

Title: **Student Observation of Teaching: partnerships for individual growth and cultural change**

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Describe the Sheffield Student Observation of Teaching scheme, including experiences of participants;
- Recognise how this one scheme fits within the broader framework of student-staff collaboration, and other student observation schemes within the UK and internationally;
- Consider how empowering and supporting students in this way may be beneficial within their institutions;
- Reflect more broadly on the roles students may play in fostering professional development amongst teaching staff; and
- Offer some preliminary responses to questions about moving from the development of individual practices to broader changes across the institution, including enhancing the overall conversation about what constitutes excellence in teaching.

Session Outline

This paper will outline the Student Observation of Teaching scheme at The University of Sheffield. This project does what it says on the tin - supporting students to act as critical friends to teaching staff wishing to develop their practices. Over the two years of the project, it has been run in both one-to-one and small group formats, and there is data to explore in terms of the impact of both variations. This paper locates the Sheffield scheme both within the academic literature (with authors such as Catherine Bovill and Alison Cook-Sather as leading lights), and within the contemporary UK HE landscape. It also seeks to draw some more general lessons from the scheme about collaboration with students, possibilities for empowering them within institutional structures and habits of practice, and the impact this has both on individual staff, and on institutions more widely. A particular concern within this is enhancing the quality of the conversation about teaching excellence in an era of TEF: without grainy, messy, lived experiences of learning and teaching within different disciplines, and a stronger sense of what teaching is like from the lecturer's point of view, it seems challenging for even the most self-aware students to offer meaningful judgements about the quality of the education they are experiencing within their own programme of study. Another dimension to this broader conversation is about

moving from developing individuals' practices – in this instance, all of whom volunteered for this scheme, so perhaps are already more disposed to being challenged in their development – to changes within departments, and ideally across the institution. The overall argument is that student observation of teaching can be a powerful form of learning, for students and for staff, with relatively low input and minimal bureaucracy. It is effective, cost-effective, and fun.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

1. Overview of the session (2 minutes)
2. Opening discursive activity – something about the roles that students might play in supporting teachers' professional development (10 minutes)
3. Front-led section about the Sheffield scheme and where it fits (10 minutes)
4. Group discussion about how the Sheffield experience might relate to existing or potential practices within participants' institutions (10 minutes)
5. How to get from individual development to culture change, especially around questions of teaching excellence, probably with one question per group (10 minutes):
 - a. What do we think is needed for a student to make a judgement about the quality of teaching that they experience?
 - b. What might be more or less effective ways for individuals to share the benefits they have experienced through participation in such a scheme?
 - c. What might be some of the barriers or conceptual limitations to working with students as partners in higher education?
 - d. In what other ways might professional development in higher education be reframed as a collaborative endeavour between students and staff?

References

- Cook-Sather, A., 2008. 'What you get is looking in a mirror, only better': inviting students to reflect (on) college teaching, *Reflective Practice*, 9(4), pp.473-83
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- Simpson, C. and Clark, T., 2018. Reflections on the development of a model of partnership designed to enhance the digital curriculum of Sociological Studies programmes. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 2(1), pp. 61-69.