

NEU Guidance for Support Staff Members

The NEU sees the spread of formal performance management as a recognition of the increasing professionalisation of support staff roles. However, the lack of any central guidance has led to a number of problems.

The NEU welcomes performance management where it is a supportive and developmental process. It is essential the individual is fully involved in the process and contributes to the setting of objectives and defining training needs.

For support staff, observation of their performance in the classroom environment is an important part of performance management. However, excessive or unfocused observation can lead to increased anxiety and stress for the staff observed.

Who may be observed?

Support staff with the following types of job definitions may be observed.

Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) –“To complement the professional work of teachers by taking responsibility agreed learning activities under an agreed system of supervision. This may involve planning, preparing and delivering learning activities for individuals/groups or short term for whole classes...”(Level 4 Supporting and Delivering Learning Model Job Profile (Preamble).

Cover Supervisor – “Cover supervision occurs when no active teaching is taking place and involves the supervision of pre-set learning activities in the absence of a teacher.” (Workforce Agreement Monitoring Group “Guidance for Schools on Cover Supervision”)

Teaching/Learning Support Assistant (TA or LSA) – A typical TA/LSA job description will include some or all of the following responsibilities: working one-to-one or with small groups of pupils; supporting pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities; supporting pupils with English as a second language; preparing the classroom for lessons; tidying up and keeping the classroom in good order; creating displays of pupils’ work; helping on school outings or at school events.

It is not uncommon for schools to expect HLTAs, Cover Supervisors and TA/LSAs to take on duties that are inappropriate such as teaching whole classes or small groups on a permanent basis. Not only are such practices a breach of national agreements with the unions, but they are unfair on the staff involved, who are being used as teachers ‘on the cheap’. If this is happening at your school, please raise the matter with your NEU school Rep or your NEU local Branch Secretary.

When might observations take place?

There are four main circumstances in which classroom- based support staff may find themselves being observed at work:

- working in support of the teacher (HLTA and TA/LSA)
- working with small groups or individual pupils (HLTA and TA/LSA)
- delivering lessons to whole classes and small groups (HLTA)
- covering lessons for absent teachers (HLTA and Cover Supervisor)

What should the observation cover?

It is important that observers remember that support staff are not teachers and must not be assessed against the Teachers' Standards (England) or Practising Teacher Standards (Wales). There are no nationally agreed standards against which support staff can be judged. The observer should consider the duties being undertaken and the level of experience of the support staff being observed.

It is important the support staff member understands the reasons for the observation and what elements will be observed and commented on. This does not mean observers cannot raise other issues that arise during the observation.

NEU believes all observations for support staff should cover:

- how well they interact with the pupils
- how well they understand and achieve the aims of the lesson being delivered
- how they interact with the classroom teacher responsible
- discipline and behaviour
- understanding of the subject matter
- how they feedback to the classroom teacher responsible for the lesson.

Below are additional elements that may be covered in the different support staff roles.

Working in support of the teacher:

- how they interact with the classroom teacher responsible.

Working with small groups or individual pupils:

- identifying and addressing the particular needs of individual pupils within the group especially those with SEN.

Delivering lessons to whole classes and small groups:

- how well the lesson has been prepared
- how well the pupils understand the lessons. Covering lessons for absent teachers:
- that the material provided has been understood and used.

Who should carry out observations?

Ideally, your line manager (who should also be your appraiser) should carry out observations, ensuring the link between observations and the annual performance cycle. If this is not possible, a senior manager or qualified teacher may undertake an observation.

Can I be observed as part of an Ofsted inspection?

Ofsted reserves the right to carry out formal observations of support staff on the basis that they are charged with observing the 'whole class experience'. Ofsted has confirmed to NEU that:

"We judge the quality of teaching and its impact on learning as well as a school's use of teaching assistants. The grade descriptors are used to judge teaching rather than individuals.

Regardless of who is teaching children, we will evaluate that provision. If a school chooses to deliver teaching through teaching assistants either in classrooms or by withdrawing children from classes, that is a choice for the school... What inspectors are interested in is whether or not the quality of teaching is good enough and whether it is leading to good outcomes for children."

How frequently should they take place?

While the NEU does not take a view on the absolute maximum number of observations of support staff at work, we do believe that the use of observations should not be excessive, and the number to be undertaken in any given academic year should be agreed in advance, as part of the appraisal cycle. The need for further observations may be identified when discussing feedback from a previous observation.

The NEU accepts the right of headteachers to 'drop in' on any lesson for the purposes of quality assurance. However, such visits should not take place excessively. Drop-ins and other observations, such as learning walks, should be planned with support staff given notice when they will happen. With careful planning and coordination, observations undertaken for appraisal can be used to inform all other management processes, such as subject reviews.

What notice, if any, should be provided prior to an observation?

Support staff should be given adequate notice of a proposed lesson or activity observation. Where the observation is for appraisal purposes, then this should be at least five working days. Prior agreement should be reached on the strengths and areas for development to be focused upon by the observer.

What feedback should be provided to the observed member of staff?

Oral feedback should come within 24 hours of the lesson or activity being observed and take the form of an informed professional dialogue where the observer/ appraiser gives due weight to the staff member's knowledge, insight and judgement. Written feedback must be received within five working days.

My school is seeking to impose a policy on classroom observations without consulting staff – what should we do?

Members should immediately write to the headteacher asking for meaningful discussions to take place prior to the introduction of any new policy. Should the headteacher insist upon imposing a policy without agreement, NEU members, working in conjunction with the NEU school Rep and other staff, should lodge a collective grievance objecting to the imposition, and at the same time seek urgent advice from NEU.

I have been asked to observe my classroom teacher, and provide feedback to the SMT - what should I do?

NEU policy is that only qualified teachers should observe teachers. What is more, this is a completely inappropriate use of your time, and you should decline to carry out such observations. You should also immediately inform your NEU Rep and Branch Secretary.