
Effective teaching and learning observation in further education colleges

October 2015



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Introduction

This report is published in response to a request for advice about effective 'teaching and learning observation' from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn 2013-2014. It is the second of two reports. The first report was published in October 2014 and focuses on effective classroom observations in schools, (Estyn, 2014a). This report focuses on effective teaching and learning observations in further education (FE) colleges. The use of the term 'teaching and learning observations' reflects the wide range of settings and contexts in which learning takes place in further education, for example classrooms, workshops, kitchens and salons.

The report is intended primarily for the Welsh Government and managers and staff in FE colleges. It may also be of interest to learners, parents and staff in other sectors and agencies who work with colleges to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This report draws on the evidence noted in Appendix 1.

Background

Colleges undertake teaching and learning observations for a wide range of reasons, which include:

- sharing effective practice among staff
- developing particular approaches, skills and innovative ways of teaching
- evaluating the impact of innovative approaches to teaching and learning
- identifying priorities for staff development
- sharing effective practice with other colleges
- developing teachers' skills through internal and external professional learning communities
- mentoring and coaching serving teachers, support staff and trainee teachers
- observing newly-qualified and newly employed teachers
- establishing the quality of candidates' teaching when applying for a post at a college
- evaluating the quality of learning across the range of learning environments
- evaluating the quality of one-to-one reviews in vocational and work-based learning (WBL) environments
- tracking individual learners to observe their learning experiences and progress
- monitoring cross-cutting themes
- carrying out internal inspections for purposes of self-assessment and evaluation
- informing the performance management of staff

Over recent years, there has been considerable debate about the extent to which teaching and learning observation in colleges contributes to raising learners' standards of achievement, improving the quality of teaching and about how often teachers should be observed.

In the Annual Report for 2012-2013, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Education and Training in Wales points out that 'The quality of teaching has a direct impact on the standards [learners] achieve. It is the single most important factor in helping [learners] to achieve their potential' (Estyn, 2014b, p.26).

In Estyn's inspections of nine FE colleges¹ between 2010 and 2013, teaching was good in six, and adequate in three. In the same inspections, the standards that learners achieved were excellent in one college, good in five and adequate in three.

Large institutions such as FE colleges face a particular challenge over how to ensure that teaching across the college is consistently good. As colleges have merged into larger organisations that often cover wide geographical areas, the challenge has increased.

All the colleges that provided information for this report singled out the Welsh Government's recent Quality Improvement Fund (QIF) project, co-ordinated by CollegesWales, as a significant stimulus to their thinking about teaching and learning. The project involved colleges developing a range of 'supported experiments' where teachers used innovative teaching methods with the support of mentors and consultants. Colleges reported that this project has helped them to:

- develop their approaches to lesson observations
- promote collaboration between colleges about lesson observations
- develop a positive culture of teaching and learning

The main focus of this report is to identify how colleges use teaching and learning observation effectively to improve learners' standards of achievement. This report identifies how effective teaching and learning observation can help teachers, training advisers, WBL assessors and learning support staff to improve teaching and learning, as well as helping leaders to support initiatives that will enhance the professional development of all staff.

¹ There were 11 FE inspections in total from 2010-2013. Two of these were inspections of University of Wales, Newport which delivers Access provision. These have been excluded from this analysis.

Main findings

- 1 Teaching and learning observation works best in colleges that have a clear strategic vision of how to achieve high-quality teaching and learning, a strong culture of improvement, self-evaluation and continuous professional development, and work as a team. In these colleges, lesson observation is principally a method for helping teachers to improve their own practice rather than being used as a tool for internal inspection or college self-assessment.
- 2 While all colleges involved in this survey have a teaching and learning policy document in place, only a minority have a policy that sets out explicitly the purposes, procedures and expectations for teaching and learning observations. This means that, in a few cases, staff being observed and observers alike are unclear about what is expected of them as part of the observation process.
- 3 Many colleges have worked hard to develop a culture of innovation in teaching and learning. In particular they have made good use of the Quality Improvement Fund (QIF) project². This project, co-ordinated by CollegesWales, involved colleges developing a range of 'supported experiments' where teachers practise innovative teaching methods with the support of mentors and consultants.
- 4 Across the sector, managers meet regularly to network and share fresh ideas and practice. However, too few teaching staff participate in professional learning communities within or outside their colleges. As a result, they do not use peer observations enough to share good practice with colleagues or to identify and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in their own teaching. Only a few colleges plan time for peer observations in their staff development programmes.
- 5 Learners take part in formal lesson observations in only a very few colleges. However, colleges account of learners' views through other mechanisms, including:
 - speaking with learners at the end of teaching and learning observations
 - 'learning walks' around the college where learners are asked about their experiences
 - questioning learner representatives, forums and focus groups
 - evaluation forms and surveys carried out at course level
 - college surveys carried out to gain information about learners' experiences
 - the Welsh Government Learner Voice survey
- 6 All the colleges visited as part of this survey use observation as part of a planned process of mentoring and coaching. In most cases, colleges use mentors well to support teachers to develop their skills. Staff reported that they found mentoring to be helpful and developmental.

² For more information about the QIF and its outcomes see <http://dysgu.llyw.cymru/resources/browse-all/quality-improvement-fund-teaching-and-learning>

- 7 Only a few colleges observe learning support assistants formally. By not doing so, colleges miss an important opportunity to develop the skills of learning support assistants and share good practice. It also means that colleges are unable to assess the impact of learning support assistants on learners' progress.
- 8 On the whole, FE teachers feel that the process of observation combined with support and mentoring has been beneficial. They report that these processes have helped them to improve their teaching skills, their professional competence, and their confidence, and that these changes have a positive impact on learners' outcomes.
- 9 However, in a minority of colleges there can be too much focus in formal lesson observations on a grade, either by the observer or the teacher being observed. This over-focus can cause observations to be stressful and less effective at improving teaching. In contrast, clear feedback and dialogue over the good features and areas to develop help the teacher to move their practice forward.
- 10 All the colleges in the survey moderate graded observation forms to help ensure consistency and reliability. In the most effective cases, a panel of moderators, including representatives external to the college, check the forms to ensure that they are properly completed and that the observer's evaluative commentary matches any grade given. As a result, forms are more evaluative and identify strengths and areas for improvement more clearly, and the grades awarded are more reliable.
- 11 Recently merged colleges in Wales have focused, in the immediate post-merger period, on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in their provision. This has contributed to a few staff feeling 'over observed'. These colleges are now moving towards observation programmes that focus constructively on developing their staff's teaching skills.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

- R1 promote opportunities, such as the QIF project, to support colleges as they develop their approaches to observing teaching and learning and encourage them to share innovative and effective practice

CollegesWales should:

- R2 work with colleges and the Welsh Government to promote professional learning communities that focus on the development of teaching and learning

Colleges should:

- R3 establish a culture of improvement, self-evaluation and professional learning so that all staff understand their roles and responsibilities
- R4 establish self-evaluation practices that take account of a wide range of evidence, including classroom observation that focuses on learners' standards of achievement and on the quality of teaching and learning
- R5 develop clear, explicit teaching and learning observation policies and practices that all staff understand and apply, and ensure that all staff who have responsibility for learning, including learning support assistants, benefit from regular observations
- R6 arrange opportunities for the professional development of staff, based on evidence that includes teaching and learning observation, that are matched to college and individual staff members' priorities
- R7 consider the benefits of accrediting observers with an internal 'licence to observe' or an external accreditation framework in order to improve the quality and consistency of observer training
- R8 work in collaboration with other colleges to improve cross-college consistency of graded observation and to share good practice
- R9 develop the use of ungraded observations to help teachers develop their teaching skills
- R10 encourage teachers' ownership of their own professional practice by giving them opportunities to reflect on practice, using ungraded peer observations, membership of professional networks, mentoring and peer support

1 Establishing a shared culture of improvement, self-evaluation and professional learning

Culture and policy

- 12 Teaching and learning observation works best in colleges that have a clear strategic vision of how to achieve high-quality teaching and learning, a strong culture of improvement, self-evaluation and continuous professional development and team working.
- 13 In the best colleges, lesson observation is not mainly a tool for internal inspection and college self-assessment, but is principally a method for helping teachers to improve their own practice.
- 14 The best colleges have an explicit and well understood priority to improve the standard and consistency of teaching. Nearly all colleges visited as part of preparing this report have detailed teaching and learning policies.
- 15 However, while all colleges have a policy document in place, only a minority have a policy which sets out explicitly the purposes, procedures and expectations for teaching and learning observations. This means that, in a few cases, staff being observed and observers are not entirely clear what is expected of them as part of the observation process.

Case study: observation policy at Coleg Cambria

Coleg Cambria has a detailed teaching and learning observation policy. The policy sets out the aims and objectives of the college's observation programme and the benefits to learners, staff and the college. It includes detail on:

- the way observations are graded, what the grades mean and what support or other action is expected from teachers receiving the full range of potential grades
- the process of observation – including what is expected from observers and teachers before, during and after the observation
- information that teachers are expected to provide for the observer and the information that observers need to obtain before the observation (for example, a class profile or scheme of work)
- protocols for the observer to follow when listening and talking to learners
- guidance on the timing, format and content of written and verbal feedback
- processes for the teacher to give feedback to the college's quality team on their experience of being observed and its impact on their teaching
- the appeals procedure
- processes for moderating and quality assuring observations
- post-observation support and development

The policy ensures that all staff are aware of the purpose and process of teaching and learning observations and their contribution to a positive teaching and learning culture.

Professional networks within and between colleges

- 16 Many colleges have worked hard to develop a culture of innovation in teaching and learning. In particular, colleges have made good use of the QIF project to help develop a culture of innovation in teaching and learning³. The project, co-ordinated by CollegesWales, involved colleges developing a range of 'supported experiments' (where teachers practise innovative teaching methods with the support of mentors and consultants). For example, Coleg Gwent, The College Merthyr Tydfil, Coleg y Cymoedd and Bridgend College worked collaboratively to develop teaching, learning and assessment techniques to stretch and challenge learners and then created video clips of classroom practice for teachers, to share between institutions. They also developed a range of resources for teachers, including a numeracy toolkit and an assessment for learning toolkit.
- 17 The use of supported experiments through the QIF project has encouraged colleges to develop professional learning communities within colleges, and to share the practice they have developed across the FE sector more widely through networks and conferences. Colleges have also used the opportunity to work with external consultants to refine their approaches to teaching and learning and observation practice.
- 18 All colleges in Wales attend a termly teaching and learning network co-ordinated by CollegesWales. Managers responsible for the professional development of teachers use this forum as a means of sharing good practice and developing partnerships with other colleges. Similar, well-attended professional networks exist for quality managers. College managers use these networks as a forum for discussing quality improvement and the effectiveness of teaching and learning observations. Managers share ideas and practice freely across the sector, for example through setting up arrangements for managers to moderate graded classroom observations between colleges and so develop a better shared understanding of the requirements of each grade.
- 19 A majority of colleges work in collaboration with other colleges to moderate and quality assure their teaching and learning observations. This has helped them develop an improved shared understanding of what makes an excellent or an unsatisfactory lesson, and it has helped with the training of observers.
- 20 However, while staff at senior manager level have good opportunities to attend networks, too few teaching staff take part in professional learning communities within their colleges. As a result, they do not use peer observations enough to share good practice with colleagues or to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their own teaching.

³ For more information about the QIF and its outcomes see <http://dysgu.llyw.cymru/resources/browse-all/quality-improvement-fund-teaching-and-learning>

Leadership and management structures

- 21 The best colleges have clear management structures in place. In a typical structure, a senior manager has responsibility for teacher development, while a second senior manager has responsibility for the quality assurance of teaching and learning. These two managers work closely together to ensure that the model for teaching and learning observations both supports teachers' professional development and allows the college to evaluate its own strengths and weaknesses to produce an accurate self-assessment.

2 Practical arrangements for teaching and learning observations

The purposes of teaching and learning observations

- 22 Colleges carry out teaching and learning observations for a wide range of reasons. This report and its partner report on effective classroom observation in primary and secondary schools have identified a similar range of reasons for which both colleges and schools use observations, (Estyn, 2014a). There are several categories of uses of teaching and learning observation. The categories and purposes are identified below, and in more detail in Appendix 2.
- 23 Nearly all colleges use observations to share effective practice among staff, either through organising formal staff development sessions or through informal arrangements between staff. Colleges use them to develop particular teaching methods, skills and innovative ways of teaching, for example by asking members of staff to work in pairs or groups of three to demonstrate particular ways of working to each other. In a few cases, colleges use a consultant to demonstrate and develop specific ideas.
- 24 All the colleges visited as part of this survey use observation as part of a planned process of mentoring and coaching serving teachers and trainee teachers. These observations are not usually graded and this encourages staff to share good practice.
- 25 A few colleges help governors to develop their understanding about teaching and learning and the work of the college by undertaking 'learning walks' or observing a lesson with a senior member of staff.
- 26 In a few cases, colleges verify the quality of a short-listed candidate's teaching when they apply for a post at the college through the inclusion of an observation activity in the selection process. These observations are usually graded in line with the selection procedures.
- 27 In most colleges, senior managers use the outcomes of graded observations of teaching and learning to monitor progress against targets in the quality development plan. All colleges visited as part of this survey use an analysis of formal observations to inform the annual self-assessment of a learning area.

- 28 Managers carry out observations as part of the performance management process and annual appraisal of a member of staff's performance. These observations are usually graded.
- 29 One-to-one teaching activities, such as WBL reviews, are not easy to record on conventional teaching and learning observation forms. Instead, in the best cases, colleges use a different type of form to record WBL reviews and use a different approach to the observation, based on the teaching skills required for coaching and mentoring.
- 30 Only a few colleges formally observe learning support assistants. This misses an opportunity to develop the skills of learning support assistants and share their good practice. It also means that colleges are unable to assess the impact of learning support on learners' progress.

How often do observations occur and how are they planned?
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- 31 In the minority of cases where colleges have a clear policy setting out a detailed rationale for observations, the policy includes the reasons why the college carries out observations, how and when observers should make contact with observees, expectations of both parties and what happens after the observation is complete. This is helpful to observers and the staff being observed and ensures that all parties are aware of the expectations of them.
- 32 Typically, colleges carry out formal observations of teaching staff for the purpose of appraisal once per year. In many colleges, these happen during defined windows of several weeks throughout the year. In all colleges, there is some notification to staff as to when the observation will occur. In a minority of colleges, the frequency of formal observations depends on the outcomes of previous observations: from once every two years for a previous 'excellent' grade, to once every three months for a teacher graded 'unsatisfactory' (a teacher graded as unsatisfactory receives support and advice from a mentor between observations).
- 33 In a few colleges, the observer and member of staff agree, in advance, which lesson will be observed. This approach has the advantage of allowing the teacher to provide detailed information in advance to the observer about the context and focus of the class.
- 34 In the most effective cases, staff are either notified or arrange with their observer that that they will be observed within a defined window, for example a one-week period. The observer chooses the specific lesson within that window. This approach retains the advantage that the teacher has some notice of the observation, and allows the observer some scope to vary the lesson that they observe.

Case study: three-day window for observation at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

At Grŵp Llandrillo Menai the observer informs the teacher of a three-day window in which they plan to observe one session. The observer does not inform the teacher of the exact session that will be observed. The teacher is given written notification using a standard form and is asked to provide a range of information to the observer, including:

- a class register and profile
- a scheme of work
- a lesson plan
- teaching materials to be used in the session
- assessment tracking information
- examples of learners' marked work with written feedback

The college provides staff with written guidance on how to complete these and has support available from mentors, where required.

This approach ensures that teachers are clear about the time frame for a teaching and learning observation, the format of the observation and any information required from them.

- 35 In most cases, teachers are expected to provide an 'observation pack' for the observer, containing background information about the class, such as attendance data, historical attainment and completion rates and lesson plans or schemes of work. Often, teachers are expected to provide a class profile with detailed information about learners in the class, such as initial assessment results, specific learning needs, the starting points of learners and other information that may influence the planning of a lesson or learners' progress. This provides helpful background information and context for the observer, but potentially adds to the workload for the member of staff being observed, particularly if the member of staff does not know the exact lesson that will be observed.
- 36 In a few colleges, the observer and the teacher hold a pre-observation meeting in advance of the observation. The teacher brings the scheme of work and assessment schedule to this meeting. The meeting enables the observer to familiarise themselves with the subject, level and unique features of the class. The meeting is typically held at least one week prior to the date of the observation.

Case study: information required by observers at Coleg Cambria

At Coleg Cambria, staff do not agree on a specific lesson to observe but the lesson is chosen by the observer from a range of lessons within a window. The onus is on the observer to download a copy of their scheme of work from a central data store and a basic class profile from the college's MIS system. Teachers are not required to produce a lesson plan for every class in the window.

This model allows the observer to have sufficient background to the class, while at the same time minimising the workload for the teacher who has to provide class information for the observer.

- 37 Many colleges also carry out formal internal inspections for the purpose of self-assessment. Typically, these take place over a three-year cycle and at learning area level. In all cases surveyed in the remit, colleges follow an Estyn derived model and observe a sample of sessions, interview learners in the absence of their teacher and scrutinise learners' work. In most cases, where colleges observe staff as part of an internal inspection, staff are not observed again in the same year as part of the college observation cycle.

Use of ungraded peer observations

- 38 All the colleges surveyed for this report use peer observations. Teachers, especially those who had been graded as excellent by their own institutions, valued the use of peer observations highly. They report that peer observations help them to reflect on their own practice, share ideas with other teachers and ultimately to improve their own teaching skills.
- 39 However, too few colleges promote peer observations actively as an effective method of teacher development. Only in a few of the best cases do colleges include planned time for peer observations in their staff development programmes and encourage teachers to reflect on their own practice with the help of peer observation evidence. Only around half of colleges have forms specifically developed for this purpose.

Case study: 'teacher development observations' at Coleg Gwent

At Coleg Gwent, one type of peer observation is called a 'teacher development observation'. These are ungraded observations, intended for use by teachers wishing to develop their own practice by observing the good practice of another teacher. They are used by teaching staff to learn from each other, across subject areas, teams and campuses.

There is a specific form for recording the observation. The form helps the observing teacher to reflect on the teaching development points identified from their own appraisal or teaching and learning observation.

Case study: Gower College Swansea – extended use of supported experiments and fewer graded observations

Gower College Swansea is piloting a different approach to observations. Since the merger three years ago, the annual observation cycle has been focused on internal inspection, self-assessment and staff appraisal. However the college decided that there was little more benefit to be gained from further conventional observations.

Instead, the college's focus has been on curriculum teams working on projects developing innovation in teaching and learning, such as:

- developing new assessment methodologies to accommodate changes to BTEC syllabuses
- 'flip classrooms' where learners work independently before the class to

understand the concepts that will be covered and spend the class time practising and applying their new knowledge

- improving the quality of feedback to learners

A significant feature of each of the projects is the use of ungraded observations, either carried out by peers or by teaching and learning mentors. At the end of the year, the college plans to hold 'sharing practice' events where course teams will demonstrate the methods that they have been developing.

The role of the mentor

- 40 All the colleges in the survey have invested in the role of the 'teaching and learning mentor'. These are experienced and acknowledged expert practitioners. They have time allocated on their timetable to provide structured mentoring to new staff, probationary staff and those teachers identified as in need of improvement. They also take part in observations and internal inspections, provide model lessons and staff development sessions, lead internal college based teaching and learning networks, and work with learning area managers to develop specific approaches to teaching and learning, as well as working with colleagues to develop teaching resources.
- 41 In all the colleges surveyed, teachers who are graded adequate or unsatisfactory after a teaching and learning observation receive follow-up support from a mentor. This may include informal observation as part of that process, followed by a formal graded observation, usually three months later.
- 42 In most cases, colleges use mentors well to support teachers to develop their skills. Staff reported that they found mentoring support to be helpful and developmental. In addition to the practical value of their support, mentors help to contribute to the development of a positive culture of teaching and learning in the college.

Case study: mentoring at NPTC Group

Mentors have the title of 'Senior Lecturer, Teaching and Learning'. They have allocated time to work with a specific curriculum area. When a member of staff from a curriculum area is formally observed and graded as either adequate or unsatisfactory, the curriculum area manager refers the teacher to the Senior Lecturer Teaching and Learning to develop their teaching skills. This may involve a period of intensive coaching or training including informal observation. It is followed by a subsequent formal observation. A different observer carries this out, usually not less than six weeks after the initial observation.

Teachers who have gone through this development process value the support given by the mentor. They report that it is effective in improving their teaching performance. In nearly all cases, senior managers at the college have found that this approach has raised the standard of teaching of their lower performing teachers.

Sharing the practice of excellent teachers

- 43 All colleges surveyed make use of teachers who have been graded as excellent in graded teaching and learning observations. The activities they undertake include giving demonstration lessons and contributing to staff development sessions during non-teaching in service training days (INSET) days. Also they give 'open door' lessons at which peers are welcome to come into the class to observe innovative practice informally in a lesson and then participate in professional conversations with colleagues about improving practice.

Case study: sharing excellent teaching practice at Coleg Sir Gâr

The college holds an annual two-day 'Teaching and Learning Conference' during staff development week, which consists of a series of talks, training sessions, seminars and sharing good practice sessions.

Excellent teachers, as well as teaching and learning mentors, lead these sessions. During term time, they offer 'open door' sessions at which peers are welcome to come into the class to observe innovative teaching approaches informally.

Excellent teachers take part in videos highlighting teaching techniques. These videos are available for staff to view and are used in mentoring sessions. Topics include: raising expectations in the classroom; embedding education for sustainable development and global citizenship (ESDGC) themes; developing strategies that challenge learners; and how best to use information about learners' prior achievements, levels of literacy and numeracy and any learning difficulties to inform the choice of teaching strategies to be used with a class.

The college is also piloting a three-way peer observation process. An excellent teacher works with two good teachers. All three teachers are from different subject/sector areas. Teachers observe each other and identify excellence that can be shared, and areas of development which they subsequently reflect upon in a professional discussion. Teachers then identify their own support or professional development needs.

Case study: excellent practice case studies at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

Excellent practice identified from annual teaching and learning observations is written up in a series of case studies. At the annual teaching and learning conference at the college, the case studies are distributed for use by other teachers in the learning area and across the college. This has the effect of sharing good practice but also developing the reflective skills of the teachers involved.

- 44 In around half of colleges seen in this survey, teachers who receive excellent grades in graded observations and who take part in sharing good practice events are not required to have a graded observation the following year. This is because they are seen as 'low risk'. This approach also acts as an incentive to take part in dissemination events.

3 Who observes lessons and why?

- 45 Nearly all colleges have a similar pattern in the way that they deploy staff as observers. College managers carry out formal graded observations for the purposes of appraisal. The managers range from senior, middle, cross college and section leader level. The number of staff deployed in this process varies depending on the size of the college. For example, at a large recently merged college, a team of 70 staff, mostly at middle management level, have been trained to carry out annual graded observations. Colleges also deploy senior managers in annual observations, although they normally have a quality assurance, moderation or dispute arbitration role. There is some variation in whether line managers observe their own staff. Typically, in newly merged colleges where restructuring and changes in personnel mean that managers do not know the strengths and areas of all their staff, line managers carry out observations.
- 46 Nearly all colleges deploy a small team of observers onto internal inspections for the purpose of self-evaluation, usually drawing strongly on Estyn trained peer-inspectors and following an Estyn approach. The team may not necessarily consist of managers and in some cases includes mentors and the college's in-house teacher training staff.
- 47 When observations are used for the purpose of mentoring, all colleges surveyed have teaching and learning mentors who work with newly qualified teachers, trainee teachers, teachers with identified development needs, or other teachers seeking advice or development. Typically, mentors do not grade their observations, but focus on progress and areas for improvement.
- 48 For peer observations, all colleges report that they use informal observations between peers. However, only a minority of colleges give sufficient weight to the potential benefit of peer observations, for example through building time into a teacher's development programme to take part in peer observations. Not all colleges have a specific form to help teachers record, reflect and learn from these experiences. Too few colleges take sufficient account of the potential value of peer observations in developing teachers' reflective skills and teaching competencies.
- 49 Governors, in the surveyed colleges, do not take part in formal observations of teaching. However, at a few colleges, governors take part in more general observations to gain a better understanding of the life of the college. For example, at St David's Catholic Sixth Form College, governors take part in 'leadership walks' where they talk to learners and teachers, and observe learners in classes and the daily life of the college. Leadership walks are not formally recorded but contribute to the governors' overall understanding of the college.
- 50 In the surveyed colleges, learners do not take part in the formal observation of teachers. However, colleges do take note of learners' views through other mechanisms, which include:
- speaking with learners at the end of teaching and learning observations in order to listen to their experiences directly and to help triangulate the observer's perception of the teaching observation

- 'learning walks' around the college where learners are asked about their experiences
- learner representatives, forums and focus groups
- evaluation forms and surveys carried out at course level
- college surveys carried out to gain information about learners' experiences generally
- the Welsh Government Learner Voice survey

- 51 In all cases, listening to learners' views on the quality of the teaching is vital to triangulating the evidence from an observation on the effectiveness of teaching and gauging the progress learners make in their learning.
- 52 In a few cases, learners' views are taken into account in the selection process for candidates applying for teaching jobs at colleges.

Case study: learners at Coleg Sir Gâr are involved in teaching appointments

Learners are a part of the selection process at Coleg Sir Gâr. Learners who take part in microteaching sessions delivered by candidates are asked to grade each candidate's teaching performance. The feedback from learners is then taken into account by the selection panel when they consider the suitability of each candidate for a post.

- 53 Colleges work with a range of other partners to bring a valuable external element to their teaching and learning observations for the purpose of internal inspection. In the case of schools, colleges work with headteachers and senior staff from partner schools, particularly in the case of 14-19 collaborations between schools and colleges. These provide useful opportunities to share good practice between schools and colleges.
- 54 Colleges also work with local authority representatives, particularly in the context of adult and community learning, where colleges are part of a larger partnership which may include local authority provision and external peer assessors from other colleges who take part in a college's annual internal inspection cycle.
- 55 In the work-based learning consortia, several colleges and private training providers use recording procedures that are harmonised, share observers and operate joint processes for moderation of graded observations

4 How do colleges develop the observational skills of staff?

- 56 In general, colleges train their observers effectively and have robust mechanisms in place to ensure the reliability of graded observations.
- 57 All the colleges that took part in this survey also participated in QIF projects. They have benefited from collaborative exchange with other colleges. In addition, all the colleges reported a benefit from the external consultants who worked with them on their QIF projects, which in some cases has led to helpful changes in observation practice.
- 58 Around half the colleges in the survey have also undertaken visits to high performing colleges elsewhere in the UK to learn from their observation practices and to refine their own policies as a result.
- 59 All the surveyed colleges have Estyn trained peer inspectors amongst their staff. Generally, colleges use their Estyn trained staff effectively to:
- lead or take part in internal inspections
 - cascade Estyn updates and training to colleagues across the college
 - moderate graded observations from internal inspections or graded observations for the purpose of staff appraisal
 - partner newly trained observers to jointly observe sessions in order to quality assure the new observer and ensure that grading is reliable and consistent
 - take part in appeals where a member of staff disputes the grade they had been awarded
 - take part in moderation events with other colleges
- 60 Around half the colleges in the survey have developed a form of accreditation that observers must achieve before they are able to carry out graded observations. In one example, observers are required to attend training and assessment before they achieve a 'licence to observe'. In another example, a college has been working with an awarding organisation to accredit their observation training programme. These are effective ways of promoting high standards in observations, improving reliability and developing a positive culture.

Case study: accredited observer training at Coleg Gwent

As part of its leadership training the college has developed an observation training programme. It consists of three strands: observation skills, feedback skills and report writing skills. Staff from across the college and staff employed in the local authorities through the adult and community learning (ACL) franchise partnership have taken part in the training.

An external trainer delivered the training through a series of workshops, which involved using paired observations to assess observers' competence against criteria for each of the strands. Over 100 staff completed this observation competency framework.

As a further development of the programme, the college has worked with an awarding body to accredit the programme and 40 of the ACL observers have successfully achieved the qualification. The college is considering expanding the programme to all observers.

Impact of observations on staff

- 61 This survey included interviews with a range of teaching staff at almost every college, including those whose teaching had been identified for development. On the whole, these teachers feel that the process of observation combined with support, mentoring and development has been beneficial to them. They report that these processes have helped them to improve their teaching skills, their professional competence and their confidence as teachers and that these changes have had a positive impact on learners' outcomes.
- 62 However, on the few occasions where staff indicated dissatisfaction with the process of observation, they identified some concerns. One was a concern about the reliability of graded observations, for example where there was a perception that some observers were 'harder graders' than others. Another concern was about insufficient focus during follow-up observations on areas for development identified in the first observation. There was also a lack of clarity about the information that the observer would expect to see as part of the observation.
- 63 Feedback from the colleges' quality managers' network raised more general issues about the potential impact of observations on staff. The quality managers said that staff can feel under pressure whilst being observed and this can affect their performance. There can be too much focus on a grade, either by the observer or the teacher being observed and this can cause observations to be more stressful and less effective at improving teaching, whereas clear feedback on teaching and learning helps the teacher being observed to move their practice forward. An observation process that requires the teacher to provide the observer with too much information can increase workload and stress for staff. Finally, the managers stated that over-use of graded observations can inhibit a teacher's development, leading to teachers becoming either complacent if they are getting good grades or demoralised if they are being told they are poor.
- 64 In summary, all colleges surveyed are aware of the potential negative impacts of observations on staff. The most effective colleges are taking steps to reduce the effect of these by ensuring they have clear policies and practices relating to teaching and learning observations. They also try to make observations, whether graded or ungraded, developmental and give staff support, mentoring and training to improve their teaching practice. They minimise the use of graded observations where they are not needed, and use ungraded or peer observations to focus staff on strengths and areas of improvement.

5 How do colleges record teaching and learning observations effectively?

- 65 In nearly all the colleges in the survey, observation forms allow the observer to write evaluative comments about a range of aspects of teaching and learning in the session observed. A very few colleges use a simple 'tick box' approach, which has a tendency to narrow observations to a simple set of superficial features and provides limited opportunities to identify good practice or areas for improvement fully. A tick box form with little or no accompanying evaluative commentary also gives moderators little opportunity to evaluate the validity of the grades awarded by observers and so makes moderation of grades across a college more difficult.
- 66 Nearly all colleges' graded observation forms include separate grades for teaching and learning (the standards achieved by learners). This helps observers to focus on the progress of learners and how well teaching strategies promote learning. However, in a very few cases, particularly where there is a reliance on a tick-box approach, the observation process and the forms used to record it do not take sufficient account of the progress of learners.
- 67 The most effective processes and forms for recording observations are used by a minority of colleges. In best practice, the form allows an opportunity for a written commentary of the strengths and areas for improvement. The form does not simply focus on teaching, but requires the observer to record and evaluate what the learners do, how much progress they make during the course of the lesson and the standard of work they achieve. The observer has to justify why they have awarded a certain grade. This is helpful for the observer because it clarifies the reasons for the judgements they are making and it is helpful for the moderator because it helps them to understand why the observer has given a particular grade. A range of criteria is included which are useful both to the teacher in identifying a profile of their own strengths and weaknesses and to the college in identifying its priorities for staff development and support. The process allows the observer to include statistical information to give a context to the class and to identify trends in learners' performance. The form has an area to record feedback and comments from learners that add context to the lesson and may influence any grade awarded. It clearly identifies features of good practice and areas for improvement. In the best case examples, areas for improvement are linked directly to action points for the individual teacher's professional development. Finally, the whole process allows the teacher who has been observed to feed back on the process of observation they have experienced (either on the same form as the observation or a separate form). In the best examples, this includes an indication of how likely it is that the observation will have a positive impact on the teacher's practice, allowing colleges to assess at an early stage the potential impact of the observation on teaching practice.

Case study: effective use of recording paperwork at Pembrokeshire College, Coleg Cambria and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

At Pembrokeshire College, the graded lesson observation form requires observers to give a clear reason why aspects of the lesson were given a particular grade. For example, 'Assessment was GOOD because...' This clarifies the reason why a particular grade was awarded.

The lesson observation form also includes 14 separate criteria which can be recorded as 'Observed in the session' or 'Evidenced in planning documents' (or by not recording anything in either box, 'not observed in either observation or planning'). The criteria are either present or absent (rather than graded).

At Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and at Coleg Cambria, there are also a range of criteria assessed in every observation. These are matched against narrative descriptors indicating graded outcomes. Each criterion is graded separately.

In all three of these examples, the outcomes (whether presence or absence, or graded outcomes) are recorded for each observation, allowing the college to build a detailed profile across the college of strengths and areas for improvement. The profile for an individual teacher also allows the teacher themselves to identify their development priorities. At Coleg Cambria, teachers' profiles are linked to individually tailored continuous professional development (CPD) programmes and resources.

- 68 In the best colleges, separate forms are available for the different contexts in which teaching and learning observations occur. These include classroom or workshop based theory or practical sessions. Typically, these contexts are with one teacher and many learners (with or without support staff).
- 69 WBL reviews or assessments are typically one-to-one sessions. The most effective forms focus on the coaching and mentoring teaching skills and strategies most commonly used in these contexts.
- 70 Ungraded peer or mentoring observation forms are normally less structured and focus on action planning, developing areas for improvement, and recording developments in a teacher's practice over time.

Case study: observations forms designed for work-place reviews and work-based learning assessors at Pembrokeshire College

Observers at Pembrokeshire College have a choice of different observation forms to record the session they observe. These include separate forms designed for one-to-one sessions such as WBL reviews and assessments.

The forms focus on particular aspects of teaching and learning which are relevant to WBL reviews and assessments, such as effective discussions with the employer, health and safety at work, and the planning of learning and skills-development through activities at work. This allows observers to recognise the particular skills required for effective one-to-one teaching and learning.

In common with other teaching observations forms used at the college, these include a set of criteria that the observer identifies as present, evidenced in planning or not present during the review. This allows the college to gain an overview of its strengths and weaknesses as well as identifying areas for development or good practice for individual reviewers.

6 How do colleges ensure consistency and fairness in classroom observations?

- 71 Nearly all colleges in the survey use an evaluative scale of judgements for formal observations for the purpose of staff appraisal. In many cases, colleges use the Estyn scale of judgements and judgement descriptors. This has the advantage of allowing direct comparison with Estyn terminology for internal inspection purposes but carries the risk that colleges may use the descriptors inaccurately, thereby giving a false self-assessment. In a very few cases, colleges have developed alternative judgements terms based on judgement descriptors developed by the college.

Case study: use of ungraded observations to evaluate teacher performance at Coleg Ceredigion

For 2013-2014 the college has introduced a system where grades are not awarded for individual sessions. This approach has been developed, in part, to change the perception and ethos relating to teaching observations. Instead of awarding a judgement following a single observation, a teacher's performance is evaluated in a variety of ways, which will take into account all the diverse activities that teachers are involved with and which contribute to the overall success of their teaching and learning.

At end of the year an overall judgement, based on a simple five-point scale using words with commonly understood meanings, is awarded to each teacher. Teachers and their line managers then have a clearer understanding of their strengths and areas for development. It also provides a way of measuring performance across courses, learning areas and over time.

- 72 All the colleges in the survey moderate graded observation forms to help ensure consistency and reliability. In the most effective cases, a panel of moderators check the forms to ensure that they are properly completed and that the observer's evaluative commentary matches any grade given. As a result, forms are more evaluative and identify strengths and areas for improvement more clearly, and the grades awarded are more reliable.
- 73 A few colleges analyse the pattern of grades awarded by individual observers to identify if any observers show unusual patterns of judgements which may indicate that their grading is unreliable. Where this is the case, observers are retrained or not deployed on future observations.

- 74 In around half of colleges, moderation includes representatives from other colleges or other external organisations such as partner schools. This is a helpful approach to ensuring consistent grading across a wider group of colleges and is another useful opportunity to share good practice between schools and colleges.
- 75 In the minority of colleges that have a clear policy for teaching and learning observation, there are formal mechanisms to allow teachers to dispute the grade awarded in an observation. A formal right of appeal is critical to a fair and effective observation system. In one effective example, a teacher may request a re-observation within three working days to the original observer. A new observation date will then be agreed between the member of staff and the observer. A senior manager, at deputy principal level, acts as the point of appeal when the observer and the member of staff cannot agree on an allocated grade. The senior manager may carry out a classroom observation to resolve such a situation.

7 Impact of mergers on college observation practice

- 76 Over the last four years, FE colleges across Wales have taken part in significant mergers, both between FE colleges and between FE colleges and higher education (HE) institutions. In colleges where there have been FE-HE mergers, the impact of merger on teaching and learning observation practice has been minimal, as colleges have on the whole retained their identities, staff and teaching and learning cultures within the larger merged institution.
- 77 In the case of mergers between FE colleges, there has been a stronger impact on teaching and learning observation practice. In particular, restructures and changes to personnel at all levels have meant that newly merged colleges have needed to 'get to know themselves'. In the majority of cases, this has meant an initial period where teaching and learning observations have been focused on self-assessment and internal inspection.
- 78 Merged colleges have often used the merger as an opportunity to review their policies and procedures and to adopt the best practice from across legacy colleges. In one example, a recently merged college has effectively combined the strongly supportive ethos of one its legacy colleges with the strong quality focus of another to produce a teaching and learning observation process that is both rigorous and supportive.
- 79 All the recently merged colleges in the survey now have effective teaching and learning observation processes in place, and provide rigorous self-assessment and an appropriate development and support mechanisms for staff.

Appendix 1: Evidence base

This report uses evidence from visits to the following colleges:

- Bridgend College
- Coleg Cambria
- Coleg Gwent
- Coleg Sir Gâr
- Gower College Swansea
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- NPTC Group
- Pembrokeshire College
- St David's Roman Catholic College
- The College Merthyr Tydfil

At each college, inspectors met senior managers and managers responsible for the teaching and learning observation programme, mentors, teachers identified as excellent practitioners and teachers who had been identified as in need of development.

Inspectors also attended meetings of the CollegesWales' Teaching and Learning and Quality Managers' networks and took part in email discussions with Coleg Ceredigion.

Inspectors' visits took place during summer and autumn 2014.

Reference list

Estyn (2014a) *Effective classroom observation in primary and secondary schools*. Cardiff: Estyn. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/docViewer/329620.2/effective-classroom-observation-in-primary-and-secondary-schools-october-2014> [Accessed 16 July 2015].

Estyn (2014b) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2012-2013*. Cardiff: Estyn. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.estyn.gov.uk/english/annual-report/archive-annual-reports/annual-report-2012-2013/> [Accessed 16 July 2015].

Appendix 2: Different types of teaching and learning observation used in colleges

Sharing effective practice among staff

This type of observation usually takes place where the college has identified effective practice through other types of observation and judge that other staff in the college would benefit from seeing this practice. These may be arranged through college-wide development days, 'open classrooms' where staff are invited to come in and observe the good practice of other teachers, specific timetabled development sessions with the purpose of developing a teacher with identified areas for improvement, or by mentors modelling their own practice. In other cases, teachers organise their own sessions informally between themselves as a result of staff room discussions about teaching ideas. Not graded.

Developing particular teaching methods, skills and innovative ways of teaching

These observations happen most often where managers are trying to improve practice across the whole college, or members of a professional learning community are trying to measure the impact of new ways of working in the classroom. Where the college is trying to develop greater consistency of teaching across the college, it may ask members of staff to work in pairs or groups of three to demonstrate particular ways of working to each other, or it may bring in a consultant to demonstrate specific ideas. These work to best effect where managers ensure planning is in place to allow time for staff to discuss the lesson before and after the observation as well as to ensure time for the observation itself. Where teachers are part of a professional learning community, staff in the professional community will often organise their own time to observe and to develop their ideas. Not graded.

Developing aspects of practice with teachers through internal and external professional learning communities

The development of internal and external professional learning communities is helping colleges to develop effective teaching practice which raises learners' standards of achievement. Colleges have used their Quality Improvement Fund projects well to kick-start professional learning communities and to share practice across colleges. When staff work collaboratively in a professional group, it helps them to reflect more carefully on their work and to see themselves as part of a team working to a shared goal. In many cases, teaching and learning observation forms a part of the professional learning community's activities. In many of the most effective cases, the members of the community agree common principles about observations and ensure that they create an observation form specific to their needs. While members of the professional learning community develop observation plans, the lead person normally liaises with managers to put the observation timetable in place within a given period of time. Not graded.

Mentoring and coaching serving teachers, support staff and trainee teachers

In nearly all cases, colleges deploy mentors – experienced and effective practitioners – to provide a planned programme of mentoring or coaching opportunities for staff in need of development, or to assist in sharing good practice. In many cases, this includes teaching and learning observation, where the mentor undertakes observations of the teacher over several sessions and provides feedback that focuses on professional development, and avoids any judgement on the quality of teaching. A key feature of this type of classroom observation and feedback is the opportunity for the observed teacher to improve their practice through professional dialogue with a colleague. In mentoring, the focus is on the exchange of ideas, while in coaching the focus is on the observer posing questions and allowing the member of staff to develop their own practice through reflection and experimentation. The technique used will depend on the observed teacher's stage in their own professional development and the extent of their development needs.

Mentors also work with teachers in training or during a probationary period. Feedback in these sessions focuses on incremental proficiency in the trainees' ability to become competent in achieving the relevant standards. In the most effective cases, as the trainees' abilities develop, mentors move from providing feedback to helping trainees to reflect on and to develop their own practice through skilful questioning. Not usually graded.

Helping governors to develop their understanding about learning and the life and work of the college through first-hand experience

Governors have an important role in overseeing and steering the direction of the college. While governors bring many useful skills, in many cases they do not have an in-depth understanding of the day-to-day work of colleges. To help them to develop their understanding, typically governors take on a role linking them to an area of the college's work. In a few cases governors visit the college and undertake a 'learning walk' or observe a lesson alongside a senior member of staff. These visits are most effective when the governor has a well-focused observation schedule. Gathering first-hand evidence helps governors to understand the complexity of the work of the college and to make better informed judgements about issues raised at the governing body. Not graded.

Establishing the quality of a candidate's teaching when applying for a post at the college

In many cases, colleges have introduced an observation activity in the selection process for short-listed candidates to help them to make an informed judgement about the quality of the candidate's teaching. In many cases, candidates teach a lesson to a class at the college on the day of interview. The selection panel seek feedback from learners as to their impressions of the lesson. The first-hand evidence they gain from the observation task is important in helping them to appoint effective teaching staff. Graded as part of the interview process.

Monitoring college objectives

As part of the annual quality cycle, senior managers plan specific times to monitor progress towards targets in the college quality development plan. Not all monitoring of college objectives will include teaching and learning observation. Managers may use other monitoring tools, or a combination of tools, such as data, book scrutiny or learner questionnaires. However, in many cases, monitoring will include teaching and learning observations; for example if a college is trying to improve the range of questioning strategies used by teachers. May be graded or ungraded.

College or learning area self-assessment

Typically, colleges carry out self-assessments annually. In most cases, these include learning area self-assessments which are incorporated into an overall college self-assessment. In many cases, colleges carry out an Estyn-style internal inspection. The learning areas are chosen to take part in these internal inspections on a rolling basis or using a risk-based approach. Teaching and learning observations are typically used during internal inspections in combination with a range of other self-assessment tools. Usually graded.

Performance management

This type of observation takes place as part of the annual review of a member of staff's performance. It focuses on whole-college and individual performance management targets. In the most effective cases, the observation focuses on how well planning, teaching and assessment impacts on learners' standards of achievement. The outcomes of performance management observations allow managers to understand the strengths and areas for development of individual staff, and inform the college's understanding of its overall strengths and areas for improvement and its staff development plan. Usually graded.

Appendix 3: Summary information about the colleges

Name of college	No of learners FT (PT) ⁴	About the college ⁵	Recent merger
Bridgend College	2645 (5820)	Bridgend College is a further education college with students across six campuses, spanning Bridgend, Pencoed, Maesteg and Cardiff. The college offers a range of full and part-time vocational courses, ranging from Level 1 to degree level. The college mainly attracts students from the boroughs of Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan, but also has students from other neighbouring boroughs. There is also a residential facility, Weston House, for students with disabilities, who are aged 16-25 and studying full-time at the college.	No
Coleg Cambria	6510 (12620)	Coleg Cambria was established in August 2013 and provides education to students across seven campuses in North-East Wales. Students can study a range of academic or vocational further education courses, apprenticeships or higher education courses, on either a full-time or part-time basis.	FE-FE (2013)
Coleg Ceredigion	610 (1335)	Coleg Ceredigion merged with the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David group in January 2014, and provides a range of vocational and academic post-16 courses, including A levels, BTECs, access to Higher Education courses and apprenticeships. The college operates from two campuses, one in Aberystwyth and one in Cardigan.	FE-HE (2014)
Coleg Gwent	7275 (17595)	Coleg Gwent is an FE college covering the South East Wales area. Learners study across five different campuses covering the boroughs of Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen. Coleg Gwent offers a range of full and part-time, academic and vocational courses including A levels, Apprenticeships, University level higher Education courses, Welsh for Adults and workforce training for employers.	No
Coleg Sir Gâr	2570 (3785)	In August 2013, Coleg Sir Gâr merged with the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David group. Coleg Sir Gâr offers a range of further, higher and adult community education courses, including A levels, GCSEs, Access to higher education courses, NVQs and apprenticeships, across five campuses in Carmarthenshire.	FE-HE (2013)
Gower College Swansea	4470 (8240)	Gower College Swansea operates across four campuses in Swansea, with each campus offering different courses. Gorseionon campus accommodates more than 2,000 full-time students, mostly studying a range of A level and vocational courses. Other campuses include	FE-FE (2010)

⁴ Number of full-time (FT) and part-time (PT) learners. Excludes work-based learners. Source: <http://statswales.wales.gov.uk>. Data for academic year 2012-2013. Where data for merged colleges do not exist, the number of learners has been calculated by summing the number of learners in the legacy colleges.

⁵ Source: colleges' websites

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		The Kingsway centre in Swansea city centre, Llwyn Y Bryn and Tycoch, which are centres for ESOL and essential skills courses, creative and expressive arts, and vocational, access and apprenticeship courses respectively.	
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	6915 (16430)	Grwp Llandrillo Menai comprises of three colleges; Coleg Llandrillo, Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor and Coleg Menai, and delivers further and higher education courses to over 27,000 students across Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire and Gwynedd. All of the colleges offer a range of A levels, Vocational qualifications, university level qualifications and WBL programmes, including apprenticeships across a total of 14 campuses.	FE-FE (2012)
NPTC Group	4315 (7745)	NPTC Group was formed following a merger between Neath Port Talbot College and Coleg Powys. The college offers a variety of full and part-time courses across 12 campuses from Port Talbot in South Wales to Newtown in Mid Wales. Courses on offer include BTECs, A levels, Higher education degrees, ACL courses and work-based apprenticeships.	FE-FE (2013)
Pembrokeshire College	1440 (4870)	Pembrokeshire College operates from a purpose-built campus in Haverfordwest and caters for approximately 2,000 full-time students and 12,500 part-time students. The college offers a range of courses, including A levels, Apprenticeships, higher education degrees and part-time evening courses.	No
St David's Catholic Sixth Form College	1455 (90)	St David's Catholic Sixth Form College is a sixth form college for 16-19 year olds in Cardiff. Although priority is given to students from the college's four partner Catholic schools, students from other faiths and backgrounds, and international students, are welcomed. The college offers its students a wide range of GCSE, A level and BTEC courses, as well as the opportunity to study for the Welsh Baccalaureate.	No
The College Merthyr Tydfil	1170 (1975)	Merthyr Tydfil is a tertiary college offering students a range of A levels, further and higher education courses. There are over 2,000 students studying across two campuses; a new, purpose-built facility in the centre of the town, which houses the majority of subjects, and the 'redhouse', which is contained within the Old Town Hall and offers all music, media, film, dance, music, drama and technical theatre students the opportunity to study bespoke, professional standard facilities.	No

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