

Flawed link – Lesson observations and capability procedures

When lesson observations are skilfully and carefully handled they can be a useful and meaningful tool for reflecting and improving professional teaching practice in further education. However, as an assessment of a lecturer's overall professional practice they are severely limited. The automatic link from lesson observations used to measure performance to capability procedures is flawed.

There are two main reasons why an automatic link between lesson observation policies and capability procedures is counterproductive and destructive:

- 1. There are serious limitations as to how representative and accurate lesson observations used as a form of assessment can be of a lecturer's professional practice.**

The limitations of lesson observations include:

- they only provide an episodic snapshot of a lecturer's delivery
- the focus is on a tiny fraction of a lectures work (1/828th of teaching)
- observations are an inherently subjective judgement – they are one person's opinion
- they are stressful and can cause otherwise excellent lecturers to 'fall apart'
- encourages a 'tick box' teaching style where lecturers perform to criteria.

For all of these reasons and more the traditional model of graded lesson observations do not provide a fair or accurate picture of a lecturer's professional practice. They are severely limited in their use as an assessment tool.

- 2. When you combine lesson observations as the only method of assessing overall professional practice with an automatic link to capability the usefulness of observations as a developmental tool is certainly reduced, if not destroyed.**

The automatic link between one or two graded observation at a grade 3 or 4 (or 'poor' observations) and capability procedure exacerbates the limits of lesson observations in additional to the following impacts:

- undermines the developmental purpose of lesson observations
- increases the pressure on that observation beyond proportion
- is seen as a 'stick to beat' lecturer's with

- does not encourage professional development and can leave lecturers feeling demoralised
- they encourage lecturers to 'perform' for the lesson observation
- does not encourage an innovative and collegiate style of teaching and team working
- they are seen as something that are 'done to' lecturers and not for lecturers

Lesson observations are not a valid and reliable tool by which a lecturer's overall professional practice can be fairly and accurately assessed. When you add the high stakes of an automatic link to capability the value of lesson observations as a genuine tool for development is lost.

Lesson observations undertaken in atmosphere of suspicion, of being 'checked up on' and linked to the threat of losing your job will reduce if not destroy any opportunity they can provide a useful tool to support professional development and an innovative and collaborative team approach to teaching and learning. If the real value of lesson observations is to be achieved the automatic link between lesson observations and capability must be broken.