

Establishing a University Apprenticeship Teaching and Learning Observation Group to enhance the quality of higher technical education

4-minute read



Key contact

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Overview

In this case study, Amy Dymond-Hobbs reflects on the first year of operation of Portsmouth's Apprenticeship Teaching and Learning Observation Group (ATLOG). This new group, alongside Amy's own role, is part of a series of investments in Academic Registry at Portsmouth to ensure that the University is ready and able to support and ensure the quality of their growing higher technical education offer.

Responsive quality management in a changing landscape

The University of Portsmouth, like many in the sector, has invested both time and resource into its growing apprenticeship provision over the last two years. In parallel, the University has additionally invested in the support for this new provision - including the introduction of my new role as Quality Manager for Apprenticeships and Work Based Learning. My role sits centrally within the Academic Registry Team and has oversight and responsibility for the quality assurance and improvement of our higher technical education across the University. But one person cannot take all of this change on single-handedly. The University has recognised the growing need to develop and formalise policies and procedures in this area, supporting its strategic vision to deliver high quality apprenticeship programmes. As such, we have adapted our governance processes and set up an Apprenticeship Quality Management Board (AQMB) chaired by our Academic Registrar. This group

has fully supported the introduction of new or adapted quality assurance policies for teaching and learning in this area of work. This includes work to adapt the existing Continuous Enhancement Framework for our provision, the introduction of a targeted Apprenticeship Quality Cycle and the development of specific processes conducted by the Apprenticeship Teaching and Learning Observation Group (ATLOG) team, which forms the focus of this case study.

ATLOG expertise comes from its members: quality experts, academic development specialists and expert members of the academic community. The group works collaboratively to fully immerse themselves in the teaching and learning environment, share good practice and offer professional development opportunities. Taking this cross-University approach has supported the work of this new group and academic teams have responded well to the variety of experts involved.

A learning organisation

Established in October 2022 ATLOG embarked on its first learning walks. The group conducted two learning walks: one in October 2022 and February 2023. Initial observations were completed to support programme alignment to the University's Apprenticeship Quality. However, during the observations, colleagues additionally made holistic assessments on the learning environment and assessment practice, as well as identifying priority enhancement themes (agreed at ATLOG standardisation meetings). These themes were then translated into focused development sessions to support the standardisation of provision, understanding of Ofsted requirements and the sharing of good practice. A variety of development opportunities have been created as a result of ATLOG's observation-informed themes. As needed, we have run development workshops, away days, one-to-one sessions, apprenticeship mini-fests and course self-assessment sessions.

As a University, we pride ourselves on our ability to self-assess and recognise areas for development. Through conducting a robust self-assessment into the quality of education within apprenticeship programmes, we were able to identify inconsistencies of practice. The ATLOG team and its processes, provide an evidence base for robust assessment and identification of good practice and areas for improvement and this feeds into action plans at Faculty and University level. Within a short period, ATLOG has become an important part of institutional culture of continuous improvement within teaching, learning and assessment, with a clear ambition to create consistency of practice, support professional development, recognise good practice and enhance the learner experience.

New milestones on our learning walks

We are not complacent, and we learn as we go. Across the academic year the ATLOG team have enhanced their observation technique from a 10-minute non-feedback learning walk, to incorporate a 20-minute, face-to-face feedback approach. We feel this has allowed the academic community to become comfortable with the process of observations and recognise the value they bring to improve and share practice. And we have to be honest. When ATLOG was initiated, concerns were expressed that the academic community would see them as an unwelcome challenge to their practice and expertise. However, our experience has shown quite the opposite. The vast majority of teaching colleagues have welcomed the opportunity to be observed and have been very positive when receiving feedback and attending development sessions. It probably comes as no real surprise that the main challenge we encountered was aligning the diaries of individuals and shifting timetabled rooms and sessions. But thanks to some deft diary support, this has had limited impact overall.

As ATLOG and its work continue to develop and grow, we aim to develop longer, feedback-focused observations. We also intend to incorporate 'deep dives', to include a review of a sample of learners' work and their feedback, to help us with our understanding of the learner journey.

I would encourage anyone who might be considering developing an approach like this is to do it in stages, ensure leaders are able to support the process by delivering positive messages, and plan to have key members of the academic community on hand during observations and development sessions to support the development of positive dialogues between the ATLOG team and academics in the classroom.