

Lesson Observations

*How they **should** be conducted*



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO NEGOTIATING
LESSON OBSERVATION POLICIES
IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Lesson Observations

*How they **should** be conducted*



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1. Introduction

Why is this guidance needed?

This guide is aimed at every activist whatever their level of experience. It is designed to give you practical information and suggestions to help you in your negotiations. We will introduce key points from the recent and extensive UCU research by Dr Matt O’Leary and look at how members can use this evidence to inform and strengthen their bargaining position on lesson observations.

What does this guide include?

► THE CONTEXT

We set the scene of the current use of lesson observations and the overall bargaining context that branches are currently facing. We also touch on the changing attitude to graded lesson observations in particular, that is starting to appear across the sector.

► AN EVIDENCE-BASED CHALLENGE TO THE CONTEXT

In this section we introduce the main themes from the UCU research into the use of and attitudes towards lesson observations.

► NEXT STEPS – INTRODUCING OUR RESPONSE

We begin to look at the way in which branches can successfully negotiate improved lesson observation policies.

► OUR RESPONSE

Here we go through the recommendations for lesson observation policies and explore how they can play a useful role in the development of professional practice when they are carefully and skilfully used.

► CHECKLIST

There is a list of key points to help you cover all the main areas in your negotiations.

Your regional office is here to support you with any advice, information and campaign materials you need to help your negotiations. If you are negotiating a new lesson observation policy, if the college has imposed graded observations, or if you need support with individual casework relating to lesson observations, call your regional office.



If you are not sure ask! Your regional office are here to help and can provide advice and information.

2. The context

Lesson observations have become a battleground in many colleges. They are often characterised by their links to grading, performance management and capability procedures. They are seen as something that is ‘done to’ lecturers rather than being a developmental, reflective and professional process owned by lecturers. Colleges will often cite Ofsted as a justification for using graded and no-notice observations even though graded lesson observations and no-notice observations are not part of the Ofsted inspection framework. However, lesson observations do not need to be like this.

Following the highly successful launch of the UCU commissioned research on lesson observations by Dr Matt O’Leary* there has been a noticeable change in tone from other stakeholders including the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Ofsted. There is now acknowledgement from across further education that graded lesson observations are not necessary or helpful, and an increasing number of colleges are moving towards new and more collegiate models of lesson observations.

There are a number of colleges still using or seeking to impose graded observations and no-notice observations. UCU will robustly challenge such practice at individual

institutions. This guidance is one of the UCU resources available to branches to support them in their negotiations and campaigns. UCU also continues to work at the national level to influence the overall context in which lesson observations are used.

The noticeable shift across further education and the valuable evidence base of the UCU research represents a real opportunity for UCU to proactively and positively put lesson observations on the negotiating agenda. We will come back in more detail to the ways in which UCU branches can engage with their management and help to move the whole sector forward in its approach to lesson observations.



An increasing number of colleges are moving towards more collegiate models of lesson observation.

*www.ucu.org.uk/lessonobservation



Graded lesson observation and no-notice observations are not part of the Ofsted inspection framework

3. An evidence-based challenge to the context

UCU recognises that lesson observations, and particularly the use of graded observations, has become one of the most contentious issues within further education. The recently conducted UCU research is the most extensive of its kind and almost unique in providing an analysis of how lesson observations are used and how they could be used in the future to best exploit their real value. The report reviews a substantial body of academic theory and evidence that shows graded observations are not fit for purpose. The research also has the most comprehensive collection of lecturers' (and further education managers') own views and feelings towards lesson observations, and these reflect the academic research.

The research brings to light a number of key themes:

Are lesson observations fit for purpose?

The research shows lesson observation policies often state a number of different and potentially conflicting aims. The multi-purpose nature of such policies is likely to contribute to their failure.

74.8% of respondents say they do not feel graded observations have helped them improve as classroom practitioners.

UCU believes graded lesson observations are not fit for purpose and that concentrating on

the use of lesson observations for meaningful professional development will unlock their potential usefulness that is lost in their current form.

Are lesson observations a good measure of performance?

The research analyses why lesson observations are not the best way to assess performance and concludes that they are not valid or reliable as a measure of overall competence.

85.2% of respondents do not feel they are the most effective method of assessing performance or competence.

Only a snapshot of one aspect of professional practice is observed and observations are themselves an inherently subjective judgement.

Link to capability

We have seen already that lesson observations are not a valid or reliable form of assessment of the overall performance or competence of a lecturer's professional practice. Linking lesson observations to capability raises the stakes of each observation and increases the fear and anxiety they cause.

88% believe lesson observations are not the fairest way of assessing competence or performance.



Lecturers feel the real reasons for graded lesson observations are not developmental but a 'stick to beat them with'.

The pressure on a single lesson observation is increased beyond all proportion. When you attach the risk of losing your employment to graded observations, any usefulness they may have is severely reduced, if not destroyed.

Power and trust

Respondents to the research said they feel observations are something ‘done to’ them and not ‘for them’. Lecturers feel the real reasons for graded lesson observations are not developmental but a ‘stick to beat them with’.

‘A fear culture has been created, I used to love my job now I hate it.’

Even the removal of grades and links to capability will not be enough to make lesson observation a meaningful tool for improving teaching practice unless colleges address the underlying issues of trust and power.

Continuing professional development

Lecturers do not finish their training and suddenly become complete. There are always new teaching techniques to learn, areas of practice to perfect and different student needs to navigate. Continuing professional development (CPD) is crucial to professional lecturers and they believe very strongly in its benefits.

81.2% of respondents believe ungraded lesson observations are a more effective means of improving teaching and learning and play a more important role in CPD.

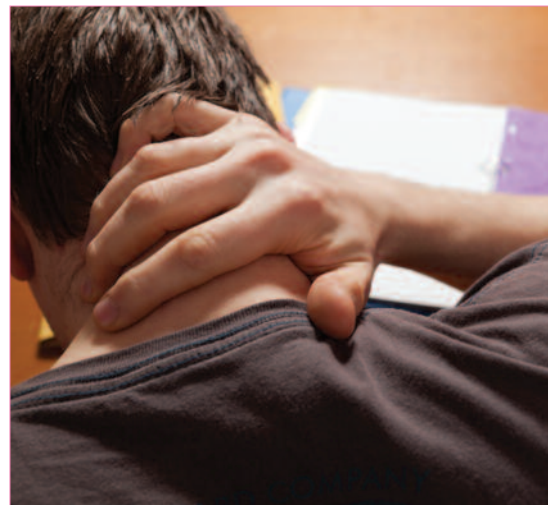
Removing grades will not fix the observation problem by itself. Lesson observations can provide a powerful tool for reflecting on and developing professional practice. The UCU research has shown that in order for lesson observations to play this vital role, colleges must make meaningful development their primary focus.

Stress

The fear of lesson observations can impact severely on the professional esteem, health and wellbeing of lecturers. Comments from UCU members include:

‘Having to perform for the observer and try to present, in most cases, an unrealistic lesson that has all the bells, whistles and sparkle that you could shake a stick at causes increased stress and anxiety, reduction in immune system and illness; ultimately time off in the future for many staff.’

‘Except for formative observations and informal peer assessments, which have been extremely helpful, other observations have had a negative impact and most of my colleagues would agree put extra stress on lecturers who are teaching too many hours a week and working flat out. Morale is always very low after observation cycles and a recent mock Ofsted left many lecturers devastated and considering leaving the profession including myself.’



Graded lesson observations can increase stress and anxiety in staff who are already overworked.



Are your management open to changing the way they conduct lesson observations? Speak to your regional office about the best way to approach your negotiations.

4. Next steps

Introducing our response

In conjunction with their regional office, branches should take stock of where their college is along the journey from punitive, graded observations to a more progressive model. The approach you take to negotiating with your employer will need to be tailored for your college's circumstances.

The O'Leary report gives branches a real opportunity to make the most of the slow but steady shift towards a more developmental and rounded process of lesson observations. The report allows us to proactively and positively put lesson observations on the negotiating table with a solid evidence base behind us.

Where the circumstances allow, the approach to management should be in the spirit of joint working on a new way of thinking about lesson observations and, where possible, the wider issues of career development and the assessment of teaching and learning.

Colleges will need to be encouraged to be bold in their approach. Tinkering around the edges of their lesson observation policies will not be enough. For example if grades for observations are removed but the system remains otherwise the same, the underlying ethos and atmosphere in which observation take place will not improve.

Some managers will feel uncertain about departing from a graded approach that they feel comfortable with and this can feel like a leap of faith. UCU sincerely believes that old model doesn't actually 'do what it says on

the tin' and, more importantly, there is a much better way that can lead to genuine improvements in teaching practice by providing a supportive environment for professional reflection and development of practice which respects the lecturer as a professional.

Working together on a new approach to lesson observation that respects lecturers' professional status will begin to embed a sense of mutual trust and provide the foundations for partnership working between unions and college management and an improved overall college atmosphere.

- ▶ Are your management wedded to graded lesson observations and determined to keep them, or
- ▶ are you knocking on an open door and your management are willing to work with you to put in place the UCU recommendations?

In the next section we look in detail at the UCU response to the problem of graded lesson observation and how branches can use evidence-based arguments in negotiations in order to achieve the best possible use of lesson observations.

Branches are encouraged to give a copy of both the full report and the executive summary to their members and to their college management. The evidence base provided by the report has already proved extremely helpful in local negotiations. For the full and summary report and lesson observation success stories see the UCU dedicated lesson observation webpage

www.ucu.org.uk/lessonobservation

5. Our response

The key points below bring together the evidence from the UCU research and UCU policy to provide the basis for a new approach to lesson observation. Where possible, branches should work with their college management to negotiate and agree an observation policy that suits their needs. There is no one perfect model but all policies must include the following:

Remove the use of graded observations:

exploring alternative models of observation

We have seen that the use of graded lesson observation is hugely problematic and UCU believes graded observations must not be used as a method of assessing overall performance or competence. A root and branch review of how observations are used will be needed to ensure a meaningful and positive change.

Colleges should explore alternative approaches that make use of recent advances in the research of observation and new models that have been successfully implemented at other colleges. Alternative approaches should make use of a variety of different methods of observation depending on the purpose of the particular observation and these could include using the best of current practice, self assessment, team teaching, peer review and the use of video technology for joint observer and observee reviews.


Furthermore, when designing a new approach to lesson observations colleges should not only

seek to work jointly with their local UCU branch, but also with teacher educators who can provide evidence-based expertise and input.


BARGAINING SUPPORT




What you might be told:


 We have to be ready for Ofsted.

UCU response:


 The focus of lesson observations should be a genuine desire to improve the professional practice of lecturers and therefore the quality of teaching and learning.


 Although Ofsted inspections are crucial and can be data heavy, this should not drive the process. Students will judge their college by its teaching and not by its paperwork.

What you might be told:

 Ofsted require us to use graded lesson observations.

UCU response:

 The Ofsted inspection framework does not require colleges to undertake graded observations.

 Ofsted themselves are piloting ungraded observations from autumn 2014.



When designing a new approach colleges should seek to work jointly with their local UCU branch, and also with teacher educators who can provide evidence-based expertise and input.

There must be no automatic link between observations and capability procedures

The outcome of lesson observations, whether they are graded or ungraded, must not be linked directly to an institution's capability or disciplinary policy. Given the concerns surrounding the validity and reliability of observation as a method of assessment, their use as the sole or automatic trigger for capability cannot be justified.

Relying on graded lesson observations to make assessments of overall performance of lecturers means the opportunity for improvement and professional reflection on practice is virtually eliminated by the high-stakes nature of a snapshot of what is often less than one 800th of lecturers teaching time.

BARGAINING SUPPORT



What you might be told:

The automatic link to capability following a grade 3 or 4 observation is needed to ensure 'poor' performance is addressed.

UCU response:

- Judgements about a lecturer's capability should not be based on lesson observations alone as their validity and reliability are in question.
- Definitive decisions about a lecturer's capability should only be made following appropriate support and training if any areas for improvement are identified.

Prioritise the professional development needs of staff

The priority of lesson observations must move away from simply measuring performance towards providing genuine opportunities for lecturers to improve their professional practice. Lesson observations should primarily focus on professional development and provide a safe

environment for lecturers to reflect on their teaching and how it may be improved.

Colleges must provide meaningful career and personal development opportunities and support to those lecturers who are identified as under-performing. This support is a necessary step before any decision is taken on their overall capability in the role.

BARGAINING SUPPORT



What you might be told:

Graded observations encourage continuing professional development.

UCU response:

- Graded observations are seen as a stick to beat lecturers with and not as a tool for development.
- The high-stakes nature of graded observations linked to capability does not provide a safe environment for lecturers to reflect honestly on their own practice and where improvements could be made.
- Grading does not encourage lecturers to work collaboratively and support each other's continued learning.

What you might be told:

Graded observations identify staff development needs.

UCU response:

- As a subjective judgement of a snapshot of performance, lesson observations will not be able to accurately identify developmental needs.
- The issues of power and trust must be addressed in order for lecturers to feel able to fully engage in identifying development needs in discussion and agreement with their observer.

Formal allocation of timetabled hours for observation:

pre-observation, feedback and feed-forward meetings

Observations can feel like something that is 'done to' lecturers in order to measure and control their teaching. The traditional lesson observation process leads to an imbalance of power between the observer and observee resulting in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust.

Lecturers must be able to play an active and key role in deciding the focus of their observation. Are there particular areas of their practice they would like to reflect on or new techniques they would like to jointly explore? Developmental action plans should also be discussed and agreed following an observation.

In order for there to be a real change in the culture of lesson observations, colleges and lecturers need to make an investment of time into any new scheme. Timetabled sessions must be allocated to allow discussions in advance and after lesson observations to ensure they are not just an exercise in measuring performance.

There needs to be time and space for the observer and observee to discuss the observation in advance and to agree the scope of the observation. In order for feedback to be meaningful, time and space should also be allocated for the observer and observee to meet after the observation to discuss and agree the outcomes. The benefit of this investment of time will outweigh the cost and will positively impact on professional development.

BARGAINING SUPPORT



What you might be told:

Graded observations are the best measure of quality.

UCU response:

Grading places too much emphasis on judging and measuring performance rather than genuinely supporting practitioners to improve teaching and learning.

If it is the lesson that is being judged there is no need for a grade to be attached to an individual lecturer.

Graded observations are not a valid or reliable method for assessing the quality of teaching or the overall competence of the lecturer

What you might be told:

Graded observations improve teaching and learning.

UCU response:

Grading observations lead to 'tick box' teaching

Observations only provide a snapshot and will not give an accurate picture of areas of practice that may need improvement.



Lecturers must be able to play an active and key role in deciding the focus of their observation.

A portfolio of performance

Graded observations must no longer be used as the only or main indicator of a lecturer's performance and capability. The snapshot that they provide is not a valid or reliable measure of general competence. Colleges should move towards a portfolio of performance using a variety of methods to build up an overall picture. A more varied portfolio approach to assessing performance will provide a reliable evidence base and encourage creative and reflective teaching and engagement with professional development.

BARGAINING SUPPORT



What you might be told:

Graded observations are the best measure of lecturer's performance.

UCU response:

At best a single observation provides a snapshot of approximately 1/828th of a lecturer's teaching practice.

A portfolio approach, gathering evidence from different sources throughout the year, will give a more accurate overall picture.

This applies equally to internal college observers. Providing a meaningful observation is a complex and skilled process. All internal observers should be suitably trained, and that training should be regularly refreshed and updated. They should have the necessary subject-specific expertise to undertake observations in a particular curriculum area. Where there is access to accredited qualifications, we encourage colleges to put all observers forward for those courses.

BARGAINING SUPPORT



What you might be told:

Internal observations can be done by any trained line manager.

UCU response:

The training must be adequate and up to date. To ensure observations are useful they must be undertaken with skill and care.

The observer must also have relevant expertise. They must have the necessary knowledge of the subject area being observed. In some cases they may also need specialist expertise such as teaching students with special needs.

Introduce statutory training and qualifications for observers

UCU believes all Ofsted inspectors must be properly trained and qualified. Inspectors are making sensitive and intricate judgements, and to ensure their judgement is and remains as valid and reliable as possible, their skills and knowledge should be up to date.



Colleges should move towards a portfolio of performance using a variety of methods to build up an overall picture.

6. Checklist

The following are some of the key points that you should cover in your negotiations with management:

Is there a genuine dialogue between your employer and UCU about any proposed changes?

Yes No

If the college refuse to engage in negotiations speak to your regional office immediately. A trade dispute should be considered.

Comments

Have you involved your regional office?

Yes No

Your regional office are here to support you with any advice, information or campaign materials you need to help your negotiations.

Furthermore it is crucial to involve your regional office at the earliest stage in order to make sure we spread good practice and as much consistency as possible.

Comments

Are lesson observations ungraded?

Yes No

Lesson observations must not be graded. This includes using the Ofsted 4-point scale or any equivalent of it. Feedback from observations must be a genuinely reflective and developmental discussion.

Comments

Have you discussed any link to capability (and/or disciplinary) policies with your regional office?

Yes No

There must be no automatic link between lesson observations and capability procedures. Lesson observations are a severely limited tool for assessing overall performance and any automatic link to capability simply raises the stakes of the observation and risks any developmental value it might have. Your regional office is best placed to help you ensure the processes in place are fair and transparent.

Comments



Are lesson observations the sole assessment of a lecturer's performance?

Yes No

An overall assessment of a lecturer's performance should include evidence from a variety of sources in order to build a portfolio and to ensure a full picture is obtained.

Comments

Are there timetabled sessions for pre- and post-observation discussions?

Yes No

There should be space set aside in the timetabled hours of both the observee and observer to ensure there is adequate time to prepare for the observation and feedback afterwards.

Comments

Is the focus of the observation agreed in advance?

Yes No

The lesson and any particular areas of teaching practice to be focused on should be agreed in advance to get the most developmental value from the observation.

Comments

Are the outcomes of the observation agreed?

Yes No

An action plan for future observations, CPD opportunities and any other actions should be discussed and agreed by the observee and observer.

Comments

Are observers trained?

Yes No

All observers should be trained and where possible they should be encouraged to access accredited training.

Comments

Have you received any proposals in writing?

Yes No

The JCC (Joint Consultation Committee) must be provided with a written version of any proposed changes in order to consult in a meaningful way. (The JCC is the meeting between UCU and the college management and may include all the college unions. It may be known by another name at your college.)

Comments



ASK FOR EVIDENCE

Has the evidence the college have used to reach their proposals been shared with UCU?

Yes No

The JCC must be provided with all the information it needs to ensure the consultation is meaningful.

Comments

Have you discussed the appeals procedure with your regional office?

Yes No

Your regional office is best placed to help you ensure there is a fair appeals process in place.

Comments

Review procedure for the policy?

Yes No

It is good practice to include a review procedure in every policy to ensure they are working as intended, remain relevant and are up to date with any legislative changes. Policies should usually be reviewed on an annual basis.

Comments

Training for all staff on any changes?

Yes No

All staff should receive training on new or amended policies. Employers will sometimes put the responsibility onto staff to familiarise themselves with all policies and feel that putting them in a staff handbook or on the intranet is enough. It is not. All staff who fall under the lesson observation policy as observers or observees must receive appropriate training.

Comments

Has the policy been subject to an equality impact assessment (EIA)?

Yes No

All changes to existing policies or new policies must be subject to an EIA and the results made available to the JCC. Guidance and an EIA pro-forma are available from the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Comments



7 Useful information

Below are links to further information and the details of all regional and national offices.
If you are not sure, ask! Your regional office is here to help.

UCU regional offices

London

uo'brien@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 020 7756 2500

East Midlands

sdavis@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 0121 634 7384

Yorkshire and Humberside

feyorkshire@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 0113 243 1915

South

southern@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 023 9281 8625

South East

mmoran@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 020 7756 2500

North West

Tel: 0161 772 7011 (HE)
 0161 772 7010 (FE)

West Midlands

westmidlands@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 0121 634 7380

Northern

gateshead@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 0191 487 7220

Eastern and Home Counties

eastern@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 020 7756 2500

South West

exeter@ucu.org.uk
Tel: 01392 412 525

Links

The following can all be found on the UCU dedicated lesson observation page:

- ▶ the full report from Dr Matt O'Leary
- ▶ the executive summary of the research
- ▶ advice on breaking the link between lesson observations and capability
- ▶ success stories from colleges that have adopted ungraded observations
- ▶ advice on learning walks.

www.ucu.org.uk/lessonobservation

IMPROVE THIS GUIDE

You can help us improve this guide by letting us know when your branch gets a win on lesson observations and how you did it.

Email Kerith Allen, UCU Bargaining and Negotiations Official kallen@ucu.org.uk

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