

Lesson Observation UCU Guidelines

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Introduction

Lesson observation has been a feature of the FE world for many years. It has many uses as part of:

- performance management and appraisal systems
- initial teaching training
- the processes of probation and professional formation
- quality assurance
- external inspection and internal self-assessment/evaluation
- capability/competence procedures;

Lesson observations are used as an important part of quality assurance in institutions. Given student experiences in teaching and learning are key issues in institutions, UCU acknowledges that there is an appropriate place for lesson observations within institutions so long as they are conducted with the right safeguards and procedures in place.

The union's concern is to ensure that this is a fair, valid and reliable process that does not focus solely on the lecturer's competence, but takes into account the totality of the learning experience, the environment and the context in which it takes place. The focus should be on resources available, generic skills and competencies, and not just on individual performance.

Lesson observation should be part of creating a culture of reflection and professional development within an institution/service. As such it should be linked to institutional appraisal schemes (not for determining pay) and to the new requirements around CPD.

Recently lesson observations and procedures around them have become an increasingly common flash point in colleges, triggering local negotiations, and in some places industrial disputes. The increasing focus and controversy surrounding the use of observations is due to various developments in the sector, including:

- Changed external inspection processes: external inspections are now more proportionate with lighter-touch inspection for providers judged to be 'excellent' and 'good': more inspection for those providers judged to be inadequate or 'coasting'. The lighter touch inspection regime requires more rigorous provider self-assessment/evaluation;
- New definitions of poor quality include 'coasting' providers being in the scope of possible intervention. 'Coasting' is defined as being satisfactory but not improving.
- OFSTED grading structure with 4 grades instead of 5 as previously;
- Government declarations and policies to remove failing and

poor quality provision. OFSTED inspection grades and Framework for Excellence scores can lead to intervention and loss of funding;

- New powers of intervention where there is failing and poor provision which can lead to competitive tendering for the provision.

All of these developments have led some institutions toward an increasingly draconian implementation of lesson observation regimes.

The issues most frequently raised by UCU branches in relation to lesson observations are:

- the amount of notice given by management for lesson observation
- the frequency of observations,
- who is undertaking observations
- the way feedback is given
- appeals against who the observers are and the results of observations
- the outcomes of observations.

UCU strongly recommends that lesson observation is the subject of negotiation between management and UCU branches, resulting in a formal agreement. We consider that if a system of lesson observation is to operate successfully, it must have credibility and be owned by the academic staff. Mere consultation by management on such a crucial issue is insufficient and will not deliver a regime that has credibility amongst those being observed.

As incorporated bodies, FE colleges are in charge of their own practices including for lesson observations. As with other issues that UCU branches negotiate around locally, the union's ability to achieve a fair and reasonable outcome will depend on how well organised the branch is. Draconian lesson observation regimes affect all teaching staff and are therefore a good issue to use when recruiting and organising new members. When lesson observations become an issue in your institution be sure to make the most of the opportunity to strengthen your branch by letting non-members know what the union is trying to do to improve the observations scheme and asking them to show their support for this by joining the union. Improving the strength of your branch is the single most important thing you can do to strengthen your hand when entering negotiations with management.

Currently there is no national agreement on lesson observations with the Association of Colleges. Any future national agreement in this area would be in the same format as existing national guidelines agreements and as such would need to be implemented through negotiation locally.

This document is designed to provide some guidance for branch officers on the issues that are raised by lesson

observations, what UCU believes lesson observation should be about and some guidelines of the position that UCU branches should take with management in negotiations on lesson observations schemes and procedures.

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What is lesson observation?

Lesson observation is observation by a third party of teaching and learning that takes place in a college, adult or prison education service. Its purpose should be to provide evidence of the quality of teaching and learning across the curriculum, including identification of good practice and weaknesses that need to be addressed and the necessary support to address such weaknesses.

The key principles underpinning the lesson observation scheme are that it should be:

- sufficiently flexible to encompass a range of contexts where lesson observations might be required, without duplication of effort or systems
- rigorous and robust, yet supportive to those being observed.

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The aims of lesson observation

- To observe actual teaching and learning in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning and so enhance the students' learning experience
- Provide evidence for part of the college's/service's formal appraisal scheme and discussions(not linked to pay)
- Provide evidence for probation and professional formation reports where appropriate
- Provide evidence for appropriate formal procedures such as capability and competence
- Provide a system of identifying, sharing, improving and developing good practice
- Provide evidence for the college self assessment reports
- Provide evidence of teaching and learning during an Inspection
- Provide evidence that would encourage staff to reflect on their delivery styles and build on their skills

Not all of these aims will apply to each observation and it should be made clear before any observation occurs, which of the above category the observation falls into and what the results of the observation will be used for. **See 6: Clarity of purpose for observation for more on this.**

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Why lesson observation?

The main purpose of FE is teaching and learning achievement and attainment on the part of students. Teaching and learning principally takes place in the classroom, workshop or laboratory. So it is not unreasonable for there to be some sort of check on the quality of the actual teaching and learning which is occurring.

However UCU would argue that lesson observation can and should be much more. It should be an opportunity for teaching professionals to receive advice and guidance on their strengths and weaknesses, to provide material for professional reflection, and to identify areas for CPD and further training. Lesson observation should be part of the developmental processes of an organisation. It should be objective and transparent to those being observed. It should not be used to stigmatise and single out individuals. It should not be used as part of performance related pay scheme.

If lesson observation is used as part of capability and competence proceedings, then both the lesson observation and the capability procedures must make the links clear and consistent. It is good practice that it is known what grade of lesson observation will result in further action, and what this action may be. There must be proper and reasonable support and assistance to the lecturer concerned with clear time scales set out for improvement, offered to the teacher who is subject of these proceedings.

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Who is involved in lesson observation?

Given that there are two sides to lesson observation, then there will be two groups involved with it: the observed and the observers.

The observed The primary focus of observation will be teachers/lecturers. However there are other groups of staff who may be involved in the actual teaching for all or some of the students. Such staff may include technicians, instructors and demonstrators, learning and learner support workers. The parameters of who is to be observed should be clearly defined in any agreement between college/Service management and the relevant trade unions, and be clear in any actual observation.

The observers UCU is adamant that all those undertaking lesson observation must be qualified teachers themselves. They should all also have undertaken specific training in all aspects of lesson

observation. We would expect such observers to have had had a minimum of three years' teaching experience and hold an appropriate teaching qualification - Cert Ed/PGCE/DTLSS.

It is important that all concerned with lesson observation are seen to be working in a fair, impartial and objective manner. UCU considers that there needs to be some form of appeals procedure should a lecturer feel that they have grounds for objecting to the person designated to observe her/his lesson for example if the two members of staff have been involved in a grievance.

Wherever possible it should be best practice to have observers who know and understand the subject content of the lesson/ session being observed. There may be situations and purposes where the subject matter of the observation is such as to not require a subject specialist. For example a non-subject specialist observer could be used if the student experience, general teaching skills and/or general classroom management were the subject of the observation.

Who observes lessons may vary depending on the purpose of the observation.

Where the purpose of the observation is part of institutional self-assessment, then it is likely that the observers would be drawn from appropriate curriculum areas and leaders.

UCU advises branches to try to negotiate for the creation of panels of observers with clear and transparent policies for their recruitment and training.

Some colleges use peer observation; that is observation by fellow teachers. This is often seen as being more supportive and less threatening. UCU would argue that if peer observation is used, then both the actual observation and any follow-up work must count towards the normal workload of the member of staff undertaking the peer observation.

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Clarity of purpose for lesson observation

The various purposes of observation are distinct and different and should be kept separate. For example on no account should observation for capability ever be part of observation for self-assessment or appraisal. It is UCU policy, and indeed good practice, that lesson observation for self-assessment and for appraisal should be a separate processes. Lesson observation that is part of a teacher training programme should be designated as such (see separate Section 11 below). UCU recognises that some institutions may wish to implement lesson observations that have multiple purposes, often because of resource implications and convenience to those being observed. Where this is being undertaken it needs to be negotiated in advance.

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Timing, frequency and notice of lesson observation

It is essential that the purposes of observation are clear and that the timetable for such observation is agreed with the UCU branch. Staff should not be subjected to continual observation by different parts of the institution with no coordination between them.

Notice There seems to be a growing practice for having lesson observations with no or very little notice given. **UCU is opposed to observations without notice.**

School teachers are subject to statutory lesson observation as part of performance management. Such lesson observations do have periods of notice. Whilst lesson observation in schools is on a different basis than in FE, UCU would argue that similar notice of observation should apply in FE.

The arguments supporting proposals that no notice of observation should be given, are based on the proposition that this is more 'real', and that if notice were given, it would allow the teacher to make special arrangements and somehow 'prepare' for the observation. UCU rejects these arguments. We would maintain that any lesson observation turns the situation into an artificial one and so teachers need to be able to advise their students of this. We would also contend that no amount of preparation should be able to disguise or hide poor and inadequate teaching from a trained observer.

UCU recommends that branches negotiate a schedule of observations with management. But there should be at least one weeks notice, which should be 5 working days.

Frequency of observations Under normal circumstances UCU would recommend an annual observation for each teacher. There should be no more than three observations per teaching year. It may be that there are particular situations where initiatives such as the delivery of a new curriculum area, may require more frequent observations. In these circumstances the more frequent observations should be negotiated and agreed and be for a set period and set purpose. For example if it is a new curriculum area then you may want to agree that the results of such observations may only be used to appraise the curriculum content and teaching materials rather than other aspects of the teaching methodology relating to the individual being observed. Such circumstances should be identified in any agreement on lesson observation.

Notice of individual observations for example for probation, appraisal, should normally be made direct to the individual by their line manager.

If grading is used this is a grading for the lesson not the teacher giving the lesson. If a lesson has been graded as unsatisfactory, then more observations may be required. The number and timing of these additional observations should be specified in any agreement. It will be essential in these circumstances that support and coaching are offered. Any agreement should also specify the number of unsatisfactory observation grades that would lead to capability and competence proceedings to be triggered.

Lessons to be observed should normally be representative of the lecturer's timetable. There can be exceptions such as when a new curriculum area is being introduced, or when a teacher requests support in a particular subject or curriculum area.

Observations should not normally take place if it is the teacher's first day back from a period of sickness; if the teacher is acting as a substitute; if there has been a substantial interruption such as a fire evacuation or power failure.

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The lesson observation

It is essential that the purpose of the observation be made absolutely clear to the teacher being observed. Lesson observation should neither be a burden for the teacher concerned, nor should it be an opportunity to 'police' a teacher's performance. When observations are part of a capability/competence procedure, the observed must be notified of this.

Staff to be observed should be fully briefed on the processes involved in lesson observation. The observation should identify main strengths and weaknesses of the teaching in the lesson being observed. Student perceptions of teaching and learning may be taken into account as part of the whole process. If this is undertaken, it should be with a representative sample of students to test. It may cover such issues as students understanding of what they are doing, how this fits with previous work, can the students work independently, are the brighter students sufficiently challenged, are those with learning difficulties/disabilities being given sufficient and adequate support, are students aware of equal opportunities and health and safety issues. Known "problem" classes or groups of students that are often subject to an institutions student behaviour management procedure should be avoided for sessions to be used in observations. Where this is not possible the difficulty of the student cohort must be taken into account.

UCU would recommend that the duration of observations should be negotiated as part of the procedures and processes for observation. However it should not be in excess of three hours

and be no longer than is appropriate for positive and constructive purposes. It should be an opportunity for a teacher to demonstrate their teaching skills and receive constructive feedback.

Normally observations should not be longer than is required to make valid judgements. The observer should arrive shortly before the start of the lesson. If the observer intends to leave before the end of the particular lesson, this should be agreed beforehand, and where possible timed to coincide with any scheduled breaks in the lesson's activities.

A lesson plan, scheme of work, individual learning plans, register and schedule of assessment should normally be available to the observer, and be given at the start of the session together with any handouts to be used in the session. Other aspects of lesson practice that may be observed could include evidence of consistent and effective session planning to meet students' learning needs; evidence of consistent and effective use of a range of appropriate strategies for teaching and learning environment management; evidence of consistent and effective monitoring of student progress and provision of clear and constructive feedback to students.

Observers will not actively participate in the lesson. If the observer wishes to have discussions with groups or individual students, this should be discussed and agreed with the teacher being observed. It should take place either at the end of the lesson or at an appropriate stage during the lesson. During the lesson or lessons, the observer should respond positively to any reasonable request from the teacher being observed. The observer should act in an unobtrusive, sensitive and professional manner.

It is recommended that notes on observations should be made on standard forms which have been agreed beforehand as part of setting up any scheme. The paperwork and bureaucracy accompanying any observation scheme must be as user-friendly as possible. It should only record the essential information. However this should cover the main points summarising the relevant details of context and environment of the lesson being observed. It should also make reference to available resources and their adequacy. One of the items to be negotiated as part of any scheme must be the shelf-life of any data. There should be space on the observation form for the lecturer being observed to make comments.

Criteria by which lessons will be observed and judgments made should be open and transparent. These should have been agreed as part of setting up any scheme.

Throughout the process of lesson observation, all participants are expected to behave according to professional standards in an atmosphere of mutual respect. There will need to be a degree of confidentiality surrounding the detail and judgements of

observations. This will vary with the purpose, but in all procedures there must be some guarantee of availability of information on a need-to-know basis. For observation for the purposes of self-assessment, the aim should be to produce summary documentation for the purpose of making an overall judgement in relation to a particular programme or curriculum area. From this it should not be possible to identify an individual teacher.

Staff should have the right to appeal if they feel the process of observation has not been carried out according to the agreed procedures. There must be an agreed procedure where the judgement arising from observation can be challenged by the person being observed.

Such procedures should specify time limits and include at some point, an appeal to someone outside the management of the observation process. If the lecturer being observed believes that the observation feedback has been inaccurate or unfair, or if the lesson being observed is not an accurate representation of their teaching, then this should be recorded on the observation form.

If this is the reason why agreement cannot be reached about the observation, then the procedural agreement on observations should allow for a further observation to be requested. It may be that existing grievance procedures can be used where there is an alleged breach of procedure or professional behaviour by management or the observer.

A conflict over judgements should be resolved by a second opinion to a mutually agreed third party as identified in any Observation Agreement.

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What is a satisfactory or acceptable grade?

Again it must be emphasised that if gradings are used then it is the lesson that is observed not the lecturer/teacher. A number of colleges are using the OFSTED 4 point grade scale for observations and deciding that a 'satisfactory' grade is unacceptable. UCU considers that a satisfactory grade should not lead to re-observation, and then to capability proceedings. We believe that the 4 point OFSTED scale does not allow sufficient differentiation of judgements between 'satisfactory' and 'satisfactory but not improving'.

If a teacher is judged to be below acceptable quality, then reasons for this should be given and the rationale for such a judgement be clear and transparent. A teacher in this position should be offered the required support and training to improve their teaching.

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Feedback from observations

It is essential that all observed staff be offered feedback following an observation. Such feedback should only be based only on the lesson observed. Observed staff should have the opportunity to comment on the observation and the feedback.

Feedback should take place as soon after the observed lesson as is practicable. Good practice suggests that immediate brief oral feedback should be given immediately after an observation.

Subsequently there should be an agreed time for more detailed feedback. There should be a written account of the feedback. This should summarise the purpose of the observation, the main points of the teaching and learning observed and any agreed subsequent actions that might follow the observation.

All feedback should take place in private unless the observed is subject to capability/competence procedures and requests their trade union representative to be present for the feedback..

Any notes of the observation should be given to the teacher who has been observed, and to other relevant and appropriate staff such as appropriate line managers and curriculum leaders. It should be clear who will receive notes from an observation. There should be set time within which feedback would normally take place, and for the production of any notes arising from the observation.

All comments on the lesson being observed must be supported by evidence. Any disagreement should be noted in writing by the teacher observed on the observation form.

Feedback should wherever possible identify the positive points arising from the lesson and constructive advice on any areas for improvement. Discussion of the professional needs of each teacher should be built into any feedback and used to identify opportunities for support and continuing professional development.

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Outcomes of lesson observation

These will depend on the purpose of the observation. For example observation for the purpose of an appraisal meeting, may have as an outcome an individual action plan with details of CPD opportunities to be offered/followed.

12 Peer observation

Some colleges have established peer observation. This involves a teacher observing the practice of another teacher, and each learning from the other. It is a practical way of teachers supporting each other's practice and knowledge about teaching and learning, and is usually seen as being less judgmental and managerial, and more palatable to staff.

Good practice on peer observation suggests it is advisable to establish a panel of such observers and give them training. Teachers could then choose their observers from this panel. This should be on a voluntary basis. Where peer observations are used, then it should be classed as teaching and be part of the normal workload of the observer.

13 Training for lesson observation

Training is essential for the credibility and ownership of any scheme by staff that will be observed. Training will also ensure consistency of approach and judgment in evaluation and recording observations across an institution, and must encompass those being observed as well as those undertaking observation.

Training should be based on explicit and written criteria for what is to be observed. There may need to be specific aspects of the training appropriate to the stated purpose of the observation. Training should cover all levels of experience including classroom teaching, workshops, practical work and resource-based learning. Some institutions have produced a pack from their training sessions for observation. This is then made available to all staff who may be observed. UCU considers this to be good practice.

Consideration should be given to additional training where circumstances of teaching and learning may be different and/or difficult. For example observation of teaching and learning with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or teaching in community settings may need more or different training.

Equality issues should be addressed through training. This should encompass issues from the perspectives of both staff and students.

14 Resources

The implementation of any lesson observation scheme within an institution has cost implications. Adequate resources must be identified and be available to undertake lesson observation. For those undertaking lesson observations such as advanced practitioners, it must be considered part of their timetable which is counted toward their overall workloads and appropriate remission from teaching duties provided. For example if a system of lesson observation has a system of peer observers, then the coordination of this will need additional resources. Lesson observation will necessitate increased report writing and meetings as well as actual observation. This must be resourced adequately and appropriate remission from normal duties provided.

15 Equality

Any lesson observation scheme will need to cover the equal opportunity implications of any procedures for observation. Lesson observation will need to be undertaken with sensitivity to issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnic origin and to issues concerning perceived physical and mental ability. This may be essential when the teaching has been designed for a single sex or a particular ethnic group or those in some community settings. Any agreement between the UCU branch and local management should detail lesson observation for part time teachers. These must be proportionate to the amount of hours that are being taught by the part time teacher.

16 Grading of lessons

Branches should give consideration to whether if grades are given for individual sessions, the grade should be available to the person who has been observed, and if so when.

Grading of sessions is acceptable for self-assessment. But this should not be a grading of the individual being observed but the session. This means that grades should be anonymous. Self-assessment gradings should be aggregated up to programme area to a grading profile. This can then be considered by the appropriate team along with other evidence and a list of strengths and weaknesses and an overall grade arrived at. Data concerning

grades for individual sessions should be destroyed after the aggregation process has been completed.

The use of grades would not be acceptable for observations for appraisal purposes. Appraisal should be a part of a developmental process and would have to take into account particular circumstances which would not be relevant to the appraisal process, such as the resources available for a particular session.

17 OFSTED lesson observations

The current OFSTED Handbook on College Inspections makes it clear that:

‘direct observation of lessons will normally occur in every inspection. A smaller number of lessons will be observed, compared to the last inspection cycle, and the number will vary with the level of the inspection. The purposes of lesson observation are to allow inspectors to assess the quality of teaching and learning and to test the college’s view of the quality of teaching as determined by its self-assessment process.

‘Joint lesson observations (JLOs) may be undertaken as part of a whole college evaluation of the accuracy of a college’s internal lesson observation scheme. They will not be undertaken as part of curriculum inspections or monitoring visits. JLOs should only be undertaken with the prior consent of the teachers involved to avoid the possibility that they may be used as part of a competency procedure.

‘Where JLOs are undertaken, the grade awarded by the inspector will not be declared to the teacher; rather the inspector and college manager will seek to discuss the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the lesson, after which the inspector will reflect on the accuracy of the judgements made by the college manager. In these instances, the inspector will not feed back a summary of the lesson to the teacher, however the senior manager involved may well undertake this activity with the inspector acting as observer.’

OFSTED are currently consulting on revisions for the FE and the skills system inspections from September 2009. This may well mean that the current Inspection Handbook for Colleges will also be revised. If there are changes to OFSTED’s approach to lesson observation quoted above, this will be the subject of additional advice to branches.

18 Monitoring and reviewing the scheme

UCU would advise that all lesson observation schemes are reviewed regularly with the UCU branch. This can include surveys of the views of those being observed. This must be built into any system that is going to be used. Any monitoring and evaluation of lesson observation schemes should include union representatives. All monitoring and evaluation must be specific to the observation system to ensure that the system being used is valid for the intended purposes.

19 Observations undertaken as part of initial teacher training (ITT)

A key part of initial teacher training programmes are observations of lessons that the trainee/student is teaching. These should be kept completely separate from other lesson observations.

The purpose of observations undertaken as part of an initial teacher training programme are see how the student/trainee is teaching and to give feedback to improve their teaching. Such observations should be under the direction of the institution and or department/faculty providing the ITT programme. Depending on the programme this may be a higher education institution or a FE college delivering an ITT programme from an awarding body such as City and Guilds. The number of such observations will be part of the programme and known in advance by the institution and the student/trainee. Time should always be available for feedback and comments made in writing. All those undertaking the observation will have been trained and approved by the delivering institution/faculty/department

Observations that are part of initial training will have their frequency requirements laid down by the awarding body. They are not normally graded. This may lead to lecturers having additional observations. These should be clearly identified and known to the student/trainee.

Newly appointed teachers may be required to be observed as part of a probationary period, or as part of a process of professional formation. Again the circumstances under which this may take place should be identified and agreed through negotiations when creating a lesson observation scheme.

If you have any suggested additions or changes to these guidelines arising from experiences in your institution please email your comments to both: Dan Taubman, national policy official (dtaubman@ucu.org.uk); and Andrew Harden, national official FE (aharden@ucu.org.uk)