management tool without this being clearly stated but also without the process actually achieving the aims of an audit tool.

7.2.1 Feedback

Respondents were asked about their experience of receiving and giving feedback to colleagues during the post-meetings.

The majority (77%) were positive but some respondents were unhappy about the limited benefit and/or quality of feedback received during the post meeting period⁵. Most of the respondents were also positive (92 out of 130) about the feedback they gave to their colleagues. One line responses like “good” and “positive” were used a lot. Some respondents pointed out that observing and giving feedback gave them opportunities to

⁵ There were 133 responses to the question about receiving feedback from colleagues.

pick up good practices from colleagues and reflect on their own practice.

“Again feedback seemed to be well received and providing such feedback made me reflect on my own teaching. I always found I learned about my own teaching observing someone else’s”

“It helped me reflect and look at some of my own issues.”

There seems to be some concerns with giving constructive feedback to senior staff members (due to hierarchical structures) and to close colleagues (due to personal proximity). Some respondents found it difficult to offer constructive feedback to close colleagues without appearing rude or being misunderstood. The anxiety about feedback is also an issue widely found in the literature on POT (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005). This was supported by another respondent who felt that personal relationship with the POT observer stifled the feedback experience.

“Yes but it was difficult to be entirely open.”

“This is a bit mixed for me - as a senior person I am not sure that giving constructive criticism is easy for the observer, so I am not convinced I have ever had very robust feedback.”

Other issues highlighted were that the feedback was not particularly challenging but diffident, that feedback quality varied and depended on the past experience of the observer. There is the potential problem of ‘mutual back slapping’ going on, an issue also widely discussed in the literature (Gannon-Leary 2007). One respondent found feedback from a colleague outside the respondent’s school to be much better than feedback from colleagues within the school. Another found student feedback to be much more useful than peer feedback.

The lack of challenging feedback and concern about offending colleagues raises the concern that POT might simply reinforce existing poor practices.

“Colleagues receive feedback, but they know in advance which session is being observed, so it’s rare that anything is picked up and rare that problems are diagnosed.”

“Rarely are criticisms voiced. I cannot remember ever having to provide negative comments. Consequently the feedback is positive reinforcement of existing activities.”

In the comments above, we can again see the central theme concerning POT being echoed, namely the perception of POT as a quality assurance tool to evaluate performance (and thus

attempt perhaps to “catch” instances of “bad” practice and as such the comments are criticising that the current POT scheme is not fulfilling this aim. Again it is important here to remember that a majority of respondents found the feedback useful.

8. Comments on the outcomes and impact of POT

Respondents were asked in what way taking part in POT has impacted on their teaching practice. There were 128 responses and of these about 25% (32) commented that POT had had no – or very little - impact on their teaching practice.

For some, POT was a management imposed task that they did not consider to be useful to them: *“Absolutely no impact at all. It is one of the many things we have to do which interferes with our main tasks”*

However, the majority were positive about POT and their responses fall into four categories (though these overlap as many responses included references to more than one category):

1. An opportunity to learn from colleagues, get feedback on current practice and get ideas for different delivery/styles

- *“I enjoy observing and learning from others, -keeps me alert to differing teaching methods, that I may choose to use in my own practice.”*

2. An opportunity to reflect on own practice and to focus on teaching and learning

- *“Made me re-think, one POT outcome was that we were 'spoon feeding' the trainees at times and it made me reconsider and raise my expectations of what they should be doing independently.”*

3. Peer observation of teaching resulted in changed practice

- *“Improved seminar group management, for example saving time in large groups by putting students into pairs or larger group to undertake tasks”*

4. Peer observation of teaching gives participants confidence

- *“Gives confidence that you are on the right lines in relation to approach, methods and style.”*

So the respondents who are positive about their experiences see POT as a way to get ideas

for teaching, to see what colleagues are doing, to try out new approaches and get feedback, help them get a new - possibly more student focused - perspective on their delivery, validates their practice thereby giving them confidence and for some also supports creative and interactive approaches. In addition to this, some indicated that POT helps them to network with their colleagues and learn about shared interests/research.

Although, some respondents see POT as a supportive activity for learning new approaches to teaching as well as reflecting on their practice, others see themselves as practitioners that are constantly reflecting and evaluating their teaching and learning as part of their practice and for these respondents the development of teaching and learning practice has nothing to do with participating in POT. This point of view is illustrated by the comment below:

“As we work in teaching and learning we are always discussing ways to develop and improve so had to disagree with last one as it isn't the POT but what we do that makes us discuss things!”

8.1 Agreement with what the outcome and impact of POT are

In the survey, respondents were asked whether they disagreed/agreed⁶ with three statements about POT. The statements were broadly based on the University's principles and guidelines for the peer observation of teaching (see Appendix 1 for the full text):

1. POT enhances my practice (66% agree) – there were 133 responses
2. POT enhances the quality of my teaching (63% agree) – there were 129 responses
3. POT encourages open discussion of teaching and learning issues within my school (49% agree) – there were 132 responses

The statements were a way to explore more generally the experiences of staff and the responses generally confirm the findings from the more qualitative open text boxes.

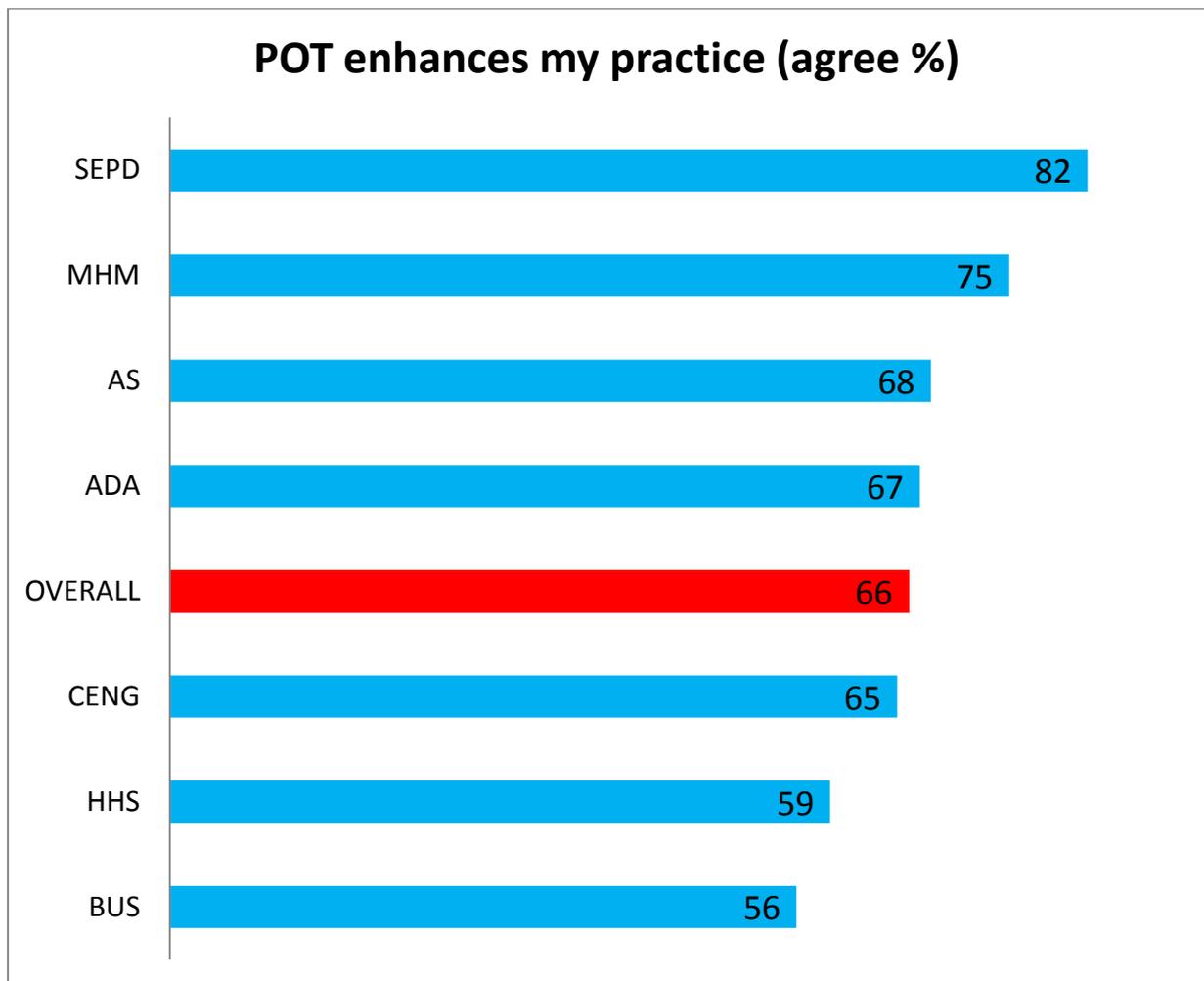
The first statement was designed to explore a more general idea of POT impacting on practice whereas the second statement was more specifically about the positive impact of POT on teaching. One respondent did comment that it was hard to understand what the difference was between these two statements. The third statement was aimed at gauging to

⁶This survey question was specifically designed with only agree/disagree answer categories to try and minimise the tendency to choose a “neutral” option. For those who objected to what some might view as a stark choice, the further comment box was available to express alternative or more complex views.

whether, in the respondent's experiences, POT leads to discussion and sharing of ideas for approaches to teaching and learning.

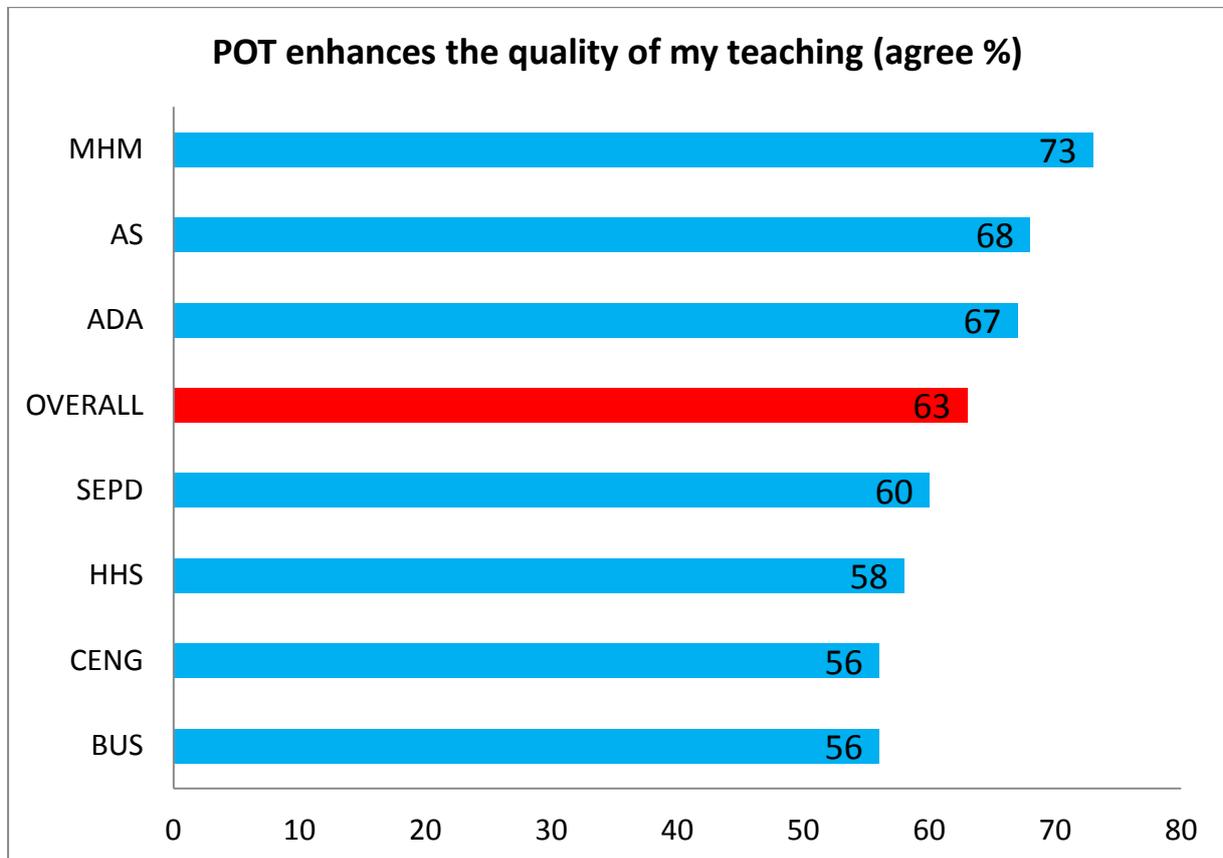
There are some variations in relation to schools for all three statements. As can perhaps be expected, the School of Education and Professional Development has the largest proportion of respondents who agree that POT enhances their practice (82%) with the School of Music, Humanities and Media being a close second with 75% of staff agreeing compared to the School of Human and Health Sciences (59%) and the Business School (56%).

Figure 4: Respondents who agree POT enhances their practice



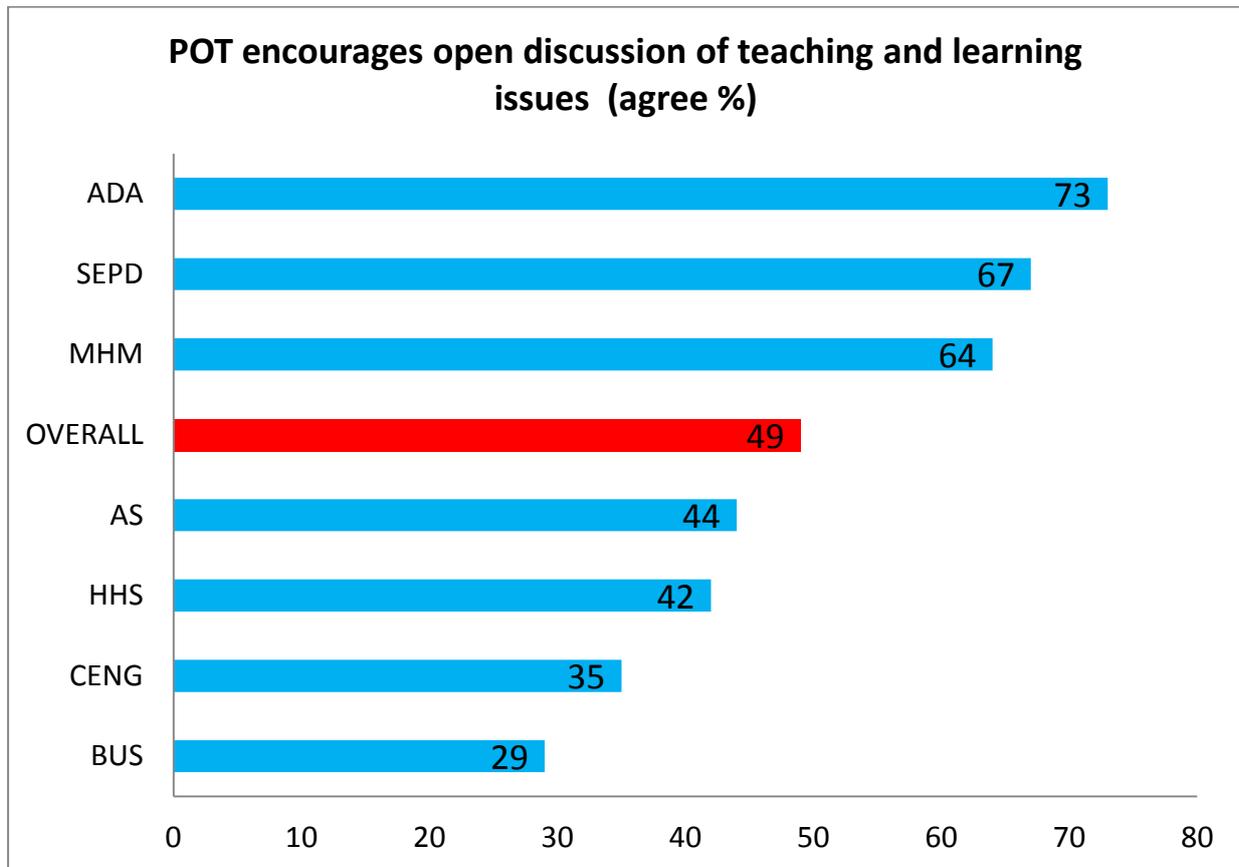
However, when asked the question about impact of POT on quality of teaching, the proportion of respondents from SEPD who agreed fell to 60% whereas the proportion of respondents from HHS and BUS remained about the same (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Respondents who agree POT enhances the quality of their teaching



Less than half of respondents from the Business School, Computing and Engineering, Human and Health Science and Applied Sciences agree that POT encourages open discussion of teaching and learning issues (See Figure 6). As this is a principle in University policy, this seems a potential area for concern. The low level of agreement could be partially explained by the perception that POT is an individual and confidential process. Further comments highlight that some respondents feel there is no overview of the POT process, paperwork doesn't encourage open discussion, lack of feedback from POT sessions and lack of follow through, which could explain the lack of discussion/wider issues being raised.

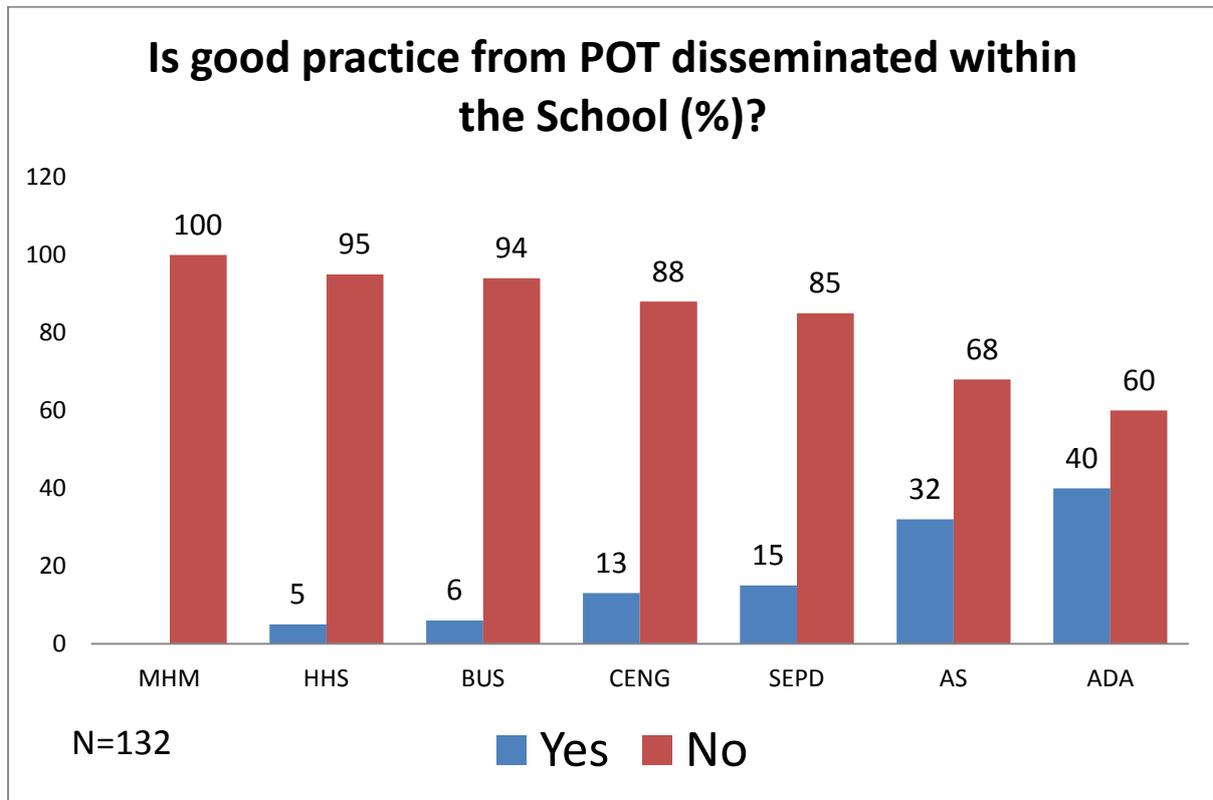
Figure 6: Respondents who agree POT encourages open discussion of teaching and learning issue



9. Dissemination of good practice identified in POT

Respondents were asked whether they felt that good teaching practices identified in other POT observations are well disseminated within the school. In general, the majority (86%) said no and only 14% said yes. All respondents from the School of Music, Humanities and Media said no and so did over 90% of respondents from the School of Human and Health Sciences as well as the Business School compared to 60% from the School of Art, Design and Architecture (see Figure 7). Around a third of respondents from the School of Applied Sciences (32%) said that good practice from peer observation of teaching is disseminated in their school.

Figure 7: Respondents who agree good practice from POT is disseminated within the School



There were some differences by school and in the further comments, one explanation for this discrepancy can be found, as comments indicate that the POT process is viewed as very confidential and confined to individual practice. This would of course complicate any best practice dissemination, although it should perhaps be mentioned here that some schools have space on forms (or simply as part of the POT process itself) to identify any practice that can be shared with colleagues. However, from the very low percentages of staff who agree best practice is disseminated, it would seem that even the process of “feeding good practice back” to organisers does not result in best practice being cascaded back down. It is of course possible that good practice identified in POT is fed back through committees etc but simply not identified as originating from POT process.

Some typical comments illustrating the different experiences:

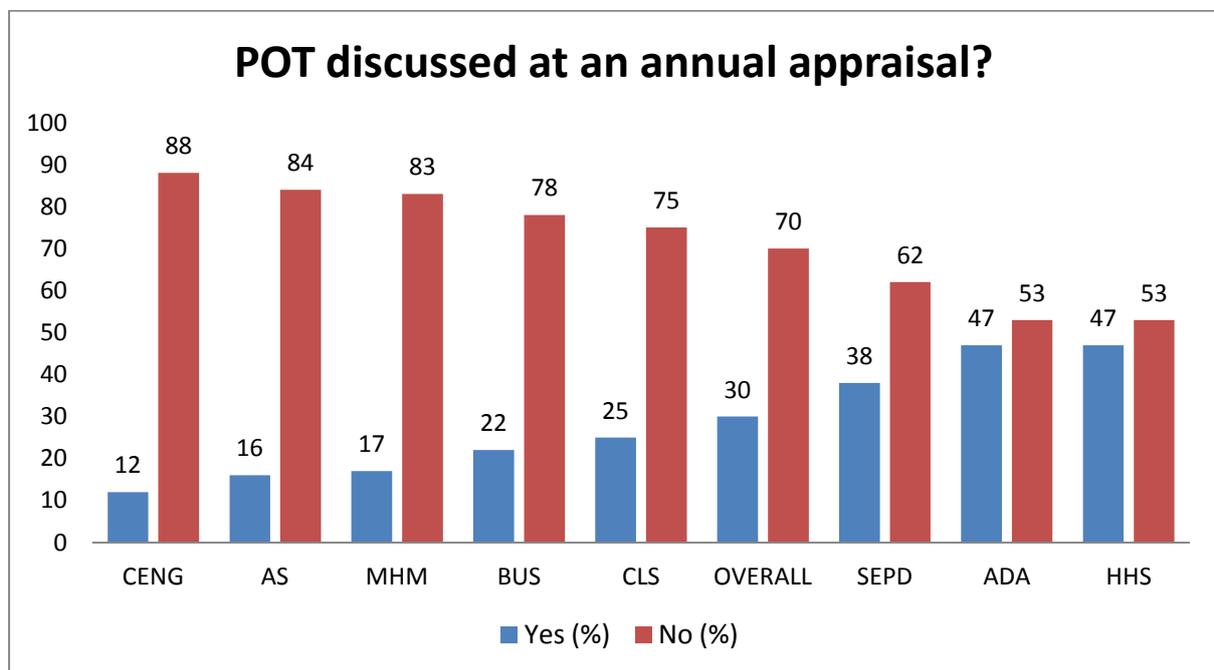
- *“Via Annual Evaluation - good practices noted”*
- *“When an area of good practice is recognised it is openly talked about and may well be adopted by more than one other member of staff”*

- “We never get any feedback about other POT observations”
- “We don't disseminate POT beyond the individuals concerned”
- “Feedback goes no further than the observed lecturer”

10. POT and the annual appraisal

We were also interested to see whether the outcomes of POT were followed up or connected to the annual appraisal process. Overall only 30% said that they had discussed the content of the POT form at an annual appraisal and again there were some differences between schools.

Figure 8: Have you ever discussed the content of the POT form at an annual appraisal?



11. Challenges of engaging in POT

Respondents were asked what the challenges of engaging in POT and there were 124 comments. The comments were clustered around themes⁷, the issue mentioned most was time: time to do the observations and write up feedback as well as the logistics of organising POT. This included time tabling issues and level of support from management to facilitate. The second top issue was the challenges involved in giving and receiving feedback, a

⁷ Please note comments could include more than one theme, i.e. time and trust issues, therefore percentages are not appropriate.

sensitive issue and something staff considered difficult to negotiate especially, perhaps, if there were differences between approaches to teaching or you were giving feedback to a more experienced colleague as also mentioned in the previous section on feedback (section 7.2.1). Some respondents commented that there was a tendency to just give positive comments and lot of comments were concerned with the need for constructive (but not destructive) feedback. A few comments were concerned with what to do if “bad practice” was observed. This again reflects other comments made in relation to feedback at post-meetings.

It is possible that some of the concern with providing feedback is related to the degree of confusion concerning the aims and objectives of the POT process. It may depend on to what extent staff see POT as an evaluation of their practice and therefore that they are equally evaluating the practices of colleagues. The anxiety expressed in relation to feedback can be connected to POT being seen as a question of quality assurance rather than one of quality enhancement, i.e. a development opportunity. Although no doubt the POT process will always entail a certain level of anxiety as it deals with your practice.

Other challenges highlighted were colleague’s level of commitment to the POT process, the importance of trusting the POT partner(s) and the need for clear aims and objectives that staff share.

12. Is POT fit for purpose?

Suggestions for changing and criticisms of the current POT process can likewise be related to the central question of POT as quality assurance tool or developmental enhancement opportunity.

“Nobody appears to ask what qualifies a peer to observe and comment on another’s teaching. Student feedback is best way as they are the regular recipients of the lecturer. How does the observer distinguish between a “special” performance and the general run-of-the-mill lecture? Is the observer in a position to understand the difference between what is difficult to get across (due to it being a dry topic) and the issue of “intellectual depth”? Does observation take account of the history of the student body - are they appropriately prepared before reaching this stage?”

The point of view in the comment above maintains that POT doesn’t impact but reinforces status quo and established practice. This highlights the issues concerning how the POT process can be critical and who sets these standards that practitioners are judged by?

Another example of concerns about being evaluated and POT used as quality assurance tool.

On the other hand, another comment highlights how the process could be more developmental and there is no concern with criteria or standards. Here the respondent is keen to establish a cycle of improvement rather than a one-off evaluation.

“...it takes time to get beyond politeness to a point where you value the observation and don't feel threatened at least a little bit - also the focus could be better - work on your use of It then be observed, work on Q&A skills then be observed. Its not very developmental - we could read up on giving feedback, develop our skills and then get some feedback - cycle of improvements type of thing”

Another consequence of the POT process being considered a quality assurance tool is reflected in comments that whatever is observed does not represent actual teaching practice.

“People go the extra mile when being observed and thus POT tells us nothing about day-to-day teaching”

Another criticism is that POT has too narrow a focus, namely deliver and very often only face to face sessions:

“The main point about POT is that it focuses on the lecture and other performative parts of teaching. It never looks at resource preparation, marking, curriculum planning etc.”

13. Alternatives to POT

We also asked staff about alternatives to peer observation of teaching and there were a number of useful suggestions:

“I have used video recordings of me (students not on camera) – that was helpful. I think we should use a variety of methods in successive years rather than POT every year.”

“I think that POT is largely seen as a hoop we have to jump through, and my own experience is that it involves too many things we have to do and then document (reflect on this, reflect on that). I think that most teachers are aware of their weak areas and would welcome informal advice from peers about how to address these without all the structure and paperwork that accompanies it.”

“Instead of POT why not peer development processes that are open – give light to continuous improvement. It would move from a formal dissolved process to an integrative task in personal staff development”

Some also wanted to use more feedback from student at module level.

Rather than focusing on individual performance, some respondents suggested a more team oriented approach

“Team teaching with colleagues over the years has been far more useful.”

“Yes, team appraisals; could look at each others’ strategies and roles and share ideas at team meetings. This could lead to consider team effectiveness and how we could support one another”

Another suggestion was that all lecturers should gain a Post Graduate Certificate of Education, although how this would support continuous development is not clear.

Two respondents suggested that POT observation should be done by *“a team external to the teaching team with expert knowledge.”* Another said *“it would be better if a smaller team of experts (or high quality) got additional training and did all the observations.”*

An interesting theme came through in these suggestions: a view that POT could/should be a more natural/organic development/process versus a view that it should be more structured and formal, possibly with links to appraisals or externally facilitated. Again this can be seen to relate to the central question of what the aims of POT are, quality assurance or developmental.

Examples of comments concerned with natural, informal development:

“Good teaching practice should develop through a natural process of staff interaction”

“Meet up for coffee and discuss things in a common room. This is somewhat old fashioned but allows practitioners to discuss things with colleagues”

Examples of comments concerned with structured, formal process:

“An independent company doing it rather than tutors”

“A 360 degree appraisal system including formal observation and appraisal of teaching performance by line managers, and formal appraisal of line management practice by staff”

It must be remembered that many respondents were happy with the current process and thought the system worked well. Again a few commented that getting rid of the paperwork involved would be useful. Getting away from evaluation and judging performance also featured

“I think you need to separate out issues of poor performance from POT”

“POT would be most effective both in subject areas and across schools if colleagues were able to observe each other and then in informal discussions discuss their observations. I ran a POT....which was based on mutual respect. It was very successful in encouraging sharing of positive practice and building confidence. It is the paperwork and the sense of “evaluation” that really undermines the system here”

14. Cross-school and cross-disciplinary POT:

Respondents were asked what their views are on how useful cross-school POT would be for them and there were 122 comments. Around 40% thought it would be useful to them and of these some commented that it would offer a different perspective, would put the focus on teaching (and pedagogy) not subject knowledge and give opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations.

“It would be useful because it would involve more diverse experiences and emphasise teaching practice rather than discipline-specific content”

“would be interesting and possibly be perceived as less threatening more about development than surveillance”

“It's pedagogy that I am interested in so I think it would be very useful. It's probably as useful to see a session that I'd think 'I'm not sure that wouldn't work in my context' and then try and workout why I think that or what could be taken from it”

However, almost a third (30%) did not believe it would be useful, the main issues highlighted were that there were no transferability between subjects, i.e teaching practices simply too different, that it was better to be observed by someone you know and that the organisation involved in cross-school POT would be difficult and complicated.

Interestingly, a number of the respondents who did not think cross-school POT was a good idea, thought that more cross-divisional or intra-school POT would be more useful. These comments indicate that for some staff POT is a very intra-subject, insular activity and there

is a lack of cross-disciplinary opportunity.

A small proportion (15%) thought that cross-school might be interesting with further comments saying the usefulness depended on the subject (i.e. engineering not as relevant to them as arts and humanities), that it should not be in addition to School based POT and that it should not become an administrative burden.

It would seem that the idea of cross-School and cross-disciplinary POT brings to the surface a tension between subject specialism/knowledge and pedagogical approaches echoing perhaps a traditional dichotomy (albeit contested) between research and teaching.

Part of the reason why there are different opinions on the usefulness of doing cross-school POT (as well as normal POT) is because cross-school – and therefore cross-disciplinary – POT brings to the forefront that POT is about teaching (not necessarily subject specific) and some lecturers do not consider that subject knowledge can be divorced from the teaching of that subject.

This is the question underlying some of the anxiety and confusion about the objectives of POT, which we can see expressed in the comments from staff: When doing POT are you evaluating subject knowledge or teaching (or both)? And as an extension of this, the question of how you evaluate a subject discipline that you are not familiar with.

15. Training and support to do POT

The majority (77%) of the respondents did not want any extra training or support⁸. The comments outlining why they did not want any training or support reflect similar concerns as outlined in previous sections, namely the organic view that *“good teaching practice should develop through a natural process of staff interaction”*, the view that POT was *“another bit of bureaucracy”* and it would waste more of academics’ time.

Some staff who had done the PCPD tended to have a positive view of POT because as part of the course they had observed and been observed during PCPD.

“Doing the PCPD really emphasised the benefits of peer observation.”

“Training is an odd word – I would like intelligent discursive interaction over time where the wisdom I felt from my PCPD course continues.”

⁸ There were 111 responses to the question about whether they needed extra training and support.

“I have been involved in POT since taking the PCPD and am quite aware of its purposes and uses.”

There were a minority (14%) who wanted some extra training and support in certain areas:

- awareness of pedagogic issues
- provision of feedback to colleagues – (“breaking good/bad news, communication skills and advice in what to look for and judge”)
- what constitutes a ‘good’ POT versus ‘bad’ POT,
- opportunity to network or reflect or discuss with other colleagues their experiences of POT – share good practices.

Some respondents suggested some training is required if feedback is to be effective. The need for high quality feedback is also underlined by Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004).

“...feedback is a skilled process which people can be helped with.”

“there is a need to develop peer assessors as facilitators of reflective practice.”

16. Conclusions

Although the aims of the POT scheme at the University of Huddersfield are to enhance practice, encourage open discussion of teaching and learning issues and share best practice, the way the process is carried out or designed/implemented at School level, as evidenced by the survey data, does not seem to be fulfilling all of these aims. Although the majority of staff find engaging in POT useful in a variety of ways (with a significant minority regarding POT as a tick box exercise) the survey findings have highlighted that good practice identified in the POT process is not disseminated (or staff do not consider this to be happening). Inevitably, the gains that staff get from the process will depend on what they put in. However, it is worth considering how the structure or framework of the process can be optimised to promote the highest level of engagement.

It is clear that staff feel there is a lack of transparency relating to how the outcomes and implementation of POT is linked to quality assurance and to annual appraisal. Throughout there are staff comments about confusion concerning the aims and objectives of the POT process, namely conflicting views about to what extent it is a management tool or a scheme to support professional development by encouraging reflection on practice and learning from colleagues.

There also seems to be varying level of support/organisation across Schools so that in some departments staff have to organise themselves, which is probably not the best way to ensure good practice is disseminated and that POT is fully engaged with.

17. Thoughts and recommendations for a future cross-school scheme

The purpose of any additional POT scheme must be transparent and communicated better. From the survey responses it seems that it might limit the uptake/interest in a cross-school scheme if it is **in addition to** School POT.

We would suggest that a future cross-school scheme would need to have buy in from staff and this might be achieved better if the scheme was not branded as peer observation but had a name that focused on learning from colleagues. We would hope to develop a scheme that incorporated all aspect of teaching and learning practice and the term “observation” does bring with it connotations of passive evaluation and classroom practice. In perhaps the same way as the health and social care professions have developed the concept of inter-professional learning (IPL).

Such a scheme would not include random pairings but deliberate pairings where a member of staff could point to an area they wanted to learn more about and they would then be connected with relevant colleagues. This would also avoid the connotation of colleagues spot checking each others’ teaching.

Taking a cue from one respondent’s comment: *“I always found I learned about my own teaching observing someone else’s”*, we would suggest that the new scheme focuses on the person “observing”. To avoid the “evaluation” element, you could establish a POT process where it is the observer, who has to reflect on how the teaching observed relates to their own practice and draw up an action plan if necessary. This means there is no “constructive” feedback imposed on the relationship and the person observed should feel less pressure “to perform” and the observer less pressure to “evaluate”. Good practice could still be identified in this model.

This is a model that has been suggested by Jill Cosh as a truly developmental model:

“We are observing in order to reflect upon our own teaching and for active self-development, rather than to make judgements upon others...This is active self-development: an intra-personal process, which encourages awareness, experiment, and the sharing and dissemination of good practice” (Cosh 1998:173).

We would also suggest that as part of a new cross-school scheme a virtual platform is set up where outcomes and the expertise of colleagues could be publicised. Given that most staff did not seem to consider training a viable or desirable option the scheme would not include training but could include setting up forums to facilitate the networking, reflection and discussion of approaches to teaching and learning.

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Appendix 1:

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR THE PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

POT PRINCIPLES

Schools should adopt a model of peer observation which:

1. Recognises the diversity of teaching and learning interactions in the University, including on-line engagement and assessment and feedback.
2. encourages the open discussion of teaching issues.
3. promotes the identification and sharing of good practice in teaching and learning.
4. has the potential to enhance the practice of both the observer and the person observed.
5. produces qualitative outputs in terms of the enhancement of teaching quality.
6. promotes, where practicable, the widening participation agenda within the school.
7. promotes, where practicable, the delivery of an inclusive curriculum.

POT GUIDELINES

Processes of peer observation in Schools should require:

1. all full-time academic teaching staff and librarians who are involved in teaching students to engage in PoT annually.
2. all full-time academic teaching staff and librarians involved in PoT normally to be observed and to observe another person teaching on at least one occasion in the course of the academic year.
3. all hourly paid and research staff involved in forty or more hours teaching per year to be observed annually.
4. each observed session normally to involve one observer and one person being observed. However, where appropriate, staff should have the option of opening sessions up to a wider circle of observers.
5. the avoidance of reciprocal observer-observed relationships.
6. each observed session normally to be preceded by a pre-meeting to discuss aims and objectives.
7. each observed session normally to be followed by a debriefing meeting.
8. an agreed summary to be produced, contributed to and signed by both the observer and the observed, which highlights both good practice and issues to be addressed.
9. a record of peer observation of teaching sessions to be kept centrally within the school or department.
10. peer observation summaries (or agreed sections thereof) to be shared with Heads of Department (or their nominee) who will use the summaries to inform the staff development priorities for the School and Department.
11. records of peer observation of teaching to be considered in appraisal for the purpose of development and the identification of support needs.

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