
Lesson observation



Lesson observation and quality

UCU and its members are committed to delivering the highest quality teaching to students, and quality is a very important concept in tertiary education. Many of the issues around quality will affect you as an education professional – in particular, lesson observation. This is where management observes your teaching and often grades it.

Lesson observation is observation by a third party and 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 any weaknesses.

The key principles underpinning lesson observation 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.

Lesson observation 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 an important part of monitoring standards in institutions. Given student experience of teaching and learning is a key issue 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. Lesson observation should be an opportunity for teaching professionals to receive advice and guidance, to provide material for professional reflection, and to identify areas for continuing professional development (CPD) and further training. It should be part of the developmental processes of an organisation and should be objective and transparent to those being observed. It should not be used to stigmatise and single out individuals or form part of performance-related pay schemes.

Lesson observation should be 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.

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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 and to the new requirements around CPD in further education.



The aims of lesson observation

The aims of lesson observation should be:

- to observe teaching and learning in action in order to raise the quality of both and so enhance the students' learning experience
- to provide evidence for part of an institution's formal appraisal scheme and discussions
- to provide evidence for probation and professional formation reports where appropriate
- to provide evidence for appropriate formal procedures such as capability and competence
- to provide a system of identifying, sharing, improving and developing good practice
- to provide evidence for self-assessment reports
- to provide evidence of teaching and learning during an inspection
- to 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 to you before any observation occurs, which of the above categories the observation falls into and what the results of the observation will be used for.

Conduct of the lesson observation

All those involved in lesson observation should receive training beforehand in what the process will involve; that is both the lecturer being observed and the person undertaking the observation. The observer should be a trained and qualified teacher.

While UCU does not dispute the necessity of lesson observations, it is UCU policy that there should be sufficient notice of observations. UCU would argue for at least five working days and normally there should be no more than three such observations per teaching year.

The lesson observation itself should be conducted correctly and should not be intrusive. Relevant documentation may have to be produced before or at the beginning of the observation. This could include lesson plans, schemes of work and individual learning plans. Judgements and observations made during the lesson observation should be recorded by the observer in writing. It is good practice for an institution to use standard forms for all staff to ensure consistency of approach. The criteria by which judgements are made should be open and transparent. The observer should give feedback orally to the lecturer as soon as possible after the observation and in writing. The lecturer being observed should have an opportunity to challenge judgements made during the observation.

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Grading

Many institutions grade lessons that have been observed. The grading should be for the teaching in the lesson observed, not the lecturer/teacher. The OFSTED scale for lesson observations grades lessons on a scale from 1–4 as follows:

Grade 1: outstanding

Grade 2: good

Grade 3: satisfactory

Grade 4: inadequate

A number of colleges are using the OFSTED 4-point grade scale for observations and deciding that a grade 3 is unacceptable even though it is defined as satisfactory within the scale. 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 the quality of a teacher's teaching is judged below acceptable quality, then reasons for this should be given as should the necessary support and training to improve their teaching.

Peer observation

Some institutions have established peer observation which involves a teacher observing another teacher's practice. This is a practical way in which teachers can support each other and enhance each other's knowledge about teaching and learning. It is often seen as being less judgmental and managerial, and more palatable to staff.

Lesson observation as part of initial teacher training

Lesson observation is a key part of initial teacher training (ITT) programmes. This is different to lesson observations of qualified, employed staff. The purpose of observations undertaken as part of an initial teacher training programme is to see how the student/trainee is teaching and to give feedback to help them improve. Such observations should be under the direction of the institution and/or the department or faculty providing the ITT programme. Depending on the programme, this may be a higher education institution or a further education college delivering an ITT programme from an awarding body such as City and Guilds. The number of these 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 or department. The frequency of observations that are part of initial teacher training will be set by the awarding body. They are not normally graded. Newly appointed FE teachers may have to be observed as part of a probationary period, or as part of a process of professional formation.



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Capability

Capability procedures are used by an institution when it is felt that a teacher is failing to perform his or her duties and responsibilities to a professionally acceptable standard. If lesson observation is used as part of capability and competence procedures, then this should be made clear. You should be told what grade of lesson observation will be considered unsatisfactory and result in further action, and what this action may be. You should also receive proper and reasonable support and assistance, with clear timescales set out for improvement.

UCU guidelines around lesson observation

Lesson observations and the procedures around them have become an increasingly common flash point in colleges, triggering negotiations and, in some cases, industrial disputes.

The controversy about the use of observations is due to changes to external inspection processes in the FE sector. External inspections are now more dependent on the performance of the institution, with 'lighter touch' inspection for education providers judged to be 'excellent' and 'good', and more in-depth inspection for providers judged to be 'inadequate' or 'coasting'. There is therefore greater emphasis on more rigorous institutional self-assessment/evaluation. New definitions of poor quality provision mean that more institutions may be within the scope of external intervention. Coasting is defined as being satisfactory but not improving, which can lead to competitive tendering for the provision.

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

UCU has guidelines on the correct implementation of lesson observation and what constitutes good practice. These are available on the UCU website: www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/a/0/ucu_lessonobsguidelines_2009.pdf

If you feel you are being subjected to too many lesson observations and/or these observations are being conducted in an unfair way, you should bring this to the attention of the UCU branch in your institution.

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

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

UCU strongly recommends that lesson observation is the subject of negotiation between management and UCU branches, resulting in a formal agreement.



If you feel you are being subjected to too many lesson observations or these observations are being conducted in an unfair way, you should talk to the UCU branch in your institution