



**Developing a National Framework for the
Effective Use of Lesson Observation in Further
Education**

Project Report for UCU

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November 2013

1. Executive summary

This report explores one of the most widely debated and hotly contested initiatives to affect teaching staff in the FE sector in recent times, that of **lesson observation**. The report captures the views of thousands of UCU members working in a wide range of contexts and institutions and as such represents the largest and most extensive account of the topic to date.

Even before beginning to discuss the project's findings, what emerges very clearly from this study is that the use of lesson observation and its impact on the professional lives of the FE workforce is something that all the participants involved in this study felt very strongly about. To say that there was no shortage of opinions in all of the data collected for the project does not do justice to the magnitude of the responses. The qualitative responses in the online questionnaire are a good example of this. At the end of the questionnaire respondents were given the option of writing additional qualitative comments about the topic. Just under half of those respondents who completed the survey (n = 1619) wrote comments in this section, which in itself is testament to the fact that lesson observation was a topic of significant interest to them. To put this into perspective, these comments amounted to over 100,000 words of text. In short, whether it was written or verbal comments, lesson observation was undoubtedly a topic that generated a lot of discussion among the study's participants and it was clearly something about which they had a lot to say and wanted to make sure their voices were heard.

Naturally the data presented in this report encompasses a breadth of views, as one might expect from the size and diverse representation of the sample (see section 3), though there were numerous aspects of the topic on which there was an overriding consensus among participants. One of the main findings to emerge from this study was the widespread discontent felt amongst UCU members towards the use of lesson observation as a form of teacher assessment. This dissatisfaction was particularly targeted at graded models of observation, which have become the norm in FE over the last two decades (e.g. O'Leary 2013a). These were repeatedly criticised by a significant majority of participants for being little more than a 'box-ticking' exercise and, in some instances, a 'disciplinary stick' with which 'to beat staff'. In relation to this, graded observations were also identified by many respondents as being a major cause of increased levels of stress and anxiety amongst teaching staff.

Another compelling finding to emerge from the study's data was the increasing appetite for change to how observation was used in many institutions across the sector. While only a small minority of participants expressed a desire to see an end to the use of lesson observation per se as a form of teacher appraisal, the majority acknowledged that it had an important role to play in teacher assessment and development. They did so, however, on the proviso that certain models/approaches to observation were deemed to be more beneficial than others, particularly peer-based models with a focus on enhancing professional learning and development. Furthermore, many participants expressed the need to explore alternative approaches and to move away from current normalised models of graded observations driven by performance management agendas. What these alternative approaches might look like or consist of differed from one institution to another, though

there are common features that seemed to apply regardless of contextual variables and these are explored in depth in sections five and six of this report.

There is little doubt that lesson observation has become increasingly associated with the monitoring of standards and teacher accountability in the sector over the last two decades. To say that respondents were fully supportive of the view that poor teaching is not something that should be tolerated and that every effort should be made to eradicate it wherever it occurs might seem to be stating the obvious. How this should be done, however, was a matter of some debate. A recurring theme in the study's data highlighted the shortcomings surrounding the current reliance of many institutions on graded lesson observation as the main – and sometimes sole – means of identifying and eradicating 'poor teaching', though opinions differed according to the employment role of some participants. Whilst teaching staff recorded high levels of disagreement regarding the effectiveness of graded observations, these views were not necessarily shared by senior managers, although it has to be acknowledged that the latter represented a very small percentage (n = 20) of the overall sample.

Many of the shortcomings expressed concerning graded lesson observations centred on the topic of assessment, in particular the key principles of validity and reliability of observation as a method of assessment. In other words, a viewpoint expressed by the majority of the study's participants was that it was neither valid nor reliable to make a conclusive judgement about someone's professional competence based on 'snapshots' or isolated, episodic performances. It was felt that any overall judgement needed to be inclusive of other key performance indicators (KPIs) such as student achievement rates, student evaluations, self-evaluations, peer reviews etc.

In short, this report raises serious questions about the fitness for purpose of prevailing observation assessment systems in FE and the extent to which these systems are able to achieve their purported goals. The overriding message from practitioners was that current, normalised models of graded lesson observations have minimal, if any, positive impact on raising the quality of teaching and learning across the sector. In many instances, they appear to have become a perfunctory mechanism with observers as well as observees questioning their effectiveness as a method of assessment. The views of practitioners working at different levels within the sector all point to one pressing outcome and that is the need for a change to current practices. The findings from this report can thus be seen as a mandate for change, along with providing an accompanying set of concrete recommendations to effect such change.

Recommendations

- i. **Alternative approaches to the use of observation:** There is a need to explore alternative approaches to the current, dominant model of graded lesson observation. Such alternatives should seek to combine elements of existing practices but also make use of recent advances in the research of observation as a mechanism for professional learning. It is recommended that these alternative approaches include features such as differentiated observation, self-assessment (i.e. observee) as well as observer assessment, peer reviews etc.
- ii. **Prioritising improvements in teaching:** Practitioners need more support with how to improve their teaching and less emphasis on measuring their performance. Thus any future use of observation should seek to prioritise the professional development needs of staff rather than the production of statistical data to serve performance management systems.
- iii. **Formal allocation of timetabled hours for 'feedback' and 'feed-forward':** In those institutions where expansive approaches to the use of observation were evident, the importance of the feedback and feed-forward stages of the process was acknowledged by the formal allocation of timetabled hours to this activity. This was certainly not common practice across many institutions but it is recommended that in order for the outcomes of observation to have an impact on CPD and the on-going improvement of practice, these important stages need to be accredited with sufficient time that is incorporated into staff timetables at the beginning of the academic year. It is therefore recommended that any observation must include a pre-observation meeting between observer and observee and a feed-forward meeting.
- iv. **Multi-dimensional model of assessment:** Graded observations should no longer be relied on as the main source of evidence on which to judge tutors' professional competence and performance. They are reductive in nature and used in isolation cannot be seen as a valid and/or reliable indicator. Such judgements need to be based on a multi-dimensional model of teacher assessment as discussed above, encompassing a varied portfolio of evidence (e.g. student achievement, student feedback/evaluations, peer review, self-assessment, external verification), so as to ensure a more triangulated and reliable evidence base for assessment.
- v. **Review of observation assessment criteria¹:** Providers are recommended to carry out regular reviews of their observation assessment criteria and consider the extent to which they cater for the diverse contexts and curriculum areas offered. For example, are the same assessment criteria used across all curriculum areas? If so, do these criteria capture the relevant subject specialisms and any associated pedagogy appropriately?
- vi. **Observers' qualifications and training:** All observers with a responsibility for carrying out formal, assessed observations must obtain a recognised qualification before embarking on their role. Given the complexity of the role and the skills required to

¹ For practical suggestions on how an institution might go about carrying out a review of its observation policy, see O'Leary (2014: 77-79).

ensure that their judgements remain as valid and reliable as they possibly can be, it is also essential that observers regularly update their knowledge and skills with suitable training and standardisation activities.

- vii. **Input from teacher educators in creating an observation policy:** When creating an institutional policy for lesson observations, senior management needs to ensure that it draws on the experience and expertise of those involved in teacher education/training programmes to inform discussion, as these practitioners are immersed in the domains of teacher assessment, development and the area of lesson observation on an on-going basis and thus are well-positioned to make valuable contributions. Not only would this help to create an observation framework underpinned by informed and current practice, but it might also lessen the likelihood of future disputes if teacher educators were to act as mediators, along with union representatives, between practitioners and senior managers in drawing up such policy.
- viii. **Sever links between formal observations and capability procedures:** The outcome of formal lesson observations, whether they are graded or ungraded, should not be linked directly to an institution's capability/disciplinary policy. Given the misgivings surrounding the validity and reliability of observation as a method of assessment discussed at length in this report, this study recommends that any institution's capability policy needs to reflect this by severing any formal links between the two accordingly.
- ix. **Support for underperforming tutors:** In the case of those tutors whose classroom performance is deemed to be below standard or considered a cause for concern, appropriate systems need to be put in place to ensure that they are given the relevant professional support in order to enable them to improve their knowledge base and skills before any conclusive decision is made on their capabilities. Timescales for improvement should be agreed between all parties. In such cases, a temporary reduction in their teaching load should be agreed so that they can undertake the necessary training and support to equip them with the knowledge and skills to improve future performance.
- x. **Observee empowerment:** There is a need to empower observees with the opportunity to play an active role in the focus of their observation and the ability to decide and prioritise key areas for development in collaboration with their observers. Thus action plans following on from observations need to be negotiated and mutually agreed between the observer and observee. In cases where it is impossible to reach an agreement, a third party may be involved in mediating.

References

- O'Leary, M.** (2013a) Surveillance, performativity and normalised practice: the use and impact of graded lesson observations in Further Education Colleges. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 37(5), pp. 694-714. Available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0309877X.2012.684036>
- O'Leary, M.** (2014) *Classroom observation: a guide to the effective observation of teaching and learning*. London: Routledge.