

Practical Guidance for Probation Reviewers



Contents

Section	Page Number
Contents	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Performance Criteria	4
3. Setting expectations	6
4. Setting objectives the SMART way	7
5. Formal Assessments	9
6. Identifying concerns	10
7. Remedial action	12
8. Meeting to discuss performance concerns	13
9. Early completion of probation	15
10. Appointment Support	15

This document is intended to provide probation reviewers with practical assistance in assessing performance and supporting probationers during probation. It is intended as guidance only, to support the effective implementation of the University's probationary arrangements. It is not contractual and will be reviewed by the HR Division in the light of any changes in legislation or University needs.

The probationary period plays a significant part in ensuring that a probationer settles into University life and can reach their full potential in their role. Its purpose is to ensure that they have the opportunity to understand their role's requirements and demonstrate their suitability within a reasonable timescale. Confirmation that probation has been passed is an important milestone.

The probationary process is managed by the probation reviewer. This is the Head of Institution, although, depending on the size of the department or faculty and the nature of the probationer's job role, the Head of Institution may delegate these duties to another member of staff, for instance the probationer's line manager, supervisor or Principal Investigator. However, in these instances, the Head of Institution will retain overall responsibility for the probationary process and should conduct the final assessment of performance at the end.

The probation reviewer is responsible for ensuring that the probationer receives induction and any other relevant training and support during the probationary period. They are also responsible for monitoring and assessing the performance of the probationer throughout.

The probationer is expected to engage fully in the probationary process, ensuring that they complete induction in a timely manner and undertake training where required.

Performance during probation will be assessed against the criteria appropriate for the role. The probation reviewer should be satisfied that the probationer has been performing at a level appropriate in the Cambridge context.

Professional Services and Research Staff

Probationers will be assessed with reference to:

- the role profile
- their demonstration of the skills and knowledge required for the role;
- the performance of their duties to an acceptable standard (with reference to the quality of their work and the volume of their outputs);
- their ability to work with others, including acting as a positive role model, adhering to the University's expected standards of conduct and promoting the University's values of mutual respect and a sense of belonging for all within the University community;
- attendance and timekeeping; and
- their general contribution to projects (if relevant to their role).

Academic Staff - Academic Career Pathways scheme (research and teaching)

Cambridge academics are required to meet the highest international standards of excellence for confirmation of appointment at the end of probation. Therefore, there must be strong evidence of consistent and sustained satisfactory performance of duties and adherence to the University's expected standards of conduct.

Academic staff are assessed against the following criteria:

- research;
- teaching and/or researcher development (including post-doctoral researchers where relevant); and
- service to the University and to the academic community.

Service includes acting as a positive role model and promoting the University's values of mutual respect and a sense of belonging for all within the University community¹. Where relevant College teaching should also be taken into account.

Clinical academics are also assessed in respect of their clinical activity at the relevant NHS Trust/Body.

¹ For the avoidance of doubt, this statement is intended to clarify that staff should conduct their dealings with others in a courteous and respectful way.

There must be no doubt that an academic probationer has been performing according to all the relevant criteria and meets the standards of excellence in their performance and contribution within the Cambridge context.

To ensure transparency, all departments/faculties are expected to adopt and publish a protocol setting out what is expected of probationers under each of the performance criteria, to be approved by School Councils. As there may be differences in the way probation criteria is set across the various departments and faculties, each department or faculty will determine appropriate practice in their respective area, taking into account the relevant normative standards for their subject discipline.

Academic Staff - Academic Career Pathways scheme (teaching and scholarship)

The Academic Career Pathways scheme (teaching and scholarship) has been designed for academic staff whose primary responsibilities are the delivery of teaching. It applies in some but not all institutions at the University.

The performance of academics on this scheme will be assessed under the headings of teaching and scholarship and service to the University and to the academic community and, in the case of clinical academics, clinical activity in their NHS Trust/Body role. Further guidance can be found at [Scheme A](#) and [Scheme B](#).

With a view to ensuring a successful probationary period, the probation reviewer should take care at the outset to ensure that relevant support is in place and that expectations around performance, conduct and attendance are clear to the probationer. As such, the probation reviewer should draw attention to the following at the start:

- the applicable University probationary arrangements;
- key duties of the role;
- goals to be achieved with specified deadlines;
- particular areas of work to be given priority;
- the expectation to promote the University's values of mutual respect;
- standards expected around time-keeping, attendance, communication, relationship building, strategic focus, people development, innovation and change and negotiating and influencing, as relevant to the role;
- any areas where particular care or sensitivity is needed.

The probation reviewer should take care to:

- ensure that the probationer has sufficient information and sources of immediate help and support to take forward the agreed tasks;
- be available to give informal advice on an on-going basis;
- assess and agree training and development needs based on the requirements of the job;
- ensure that a mentor is allocated where appropriate;
- arrange for regular informal progress reviews and formal assessments;
- provide feedback to the probationer on whether they are meeting the employer's expectations and discuss any issues around performance with the probationer as they arise;
- keep a written record of feedback given and any steps required of the probationer going forward, using the templates referred to under the University's probationary policy and procedures, where appropriate.

Special Arrangements

Where the probationer has indicated that they are disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010 ("the Act"), the probation reviewer should take care to ensure that adequate support and equipment is available to the probationer as required under the terms of the Act.

The Act requires employers to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace and working arrangements so that a person with a disability is not at a substantial disadvantage when compared to a non-disabled person. Probation reviewers should refer to the University's policies regarding disability and employment for further guidance and information in these circumstances.

4.

Setting objectives the SMART way

It is important that the probation reviewer clarifies the probationer's objectives at the outset, in light of the key duties of the role. These objectives should be revisited during the probationary period.

The setting of **SMART** objectives provides a useful focus for the probationer and probation reviewer and this method can be applied to any role, whether academic, researcher or in the University's professional services.

SMART stands for **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-bound. **SMART** objectives have several benefits as they:

- avoid misinterpretation and confusion by clearly setting out expectations, timings and the importance of the task;
- facilitate precise feedback and evaluation; and
- motivate the individual by providing a focus for their work.

<div>S</div> SPECIFIC The objective is focussed, detailed and well-defined.	<div>M</div> MEASURABLE It is possible to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	<div>A</div> ACHIEVABLE The objective is stretching but realistic.	<div>R</div> RELEVANT The objective is relevant to the individual's role and the priorities of the team and institution.	<div>T</div> TIME-BOUND The objective is subject to achievable and realistic timescales.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it clear what needs to happen and by when? • Will the objective lead to the desired outcome? • Is it clear who should be involved or consulted? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will success be measured? • Will this be through success rates, the delivery of work by certain deadlines or otherwise? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it possible for the individual to achieve the objective within the proposed timeframe and given the resources available? • Are there any budgetary or other limitations or constraints? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the current priorities for the individual's team and/or institution? • Have team/institution priorities changed since the objective was set? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the deadline achievable and realistic given the potential barriers and constraints? • Can the task be split into manageable pieces to enable the probationer to work towards mini-deadlines along the way?

The probation reviewer is advised to limit the objectives to a reasonable number. It is also important to review and modify objectives at formal assessments to ensure that they are still relevant and attainable.

When assisting a probationer in working towards their objectives, a good tip is to divide long and difficult assignments into smaller parts, setting mini-deadlines along the way. It can greatly reduce the pressure on the probationer if they pace themselves and work in sections, rather than attempt to complete a long assignment in one go.

SMART objectives can be applied to any staff member. For instance, a probation reviewer can assist an academic probationer to great effect in the planning of their research: helping them to devise a roadmap towards the publication of books, articles and peer-reviewed journals, whilst juggling the competing demands of teaching, marking and assessment. This might mean consciously planning clear time to be research productive throughout the year.

It is important that formal assessments take place at appropriate intervals as set out in the University's probationary arrangements. This is the case even where progress is going well, in order to provide the probationer with the opportunity to raise any concerns and request further support or training. The tone of the formal assessments should be constructive, giving positive feedback on achievements to date and guidance on how to make improvements or develop aspects of the role.

The probation reviewer should review work completed since the last formal assessment, addressing competence in particular duties and capability to perform at a level that meets the operational requirements of the department. The probationer in turn can comment on progress to date and specify any areas in which further training or support is needed. The probation reviewer should set objectives for the next review period and agree any training and development needs.

Each formal assessment should be documented on the Formal Probation Assessment Form, with copies signed and retained by both sides. Where performance and progress are satisfactory, the formal assessment may be less detailed. However it is important to be aware that the documentation will form part of any decision to confirm or terminate an appointment or to extend the probationary period. It should therefore contain sufficient detail around the progress of the probationer, their objectives and the support in place for them.

If, at any stage, a third party contributes formally to the formal assessment, this should be recorded and signed accordingly.

As the formal probation assessments for academic staff take place on an annual basis only, the probation reviewer is advised to meet with the probationer on an informal basis at regular intervals throughout the year, to provide advice, guide and monitor. In this way they can provide support and be sure that the probationer is meeting milestones along the way, for instance being on track to submit the expected level of quality publications within the relevant period.

6.

Identifying Concerns

Sometimes, despite support and guidance, concerns can arise around performance. The table below gives examples which, if demonstrated over a period of time, may indicate that the probationer requires further support.

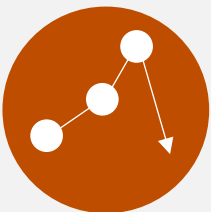
This list is not exhaustive and intended only as a guidance tool to signpost issues during an individual's probation.

Quality of work is below the expected standard



- More supervision is required than expected
- Frequent correction of work or completion by others
- Reluctance to allocate work to the probationer because they cannot be relied upon
- Judgement, problem solving, decision-making, initiative, motivation or communication skills are below the standard expected
- Performance deteriorates rapidly upon the allocation of a new task

Low Productivity



- Outputs create bottlenecks for others
- Frequently missed deadlines
- Avoidance of certain tasks

Issues around behaviour



- Avoiding responsibility when problems arise
- Seeking to blame others
- Behaviour causes conflict or disruption within the team
- Unable to work collaboratively or support team members

Should concerns around performance arise, the probation reviewer should consider the following **(this list is not exhaustive and is intended only as a guidance tool)**:



Feedback

- Has the probationer received regular and adequate informal feedback on their performance?
- Have regular formal assessments been held with the probationer in accordance with the probationary arrangements and have these been documented?
- What action has been taken in the past when similar problems have arisen?



Probationer

- Are there personal or mitigating circumstances affecting the probationer?
- How long has the probationer been with the University and in their current role?



The Role

- Have the duties and expectations in the role been clearly set out?
- To what extent does the probationer have sufficient control to perform effectively (e.g. time, authority, tools, resources, information and procedures)?
- Can the shortfall in the individual's performance be defined clear for them (e.g. in terms of quantity, quality, time and cost)?



Targets

- Are the standards expected realistic and achievable?
- How serious and frequent is the problem and what are the consequences?
- Has the probationer demonstrated acceptable performance on other tasks at other times?

7.

Remedial action

The table below outlines four common reasons for underperformance and gives suggestions for possible remedial action against each of these based on good practice. **These suggestions are intended as guidance only.**

Objectives are unclear

- Performance on other tasks is acceptable
- Deterioration of performance coincides with a new task
- Frequency with which the probationer checks with their supervisor is relatively high
- No record of role having been clarified

Clearly set out the responsibilities and expectations in the role. Verify that the probationer understands these.

Objectives are clear but the probationer lacks the skills and ability to achieve them.

- New task
- No record of training or coaching on this task

- Provide appropriate training / coaching.
- Agree training and development activities

Objectives are clear and the probationer possesses the skills and ability to achieve them, but lacks control over significant factors affecting their performance.

- Performance on other tasks is acceptable
- Probationer usually responds well to new tasks
- Probationer is dependent on other people to be able to complete the task effectively
- Task or procedures changed recently

Explore the potential barriers to successful performance and agree actions to tackle them.

Objectives are clear and the probationer possesses the skills and ability to achieve them, but lacks the motivation. This could be because:

They do not understand why it is important

- Performance on other tasks is acceptable
- No record of role having been clarified

Ensure the probationer understands their contribution. Reinforce this message by setting clear goals which link into the wider priorities.

They hold views, values or beliefs that are contrary to those necessary for effective performance

- Behaviour indicates contrary views, values or beliefs

Discuss the consequences of underperformance with the probationer and agree a personal development plan.

They are affected by external factors, for instance, poor health or issues in their home-life

- Past performance was acceptable

The probationer may need support, which might include counselling, support from the University's Occupational Health Service or short-term adjustments to their duties / working hours

8.

Meeting to discuss performance concerns

Concerns around performance should be addressed as soon as they are identified, initially on an informal basis. However, it may be appropriate to hold more regular formal assessments in order to set SMART objectives and monitor progress.

Probation reviewers are advised to seek advice from their relevant School HR Team in these circumstances.

How a probation reviewer should approach a meeting to discuss performance concerns

Probation reviewers may be nervous about conducting what may be a difficult conversation around performance but here are some tips to ensure the meeting is constructive.

Do:

Confirm the purpose of the meeting and points to be covered.

Encourage individuals to give their views on their performance before you express yours. Start with some exploratory open questions (e.g. "How do you feel things have gone this month?"), and follow these with more focussed, but still open, questions (e.g. Why do you think that occurred?).

Ask open questions (e.g. Who, What, Where, When, Why, How...?).

Review the entire period since the last review and remember to provide positive feedback on any areas in which the probationer has performed well.

Discuss specific examples and evidence of where performance has not been satisfactory (e.g. "The project is two months behind schedule and is £20,000 over budget".)

Explore any comments the probationer makes about their own performance, including why they believe it has fallen below the expected standard. It may be appropriate to raise underlying concerns (e.g. "Is there anything in your personal life that may be causing you concern? Would you like to talk to me about it?").

Don't:

Impose your views at the start of the meeting (e.g. "Let me tell you how I think you have done this month").

Use closed questions as a rule (e.g. Did you...? Are you...?), unless you are summarising or confirming what has been agreed (e.g. "So we are agreed that you need to attend a training course on communication skills?").

Focus exclusively on recent events or on things which have gone wrong.

Make general statements about performance (e.g. "You have managed this project badly" or "You always seem to disappear whenever your colleagues need help. The team can't rely on you.")

Make assumptions about the cause of a performance issue (e.g. "Are you still having problems with your boyfriend/girlfriend?")

Do:	Don't:
Focus on what can be done to resolve the issue (e.g. "Is there a problem with you meeting this deadline that I can help you with?")	
Discuss and agree the actions or changes required to improve performance and the period for improvement and any training, development, support or reasonable adjustments required to support the individual to reach the standards expected.	Leave the meeting without an agreed action plan including relevant support and training.
Explain how performance will be reviewed and the possible consequences of failing to make the required improvement.	Leave the meeting without having set clear expectations round expectations and further reviews.
Ensure regular formal assessments are scheduled to review progress.	
Summarise what has been agreed and ask the probationer if there is anything they wish to add before the meeting is closed. Record the meeting using the Probation Assessment Form or by providing a summary to the individual by email (where the meeting was informal)	Fail to summarise the agreed action plan with the probationer meeting using the Probation Assessment Form or by providing a summary to the individual by email (where the meeting was informal)

The probation reviewer is advised to conduct more frequent formal assessments in the case of poor performance, setting clear objectives between reviews.

If there is no improvement within the timescales set, further guidance should be sought from the relevant School HR Team. Solutions may include extending the individual's probation period or terminating the individual's employment if it is clear that there is unlikely to be sufficient improvement, despite the provision of reasonable support. However, it is vital that the probation reviewer seeks advice before taking further action.

Whilst the standard probationary period must be applied from the outset, the University's probationary arrangements allow for early completion of probation in certain circumstances. When considering whether to confirm an individual's appointment early, there are some factors that should be taken into consideration:

- Although an individual may be demonstrating that they are capable of undertaking the role at the required level, it does not mean that they would not continue to benefit from regular formal assessments in order to have structured support and guidance during the early stages of their appointment.
- Probation is a two-way process and an individual may appreciate the opportunity to raise concerns about their role and working environment and any training needs in a 'safe' environment such as a formal assessment.
- Although a role may appear straightforward, individuals work to their own abilities and may benefit from a longer period of support and guidance.

Where an existing member of unestablished staff who has worked for the University for more than one year and who has successfully completed their probationary period in one role is transferring to another, it may be appropriate to follow an Appointment Support process rather than give them a further probationary period.

The Appointment Support process offers a structured approach where that staff member can receive support and feedback on performance and the University can assess their suitability for the post.

Managers can apply the general principles in this guidance around assessing performance and conducting reviews to the Appointment Support process. However, where the staff member does not meet required standard during the Appointment Support period, despite reasonable training and supervisory support being provided, the situation should be managed within the context of the relevant capability policy.