

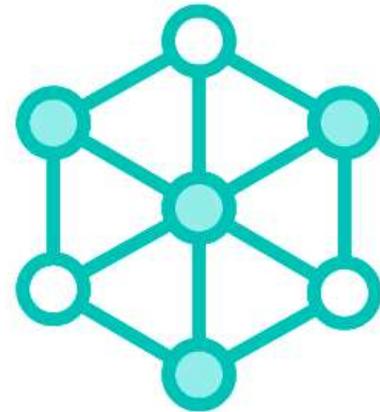
Peer Learning Communities: Guidance

Staff Development

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Peer learning communities, otherwise known as communities of practice or peer learning networks, are groups of people within an organisation who have a common interest in a particular area of knowledge. These communities can empower staff to share invaluable knowledge and insights, learn new skills from each other and grow their personal networks. They can be incredibly powerful learning forums, especially in an organisation as large and diverse as ours.



// Before //

Before setting up a new peer learning community, have a think about the following questions to help define the community and its purpose:

Why?

- Why do you need a peer learning community?
- Is there a need / appetite?
- Does one exist already? Have you searched on Yammer and SharePoint to check for similar Groups?
- What are you hoping to achieve / what are the objectives or development needs? Some examples might be:
 - to improve consistency in processes between different teams across the organisation.
 - to bring together members of staff in similar roles that work in different locations across the University.
 - to share ideas and best practice on a specific area or type of work, e.g. Data analysis.
 - to create a "safe" environment to share thoughts and ideas.

Who?

- Who will you invite to join the Community?
- Are there specific criteria that will define the membership? For example, this could be based on job role, a defined area of work, a physical work location, or a shared interest/specialism.

When and where?

- How often will you meet? Think about the duration, frequency and location, and whether this is face-to-face or in an online context.
- What format will the meetings or activities take? What is your purpose for a specific activity or event, and how might that activity help you to achieve that purpose? Being clear on your purpose will also help you to manage the expectations of the community.
- See our 'PLC activity templates' resource for examples of different formats and how they work.

Resources required?

- What resources might you need to ensure your peer learning community will work? Consider:
 - A place to meet – whether physical or virtual
 - Budget for catering, expenses for visiting speakers
 - Administrative support – to help with room booking, communications, ordering catering, maintaining the group membership etc.
 - Volunteers from across faculties to help facilitate and steer the group

// Getting started //

Once you have decided on the purpose and scope of the Community, follow these tips / ideas for getting set up:

Platform

- You might want to choose a platform to host your Community. We recommend setting up an **Office 365 Group**, which will give you access to a shared calendar, notebook, document library, and more. For information on how to set up a new Office 365 Group, see the [Office 365 Support pages](#).
- If you don't think you will need all of the tools associated with an Office 365 Group, a [Yammer Group](#) may be a good alternative.

Define roles

- It can help to have a number of people in defined roles, to make sure the Community stays up to date and on track, for example:
 - Chair/group of co-chairs – The chair(s) should keep the Community on course and ensure that it's effective in its aims. The chair will see to it that network meetings flow smoothly, involving all members and not permitting one or two people to dominate discussions.
 - Administrator/secretary – This person(s) should support the Chair in the smooth running of the Community. They may be responsible for organising regular meeting dates for the group and keeping a record of actions or achievements, as well as overseeing the membership of the Community, and communicating messages/updates.
 - Facilitator – Any activities or events you run should be well facilitated, to ensure that all members remain engaged and can participate effectively, and that the learning outcomes can be achieved. The facilitator could be the chair, or someone invited specifically to facilitate. The [Staff Development team](#) can help you to understand how best to facilitate your events.
 - Sponsor – A sponsor is an individual (often a senior manager or leader) with overall accountability for the peer learning community and its outcomes. A sponsor may be able to represent the Community at a senior level, and should be an enthusiastic advocate of the work and the change it brings about.
 - Steering group – If the network is very large, consider having a smaller group of members to agree the agenda and organise meet-ups and events for the larger group.
- Taking on one of these roles can be an excellent development opportunity for your members, giving them exposure to new positions of responsibility, and enabling them to expand their skillset, for example in chairing meetings, managing events and planning communications strategies.
- If you don't want the administration and maintenance of the Community to fall to just one or two staff members, consider having a 'rotating chair' – a group of people taking turns to organise events/group meetings and to take on the administration.

Identify members

- Identify and invite staff to join the Community.
- You can let people know about the network using some of the university comms channels – via Yammer, the all-staff bulletin, or local bulletins. Speak to Staff Development if you would like us to promote your Community through our monthly Professional Services Staff Development bulletin. We can also add your Community to our [Peer learning communities](#) web page.
- To identify staff based on a type of role, try using the [contact directory](#) on the Staff Intranet and search for a job title, e.g. 'executive assistant'.

Launch event

- Organising an event to launch your peer learning community can be a good way to get members together and generate some initial ideas and momentum.
- Think about an agenda – you might want to include some icebreakers or networking exercises; input from internal or external speakers; plus some time for discussion and generating ideas/aims for the network.
- Consider using the launch event to agree on a ‘mission statement’ – a short statement outlining the purpose and aims of the Community.
- Depending on the event, it is generally good practice to establish some ground rules, to set expectations and facilitate a productive and supportive environment for learning to flourish. For example, these ground rules could focus on confidentiality, respecting others’ opinions, enabling all members to participate, and managing time appropriately.

Scheduling

- Schedule ongoing meetings for your Community. These can take a variety of formats- see our handy table below for examples of different formats and how they work.
- We recommend scheduling your meetings at least 3-6 months ahead, so that members can commit to attending, and the network maintains momentum.
- If you have limited time/resource or want a less formal arrangement, then consider having a recurring fixture - for example, choose a time and place for members of the Community to drop in every month.

// Maintaining momentum //

After the initial excitement of the launch, it is important to keep the momentum going and maintain focus for the peer learning community. Follow these steps to ensure the community stays relevant and useful:

Membership

- Maintain the membership of the network, ensuring that new potential members are identified and invited, and any members that have left the organisation or no longer have an interest in the community have been removed from the Group/communications list.
 - Consider advertising the community every few months or so, to ensure any new staff are made aware of it.

- If you have a Chair, secretary and/or steering group for the community, consider giving others a chance to step into these roles – to give existing role-holders a well-deserved break, and to bring new perspectives and energy to the Community.

Reviewing and recording progress

- Reviewing progress regularly helps to keep your members engaged, and enables you to address any gaps or challenges. This review could take place after each event, for example, to reflect on learning and engagement and to check whether your aims for the event have been achieved.
- Recording the actions and achievements of the Community will help your members to recognise the value and purpose of the network.
 - Check progress regularly to make sure you are working towards the aims agreed at the launch event, or when you started the Community.
 - If those aims have been achieved – are there new goals for the network?

Evaluation

- It is good practice to evaluate your peer learning community regularly, to check whether it is still useful and fit for purpose. We recommend doing this every year, but you may want to do it more or less often, depending on the scope and purpose of your community. Think about the following when carrying out your evaluation:
 - Is the community still helpful and relevant?
 - Is it achieving the agreed aims?
 - Has the community evolved into something different – if so, is it worth reviewing the aims and mission statement to ensure they still reflect the purpose of the group?

For further support or advice about your peer learning community, contact the Staff Development Team on sd-course@bristol.ac.uk.